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Pragmatics for scholars and students

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Betty J. Birner. 2013. *Introduction to Pragmatics*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell

Introduction to Pragmatics, by Betty J. Birner, meets all the requirements of a university textbook dedicated to this branch of linguistics, not only in terms of its content but also its structure and style.

The book addresses the main areas of concern of the field of pragmatics by devoting either a full chapter to them (“Gricean Implicature”, “Later Approaches to Implicature”, “Presupposition”, “Speech Acts”, and “Inferential Relations”) or at least a section of a chapter (for example, “Deixis” and “Anaphora” in the chapter “Reference”; “Face and Politeness” in the chapter “Speech Acts”). The author successfully combines “classical” with more innovative approaches and tackles topics that are not frequently found in textbooks of this kind. I refer specifically to the chapter entitled “Information Structure”, an area of pragmatics that even Stephen Levinson opted to omit in the first comprehensive textbook in the field (Levinson 1983). Birner, however, deals with the subject in a thought-provoking fashion, outlining some of the main structures with which utterances are marked at the sentence level in English, enabling the reader to appreciate the vastness and complexity of this topic. This particular chapter also opens up interesting avenues of research involving comparisons with other languages, typologically close or distant.

In the first chapter, “Defining Pragmatics”, but in other chapters too, including “Dynamic Semantics and the Representation of Discourse”, the book explores the challenging questions at the boundary between semantics and pragmatics. And, less explicitly, it also explores relationships at the interface between pragmatics and grammar. The author raises these questions in the chapter I discussed above, “Information Structure”, as well as in the chapter entitled “Reference”, where she tackles the subjects of deixis, anaphora, and the distinction between definite and indefinite noun phrases.

The manner in which the author presents these subjects is, as said, especially adequate for a textbook. Particular mention should be made of the extraordinary clarity of exposition that characterizes Birner’s prose. At times, the reader has the impression of sitting in one of her lectures, in a perfectly organised presentation entirely appropriate for teaching. Students assigned this textbook will unquestionably be grateful for this, especially those who do not have English as their first language.

A further feature that makes this book particularly suitable for students, and one that cannot always be taken for granted in university textbooks, is the richness and generosity of the author's examples (all drawn from authentic sources). The numerous fragments of discourse are always of sufficient length to provide adequate context for interpretation.

There are two final features I would like to stress that ensure that *Introduction to Pragmatics* is a particularly good textbook. First, the Summary sections placed at the end of each chapter, combined with the insightful introductory comments, give the reader a very useful overview of the ideas discussed in each. And, second, the exercises (which range in number between six and fifteen) included with each chapter help the readers (and especially students) to further their understanding of the topic, apply the ideas raised to other areas, and to explore additional perspectives on the ideas discussed without the author having to resort to footnotes. For example, Birner introduces the concept of left- and right-dislocation in the exercises included in the chapter devoted to "Information Structure".

In any textbook, it is almost inevitable that some aspects could have been dealt with in greater depth or from a different angle: the author has made her choices, and they will not always coincide with ours. For example, given its importance among pragmatic phenomena, I would have liked to have seen a whole chapter dedicated to deixis. And the same might be said of politeness.

These imbalances between the subjects addressed might have been partially offset if, at the end of each chapter, a selection of basic references had been offered ("Further readings" or "To learn more"). This would have helped the interested readers broaden their knowledge.

In short, Birner's textbook is a very useful, interesting, up-to-date, and in some aspects innovative contribution for those studying pragmatics or taking their first steps in research in the field.

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Research interests: Deixis, especially person deixis and text deixis. Linguistic consultancy in Catalan (oral and written texts) and editing and revising criteria. Prescriptive syntax.

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