Book reviews


Reviewed by Helmut Gruber*

This volume is obviously intended for use in introductory courses on language and politics, especially for those with students who are not familiar with different approaches of pragmatic language analysis. The author is basically concerned with "a pragmatic description of the choices politicians have made, a real (political) world consideration of pragmatic concepts in action" (p. 181), leaving aside considerations concerning the interplay between power, control, manipulation and language. The second aim, namely to show "what we learn about pragmatics itself from applying pragmatic concepts to political language" (p. 181) is not always accomplished very convincingly due to the large variety of applied concepts which precludes any in-depth treatment. The book is very useful in its portrayal of how politicians use certain linguistic devices in political discourse and how pragmatic analysis may account for them. Argumentation and style are clear so that even readers who are unfamiliar with certain concepts will have no difficulty understanding their application in political language analysis. In contrast the different pragmatic approaches receive extensive explication (for the linguist, sometimes too extensive).

Wilson starts with a brief consideration of different types of pragmatic arguments, viz., what he calls L-pragmatic, P-pragmatic and O-pragmatic arguments. L-pragmatics refers to approaches dealing with the encoding of contextual meaning in the language system, P-pragmatics is "an account based on rules or general principles of behaviour" (p. 6) and O-pragmatics denotes a type of approach which is known as ethnomethodology. Although the author claims to apply all three types of approaches, he is concerned with L- and P-pragmatic approaches in most cases. Wilson's introductory reflections lead him to two basic assumptions concerning political language and pragmatics, namely that pragmatics is considered to be "the analysis of meaning which is beyond what has been said" (p. 7) and that "political talk

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will be considered from a pragmatic perspective by focusing centrally on meanings which may be derived beyond the context of what has been said" (p. 7).

In the first chapter the author provides a short review of mainstream work on language and politics focusing on what is known as 'critical linguistics'. He dissociates himself from this direction with the argument that "there is (not) an underlying reality which we transform to suit our needs; it is rather that there are competing realities which become reflected in the various structures which we employ to talk about the world" (p. 14). This seems to be a promising way of dealing with the topic and it is for this reason that I highly value the book (despite its weaknesses). Critical linguists often tend to short-circuit the analysis of power and language in society by analyzing language phenomena as directly correlated with power relationships without offering any methodological and/or convincing theoretical account for the connection between the two areas (cf. Trew 1979). This does not mean that the analysis of sociological variables and their relationship to linguistic phenomena is not a relevant question for the social sciences, but rather that in the narrower context of (applied) linguistics the analysis of language and politics should employ all the methods and tools which the discipline provides.

In the following chapters Wilson traverses different areas of political talk and discusses appropriate pragmatic concept for analysis. His examples are taken from various political contexts such as parliamentary debates, press conferences and political speeches. He begins his journey with some considerations about the importance of the concepts of presupposition, implication and implicature in the analysis of political language. In the course of a close examination of a statement by a British Undersecretary of State concerning issues of international terrorism, he shows how the implicatures of the statement create an additional meaning which may reveal certain underlying assumptions on the topic by the speaker (i.e. the British Government). The question which now arises is: Was the politician aware of what he said or not? Wilson doesn't discuss this issue at all, but simply states that the politician only showed "a certain lack of sensitivity to the interpretation of pragmatic implications" (p. 43). This interpretation shows the limitation of Wilson's entire approach: he treats politicians like 'ordinary' people who are sometimes not really aware of what they say. This view is a logical consequence of his reluctance to deal with extralinguistic components of political talk. Thus, his analyses are convincing in most cases, but his interpretations reveal a mirror-image of the shortcomings of analyses by critical linguists.

