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This introduction to pragmatics has been planned by the author as a "classroom compendium" to the field, relying mostly on the works by S. Levinson and G. Leech published in 1983. The book is divided into three parts, the first covering basic introductory notions and the other two dealing with issues in what the author calls micropragmatics (which covers notions such as conversational implicature, presupposition, and speech acts) and macropragmatics, where he takes a critical look at other mainstreams in the analysis of language use, such as Discourse Analysis, Text Linguistics, and Conversational Analysis. The perspective from which he approaches the study of language is one of "social critique and action", and his book is an attempt to show how all aspects of linguistic interaction can be seen to conform to the patterns of domination of the haves over the have-nots, from the analysis of indexical expressions and metaphor to turn taking in conversation.

There are two main problems with Mey's book. The first and most obvious one has to do with a confusion of fields of study, since his concerns are naturally covered by other disciplines, such as sociolinguistics, social philosophy, criticism, anthropology, etc., which were among us long before anyone gave a hoot about pragmatics. The second has to do with an astonishing and discouraging lack of rigour when dealing with most technical aspects withing the theory. Thus, conversational implicature is described as principle (p. 40); the flouting of Grice's maxims of conversation is very often confused with outright violations (pp. 66-67 and 76-77); conventional implicature is defined as "implicating certain states of the world" (p. 103), "may be exploited" (p. 105), and is made to include, among other things, the perception of accents as socially "inferior" (p. 104); presupposition is sometimes equated with "hidden assumptions" (p. 256), and a whole series of other blunders of various kinds.

Pragmatics, as it is normally understood, seeks to explain how hearers come to the interpretations intended by speakers on the basis of the linguistic information that speakers make available. This is no easy task, given that there is a vast gap between (decoded) linguistic form and intended interpretation, a gap which can only be bridged by inferential means. Take the following example:
1a. Mary: Have you seen my glasses?
      Peter: You were reading the paper in the kitchen.

How does Mary come to an interpretation like (1b) for Peter’s answer?

1b. Your glasses are probably in the kitchen.

Within the groundbreaking Gricean framework, hearers assume that speakers are rational and cooperative (it is formulated as an assumption, not as a fact, contrary to what is claimed by Mey (p. 74)), more specifically, hearers expect speakers to be relevant, truthful, informative and clear. These assumptions are so overriding that even in the face of apparent violations (floatings) hearers look for an interpretation that can render the speaker’s words cooperative and rational. In (1) Mary needs to make additional assumptions easily derivable from the words of Peter: If she had been reading the paper in the kitchen, her glasses might well be there. Peter has thus managed to give Mary an implicit suggestion as to where to find her glasses by making explicit a fact that can be relevant to her. Here information has been transmitted implicitly but overtly, there is nothing hidden in this process; were Mary incapable of deriving the implicit import of his words, Peter would be prepared to make it explicit. This is so because it is in speakers’ interests to be understood the way they want to be understood. Of course, speakers and hearers may well have hidden intentions; in the above exchange, Peter may know that the glasses are somewhere else and simply want to send Mary up the garden path, but this would not count as evidence against the (very succinct) description given above of the process that Mary had to follow in interpreting his words. Notice, as well, that were Mary to accuse Peter of wanting to mislead her, he could always claim -perversely- that she is talking nonsense without seeming irrational, but he could not likewise deny that he intended her to derive (1b).

This inferential process, which Grice saw as governed by principles of a social nature (the Cooperative Principle and the maxims of conversation) and Relevance Theory (RT) (Sperber & Wilson, 1986), explains in purely cognitive terms (the Principle of Relevance), applies to all forms of interactive behaviour, and has therefore the advantage of being motivated independently. No one has claimed in pragmatics that this is all that goes on in communication; the reason why both the Gricean and the RT frameworks are concerned with overt implicit communication is that there are systematic generalizations which apply to this form of information transmission which are not applicable to accidental or covert transmissions, hence the need, which Mey does not seem to be aware of, to draw the line.

Now let’s get one example of the kind that Mey favours:

2. Mary: Can I have the information on how to join the army?
       Information office attendant: You’re a woman.
Mary will most probably interpret the attendant's words as a refusal to hand over the information she requires. To understand the words of the attendant, Mary must use the information that some men do not approve of women joining the army, an assumption that involves sexual discrimination and/or male chauvinism. This fact has a social relevance that the information she had to use in (1) lacks, but notice that the inferential process that we sketched above is in no way affected by the nature of the assumption.

The only constraint on the assumptions utilized in utterance interpretation is that those assumptions be the ones the speaker was expecting the hearer to derive; it is of no consequence to the theory if they involve social biases; the social/political relevance of such behaviour requires a different kind of explanation as well as other methods of analysis. Because there is no overlap of interests, there is no reason why the two types of theory should clash (or be conflated). However, Mey's societal pragmatics would still have to account for how non-coded inferential communication can take place. Hammering the message that inequality patterns are reproduced in our speech and providing juicy examples does not count as an explanation. Besides, his insistence is misplaced: rigorous pragmatics is not naïve or socially biased, it is simply a different kettle of fish.