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Review of Jürgen Jaspers, Jan-Ola Östman & Jef Verschueren, eds. ‘Society and Language Use’

Holly R. Cashman

University of New Hampshire, Durham, holly.cashman@unh.edu

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Society and language use comprises an introduction plus 18 chapters, organized alphabetically in encyclopaedic fashion. The volume is part of a series on aspects of pragmatics aimed to provide students and researchers access to the most up-to-date and relevant research in the field. The contributions vary markedly in their depth and breadth, as well their aim. Some contributions are essentially reviews of the development of research in an area, while others summarize a theoretical approach or an adjacent field as it relates to the study of pragmatics; other contributions work to re-define concepts that have long been the object of interest, and, finally, some represent an effort to introduce a novel idea or perspective. As a matter of convenience in this review, the volume's offerings will be grouped into three areas and summarized, after a brief review of the introduction. Space limitations prevent a detailed treatment of every chapter, but it is hoped that the brief overview below will provide a taste what the volume has to offer.

Jaspers’ introduction traces the roots of sociolinguistics to lay the groundwork for the volume’s contributions, which all focus in some way on the interdependence of language use and social structure. The social turn in linguistics and the increased attention to language in sociology are examined and their theoretical consequences are noted. Jaspers closes by way of recognizing several trends and highlighting issues facing the field. First, the growing focus on the multilingual, diasporic, transnational, and urban contexts and styles; second, the move away from a quest for the ‘authentic’ vernacular and toward an examination of sarcastic, ironic, non-routine, and ludic uses of language; and third, the myriad ways in which the term ‘discourse’ is used and operationalized as a common ground for research on social implications of language use and linguistic implications of social structure.

Multilingualism & multidialectalism: The readings around this topic include Heller and Pavlenko’s entry on ‘Bilingualism and multilingualism’. This piece summarizes four approaches to research on bilingualism from neuro- and psycholinguistic to sociolinguistic, from social psychological to sociological and anthropological. In each of these four sections, the authors present the approach’s primary concerns, its origins and early work, development, and current trends. It closes with a reflec-
tion on why multilingualism is an interesting phenomenon to investigate and what it might offer to pragmatics.

Auer and Eastman’s ‘Code-switching’, which explores the topic in some depth, begins with a discussion of terminology before tracing the history of early research on the topic. Three main sections present in turn the politics of code-switching, code-switching in interaction and grammatical constraints on code-switching. The piece concludes with a brief exploration of future directions in research on code-switching.

Li Wei’s ‘Contact’ is an overview of research into what happens when speakers of different languages come to interact with each other in either face-to-face or virtual contexts. There are three main sections: the first presents the external forces that cause language contact to happen and the outcomes of language contact; the next offers a review of the main theoretical and methodological approaches to language contact, from the sociology of language and cultural anthropology to sociolinguistics and theoretical linguistics; the last explores the pragmatics of language contact, including domain theory, audience design, and the markedness/rational choice model and conversation analysis.

The topic of contact is also explored in Coupland’s short piece on ‘Accommodation theory’, which traces the development of Speech Accommodation Theory from the 1970s, summarizes the general findings of decades of research on convergence and divergence in interaction, describes the major conceptual developments in the model, and suggests the possible relationship of the sociopsychological dynamics of interaction to pragmatics.

Finally, Patrick’s ‘Language dominance and minorization’ interrogates the naturalness of categories such as ‘national language’ and ‘minority language’. The entry has two main sections in which the processes of naturalization and minorization are described. The outcomes of various language minority groups are described and contrasted, particularly those of French and indigenous languages in Canada, and the value of declarations of minority language rights is discussed.

Theoretical approaches: In ‘Cognitive sociology’, Saferstein provides a thorough introduction to the sub-discipline in three main sections. The first traces the relationship between that discipline and other related fields and approaches, such as ethnomethodology, discourse analysis, cognitive psychology, and linguistic anthropology, and he indicates how they differ in terms of emphasis, focus, and approach. The second section provides an outline of key concepts involved in the research on the process of sense-making and organization of social environments, and the third section presents key terms and concepts. A final section illustrates the approach by way of a sample analysis.
Two different approaches within sociolinguistics are presented separately. First, Dittmar in ‘Correlational sociolinguistics’ describes the approach that has alternately been called variationist sociolinguistics or quantitative sociolinguistics. In the three main sections of Dittmar’s entry, he summarizes the methodology, the linguistic and social data employed, and the paradigm’s understanding of language change. Second, Verschueren introduces ‘Interactional sociolinguistics’ and traces its development out of the work of Gumperz, Garfinkel, and Goffman. He explains the approach’s central concerns and describes its methodology, from ethnomethodology to elicitation and conversation analysis. The entry closes with a rearticulation of the program’s goals and questions.

Two shorter pieces describe approaches that are perhaps not as valuable for the body of research they have generated, but rather, according to their authors, for their potential. In ‘Symbolic interactionism’, Watson makes an argument for taking another look at the work of G. H. Mead, how it relates to other, more widely used approaches like conversation analysis and what it has to offer pragmatics. Helsloot’s entry on ‘Marxist linguistics’ proposes that such a linguistics is possible by bringing together the contributions of Gramsci, Volosinov, and Pêcheux. The entry describes the tension between Marr’s notion of essential linguistic difference and Stalin’s concept of linguistic unity, and synthesizes the different theories, noting where they converge and diverge.