His next stop is the examination of politicians' use of personal pronouns, which is one of the most interesting parts of the book. Taking examples from a presidential debate between Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter he shows how the distribution of uses of 'I' vs. 'we' reveals the intended shifting of responsibility for certain actions by the two politicians. The major part of the
chapter presents the results of a study on the use of pronouns in the speeches of three British politicians (Margaret Thatcher, Neil Kinnock and Michael Foot). Presenting a ‘distancing scale’ for pronoun use he investigates three functional areas, namely ‘Self-referencing’, ‘Relations of Contrast’ and ‘Other Referencing’. In the area of self referencing he is especially concerned with the effects of the use of speaker-inclusive vs. speaker-exclusive ‘we’. He shows how Mrs. Thatcher is able to construct an equation between the British Government and Britain as a whole by using these two variants of the pronoun ‘we’. The results in the two other domains are not very surprising as they show that different distancing scales evolve according to which politician is under investigation. Nevertheless, the analyses presented are not only interesting and stimulating in themselves, but also in respect to the dissemination of knowledge in linguistics as a whole.

Wilson states that “the analysis provided in chapter 3 ... provided a potentially new, ideologically sensitive linguistic tool” (p. 182). This may be true for the English-speaking world of linguistics but surely not for German-speaking (or at least ‘German-reading’) linguists. In his influential 1984 book, Utz Maas provided nearly the same approach for the analysis of pronominal use in speeches by ‘Third Reich’ politicians showing how the shift from speaker exclusive to speaker inclusive ‘we’ was involved in the propagandistic pocketing of the Germans by the Nazi party. Without being aware of it, Wilson re-launches a valuable linguistic tool already known in one part of the world.

In the following section of the book (chapter 4) the author is trapped by his own partiality for sophisticated analysis. In this chapter Wilson is “interesting in the way in which selectional choices made at the level of definite descriptions may manipulate the hearer’s identifications by directing attention away from designated individuals towards some generic role and conceptual category” (p. 77). This seems to be a promising starting point because the investigation of naming and referring in political talk is one of the core-areas of critical linguistics (cf. Kress and Hodge 1979: 62 et passim) as well as of approaches not associated with this tradition (cf. Van Dijk 1987), but as mentioned above, these analyses often lack methodological rigor. Wilson takes an example from British domestic policy. Answering criticism to his attack on the BBC’s coverage of the bombing of Libya by the United States in 1986, Norman Tebbit said: “‘it was not the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster who made the complaint but the Chairman of the Conservative Party’”1 (p. 78). The author provides further information that Mr. Tebbit was Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster as well as Chairman of the Conservative Party at this time. Unfortunately the author reduces his example

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1 Editor’s note: In the United Kingdom, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster is a member of Her Majesty's Cabinet with varying functions between different governments. (HH)
by half, i.e. he only discusses the first half of Mr. Tebbit’s statement, while maintaining his “arguments ... would apply equally to [Tebbit’s, H.G.] reference to himself as the Chairman of the Conservative Party” (p. 78). This suggests that the author treats Mr. Tebbit’s utterance as exhibiting a parallel construction joined together by *but*. However, this is not the case: the utterance expresses a clear contrast between the two parts. Apart from this I have never heard of any pragmatic theory in which it is legitimate to analyze only parts of an utterance leaving the rest aside. Having made this precarious amputation, Wilson performs a linguistic *tour de force* reviewing various concepts of reference in an attempt to show that “referential choices (are) also ... cognitive options which have specific cognitive effect and impact” (p. 82).

Special attention is paid to Sperber and Wilson’s relevance theory, which he applies to the first part of the utterance with a rather convincing result, viz., that by using a definite description Mr. Tebbit is stressing a role rather than an individual. But unfortunately Wilson does not stop here but claims that there might be members of the audience who did not know that Mr. Tebbit was the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster [= CODL] at this time. Following this strand of argumentation he “want[s] to argue that it is possible that NT’s [= Norman Tebbit’s] aim was to get both the audience who knew that NT=CODL and the audience who did not know that NT=CODL to behave in the same way, that is he wanted both to behave as if they did not know that NT=CODL” (p. 97). He admits that this sounds somewhat odd, but in a further step he tries to prove it because “since NT has not used any explicit available self-referential form he is not referring to himself” (p. 100). The argument which leads to this conclusion runs counter to all pragmatic argumentation insofar as it ignores any contextual knowledge hearers might apply in processing the utterance.

