

## CURRENT ISSUES IN SOCIETAL PRAGMATICS<sup>1</sup>

*(Questões correntes na Pragmática Social)*

Jacob L. Mey<sup>2</sup>

*(University of Southern Denmark - Dinamarca)*

### **ABSTRACT**

*The essay argues for the need for a renewed consciousness of the human element in language use: a human 'ecology' of language, as one could call it. The label 'societal' is intended to capture the fact that the human user is central in all considerations of language policies, in efforts to save endangered languages and raise language awareness ('conscientização'), with regard to questions of language and gender, of language abuse, and so on. It is further argued that an emancipatory language use must incorporate an anticipatory aspect, by which present and foreseeable effects of language policies are placed within the actual life situations of the users. (Two actual cases, one from Brazil, the other from India, are discussed).*

**Keywords:** *Societal pragmatics, language awareness, gender and language, endangered languages, 'conscientization', 'anticipatory' pragmatics, ecology of language*

### **RESUMO**

*O ensaio defende a necessidade de uma renovada consciência do ser humano no uso da linguagem: uma ecologia humana da linguagem, como se poderia chamá-lo. O rótulo "social" destina-se a captar o fato de que o usuário humano é central em todos os aspectos das políticas de língua, nos esforços para salvar as línguas em perigo e aumentar a conscientização da linguagem ('conscientização'), no que concerne às questões de*

1. A much abridged version of this contribution will appear as an entry 'Societal Pragmatics' in The Encyclopedia of Applied Linguistics (Carol Chapelle, ed.), to be published by Wiley-Blackwell in 2011.
2. Professor Emeritus of Linguistics at the University of Southern Denmark.

*linguagem e gênero, abuso de linguagem, e assim por diante. Argumenta-se ainda que o uso da linguagem emancipatória deve incorporar um aspecto antecipatório, pelo que se apresenta e pelos efeitos previsíveis das políticas linguísticas que são colocados dentro das situações da vida real dos usuários. (são discutidos dois casos reais, um do Brasil e outro da Índia,).*

**Palavras-chave:** *pragmática social, consciência linguística, gênero e linguagem, línguas ameaçadas de extinção, 'conscientização', pragmática antecipatória, ecologia da linguagem*

## Introduction

What is 'societal pragmatics'? Given that pragmatics, by definition, is social, one could legitimately raise the question: Why is it necessary to talk about 'societal pragmatics'? Implicit in these question is, of course, a preliminary assumption, which leads us to a further, more fundamental question: What do we mean by saying that pragmatics by definition is social, and why is this a 'given'? To answer this double question, let's look at the history of pragmatics as it has developed over the past decades.

In the course of the last century, the study of language (also called 'linguistics') has moved away from the classical paradigm, in which the study of language was either mainly *historically* oriented (where do languages come from and how are they related?), or focused its interest on linguistic *structures* (how do languages go about organizing their expressions?). The first question was typically the object of 'historical grammar', as it used to be called; the second question belonged in the realm of syntactic studies, which became (and for a great part still are) what is understood by many as the primordial area of linguistic interest. What is called the 'pragmatic turn' in linguistics may thus be described as a "shift from the paradigm of theoretical grammar (in particular, syntax) to the paradigm of the language user" (Mey 2001:4).

But what is such a 'paradigm of the user' all about? Here, our question must naturally direct itself at what the users *do* with their

language, or how they “do things with words”, as one of the founders of modern pragmatic studies has expressed it (John L. Austin, in the title of his famous posthumous treatise; 1962).

## 2. The importance of the user

The idea of a user naturally presupposes the idea of *use*: ‘use is what a user does’. When it comes to language use, we can easily observe, just by looking around us, that in our society, language is used primarily for the purpose of communication. The business man or woman concluding a deal, communicates his or her preferences and conditions to the other party by using language. The defendant in court and his or her lawyers use language to communicate their viewpoints to the judge and the jury. Newscasters use language to communicate what they consider as the important political or local news items of the day, while advertisers express themselves through language when providing suggestive or useful information about their products. Even on the domestic front, partners agree or disagree, quarrel and make up again, using the linguistic resources at their disposal. And when it comes to the third most important sector of our society (after politics and commerce), namely education on all its levels, communicating knowledge and checking feedback on provided input would be impossible without language (both spoken, written, or — in the case of the Deaf community — signed).