Finally, while Rampton’s ‘Speech community’ does not present a theoretical approach, it traces the effects of emerging theoretical approaches on the concept. Rampton summarizes the history of the term ‘speech community’ and then enters into a broader discussion of how the concept was influenced by and influenced the formative tradition/modernity dichotomy in the social sciences. Subsequent sections summarize the social constructionist turn, describe the community of practice and the community as a semiotic sign, and reflect on language ideology and community as product. The contribution closes with a discussion of the shift away from community and toward a ‘linguistics of contact’.

*Power & hierarchies:* The contributions in this section all contend, in one way or another, with the unequal distribution of power in society and how this relates to language use. Wilson and Stapleton’s contribution on ‘Authority’ deals most explicitly with this topic. They define authority and explore the concept in six main sections as it relates to the self and the expression of evidentiality, the other and the relative distribution of turns in interaction, the world and the grounding/founding of claims of authority, religion and speaking for/as god, gender and strategies for gaining/maintaining authority, and language, including notions of prescription and planning. They conclude by noting that author-
Lakoff’s entry on ‘Gender’ first distinguishes the grammatical encoding of gender in language from semantic and pragmatic aspects of gender and language, followed by a description of what she terms the pre-history of language and gender and her (admittedly partial) creation story of language and gender research. Lakoff reviews the main findings and achievements in research on language and gender from the 70s, 80s, and 90s, and concludes with a look to the future of research on language and gender, emphasizing the field’s location between theory and practice, between perception and reality and between language and society, as well as the field’s continued importance.

The contribution from Skutnabb-Kangas on ‘Language rights’ introduces the concept of linguistic human rights, which is explored in more detail in several sections, including distinctions between individual and collective rights, negative and positive rights, personal and territorial rights, and hard law and soft law. Finally, the educational context is examined with respect to the role of linguistic human rights and the concept of linguistic genocide.

In ‘Other representation’, Coupland defines representation and develops an understanding of how representation can be ideological as well as how it is a cognitive, discursive, and relational process. Coupland also defines the concepts of ‘self’ and ‘other’, and he summarizes strategies of minorization, including homogenization, pejoration, and suppression. He closes with a problematization of the concept of ‘groupness’, noting the conflict between the hybridity and intergroup models.

In ‘Agency and language’, Ahearn defines agency, emphasizing that notions of agency may vary from culture to culture, and she argues that practice theory is a promising approach to the study of agency. Four subsequent sections of the contribution explore anthropological contributions to agency, the concept of intentionality, the encoding of agency in language and talk about agency. Ahearn closes with a brief overview of three different angles from which the connection between agency and language can be examined, followed by a call for researchers of language use in society to interrogate their understanding of agency.

Watts’ ‘Social institutions’ begins with a treatment of the theory of social constructivism and the notion of symbolic capital. Watts then gives an overview of what a needed micro-analysis of social institutions might look like, discussing the work of Sarangi & Slembrouck on the reproduction of predetermined identities of client and bureaucrat in bureaucratic discourse and reproducing a small bit of his own work on family discourse in which family discourse as institutional discourse is
exemplified. The piece ends with a call for more research on social institution that connects micro-level interaction and macro-level structure.

Finally, Kroskrity’s ‘Language ideologies — evolving perspectives’ explores the history, theoretical concepts and significant trends of research on language ideologies. He traces the history to Silverstein’s (1979) groundbreaking article, and he highlights four key concepts — from interest to awareness, multiplicity to mediation — that illuminate the study of language ideologies. Kroskrity points to several trends — from the historiography of language ideologies to the role of language ideologies in the construction of identities — in recent research. He ends by pointing out several promising directions for future research on language ideologies.

Conclusion: The encyclopaedic nature of the volume means that one should not expect a coherent collection to be read from cover to cover. Its value is in its diversity and its breadth. Some of the contributions are very well developed and would stand on their own as valuable overviews of an approach or a topic, while others seem to be merely filling in a slot without truly contributing a great deal. That said, it is a useful resource for students and scholars of pragmatics and sociolinguistics. It would provide an accessible introduction to areas of interest to the field for non-specialists or students/researchers in other fields.


This modest, but at the same time very informative, volume has the first editor’s name written all over it. Vera Regan has not only co-authored the introductory essay but has also contributed to three of the seven chapters that follow. In addition, she was the organiser, at the 17th Sociolinguistics Symposium (Amsterdam, 2008), of a theme panel which was attended by all contributors. The panel proved to be such an intellectually stimulating exercise that a decision was made to base a publication on it. The result is not a mere volume of proceedings; a wider range of topics has been included, and the panel turns out to have been at best a starting point — which is exactly how it ought to be. Even so, the focus remains firmly on Canada and Ireland, the countries most contributors hail from.

University of New Hampshire, Durham
Holly R. Cashman