I want to try to extemporate an analysis of the whole utterance and show how one can get towards an understanding of it. Taking into account the context (namely that NT was criticizing the BBC) there are five main possible interpretations by the audience:

1. Some members of the audience may not know that NT had criticized the BBC nor may they know that he is CODL and Chairman of the Conservative Party. These people are the only ones who may not understand that NT is referring to himself by his utterance, and they would simply *misunderstand* NT’s statement or they would seek further information as to why NT had made this utterance.

2. (The following considerations are made under the assumption that people are at least aware of the fact that NT criticized the BBC.) Some members of the audience may not know that NT is both CODL and Chairman of the Conservative Party. Applying the principle of relevance they would be forced to at least believe that NT is the Chairman of the Conservative Party, otherwise they would have to assume that NT is talking nonsense.
(3) Some members of the audience may not know that NT is the CODL but do know that he is Chairman of the Conservative Party. For them NT is clearly referring to himself and there may be some weak implication for them to believe that NT = CODL, too.

(4) Some members of the audience may not know that NT is Chairman of the Conservative Party, but do know that he is the CODL. But they are forced to believe that NT is referring to himself by the form of the utterance when he talks about the "Chairman of the Conservative Party" (especially through his use of the conjunction but).

(5) Those members of the audience who know that NT is both the CODL and the Chairman of the Conservative Party may understand that NT is trying to divert his personal responsibility for his attacks on the BBC by stressing his role as Chairman of the Conservative Party, thereby implying that he was speaking on behalf of the Party.

This brief alternative analysis, devoid of technical details, shows how it is possible to model different possible pragmatic interpretations of an utterance by a stepwise application of different layers of background knowledge, rather than by relying on complicated formal devices. In my opinion pragmatic analysis of political language should not show how different members of the audience may understand an utterance in the same way, but rather how different members of the audience may understand an utterance differently according to their background knowledge. The crucial point in this example seems to be the exploitation of the different roles NT is able to establish by referring to himself in two different ways and thereby diminishing his importance as a person. But this result is only possible if one analyzes the whole utterance in context and not just parts of it.

The rest of the book compensates for this slip. In the following chapter Wilson deals with the role of metaphor in political language. He thereby not only relies on the Lakoff/Johnson paradigm, which is used in so many publications at present, but he also presents other approaches and demonstrates their merits in the analysis of political talk. In an attempt to explain how politicians can make sure that their audience understands their metaphors in the intended way, he does exactly what he fails to do in the preceding chapter, i.e. he relies on discourse structure to show that by repetition politicians create 'landmarks' (one could also call this 'themes') in their speeches which serve as interpretive devices for their hearers.

The last chapter is devoted to questioning and answering strategies in politics. Wilson argues convincingly that political journalists hardly ever ask yes/no questions even if they use this question form and that politicians cannot always be blamed for evading answers when they give lengthy statements after such questions. He presents two scales of evasiveness (one for yes/no questions, the other for wh-questions) to provide a structural account for the evasiveness of an answer. This is an interesting approach in view of the
rather intuitive approach generally employed in investigations of questions in political language.

The investigation of political language is like a journey because one finds new topics to deal with every time and as politics change, political language also changes. The book reminds me of a road movie (and this is not a criticism), where the main character encounters different situations at every place he/she arrives at and has to apply different strategies to cope with them (in some places he/she meets bad guys who knock him/her down – as I did with regard to Wilson's chapter on referring expressions). I like this book because of the thorough analyses of some aspects of political language use, but it should be accompanied by some research work on the relation of the pragmatics of political language to concepts like power and control in society. I would recommend it to all readers who are beginners in the investigation of political language, but I would also strongly advise them to slip chapter 4.

A final comment: the mysterious two lines at the top of page 146 which do not fit there in any way were obviously placed there by a malicious word processor because they are the first two lines of page 171 as well (and here they fit).

References


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The subject of the book is, for a variety of reasons, bound to attract attention. The 'language of politicians' is of a highly complex nature; it is an area of intersection for a gamut of interests, and, as the author sees it, offers a challenge to the linguist to stake his or her claim and introduce some order into the chaos. Discussion in this field being open and without bounds, the

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