But communication should not be thought of as a one-way, or even two-way, street, with somebody (the sender) throwing out some message and somebody else (the receiver or receivers) catching it and retuning it like one does a volleyball serve. This idea of language users acting like ‘talking heads’ (as it is often proposed in initial chapters of introductory linguistics textbooks) is not only very limiting, but downright misleading. While it is true that communication in society mainly happens by means of language, language as such is certainly not the last word. And society should be taken seriously when we are dealing with communication. The ‘one way street’ is not only limited

and limiting, but it basically leads nowhere, as long as it isn't placed in its proper context: that of society.

As to the users of language, "as social beings, they use language and communicate strictly on society's premises. Society not only controls their access to the linguistic and communicative means; society enables the users of language in their use of the communicative means. Pragmatics, as the study of the way humans use their language in communication, is based on society's premises; more specifically, *societal* pragmatics explicitly invokes those premises and inquires how they affect our language use. Hence, while pragmatics is defined as the study of language in human communication as determined by the conditions of society" (Mey 2001:6), societal pragmatics emphasizes the social conditions under which we live and use language, and tries to determine in what specific ways these conditions facilitate, respectively obstruct, indeed, 'make and break' our use of language.

### **3. Society and its discontents**

There are many ways of looking at society. Liberal philosophers and economists of the 'objectivist' obedience have considered society as an inevitable, but hardly desirable way of going about our social business; for British economists of the nineteenth century, the ideal society was considered a kind of 'night watchman': a necessary, but not necessarily popular institution.

A more adequate contemporary view of society is that by which the economic conditions under which we live are viewed to be of decisive influence on the way we organize or social world, including the way we express ourselves in words and emotions. This view distances itself both from the strict economic determinism by which social relations are thought to be exclusively materially bound, and from the view that our social relations exist between individuals in the first place (or even exclusively), to be extended beyond the 'two-way street' interaction alluded to above, to comprise a more extended give-and-take.

There is a German proverb that says ‘Humans are what they eat’ (*Der Mensch ist was er isst*: unfortunately, the word play does not carry over). One could modify this to say, more appropriately, ‘Humans are what they make’: the capacity of humans to produce useful things leads them to invest their mental and material energies in the object they have made, a bit like those Israelites in the desert who invested their golden calf with divine power and adored it as impersonating some supernatural entity. The ability of humans to create this kind of ‘fetishes’ has fascinated philosophers, economists and anthropologists for a long time: but the phenomenon (for all its pervasiveness) has not been evaluated properly by most of those writing about it.

Karl Marx was one of the first who focused on the immanent character of the fetish as a human-made object, encapsulating human social relations in the shape of a *thing*. When the social relations of production and consumption in our society become measured by, even defined by, the marketing value of their outcomes, our social relations themselves become ‘things’. But when this happens, we no longer see the processes that led to the production of useful goods, but only the end results, the marketable commodities. The value of the product, the marketable thing, is not measured in terms of the social relations that were necessary to produce it (such as the oppressive employment relations that are embedded in the process of its production). Its only value is what can be expressed in terms of the market; as Marx has it, quoting a common saying of the times:

*The value of a thing  
Is the price it will bring.  
(Capital, I, 1, 1 fn. 7)*

The market is indifferent to the conditions of labor under which the marketable goods are fabricated; the outcome of the human labor is uniquely represented in the money value that the market allows one to charge for it.

As far as language is concerned, the ‘thing’ character of the marketable product carries over to its linguistic expression: words become abstract value-carriers that bear no relation to the conditions under which they were ‘born’. An expression like ‘welfare reform’, as currently used in many communities word-wide, has lost its connection to the context in which it was first launched: a desire on the part of governments to limit its expenditures, without regard for those who were supposed to bear the brunt of the ‘reform’. Similarly, a term like ‘democracy’ needs to be analyzed in accordance with the proper societal context in which it occurs: are we talking about the kind of ideal society that romantic philosophers of the 18<sup>th</sup> century dreamt about when they idolized the ideal classical Greek city-state, or are we referring to the kind of ‘people democracies’ that were abundant during the past century in Europe and elsewhere?

It is certainly no exaggeration to say that there are ‘worlds’ of difference between the various uses of such a term: some uses are more appropriate than others to ‘mask’ the real state of affairs, but all uses have this in common that they reflect the modes of thought and ideologies that were prevalent in the societal contexts where they originated. Societal pragmatics sees it as its primary task to ‘unmask’ such manipulative use of language, and to set the record straight by connecting controversial and ‘masking’ expressions with their proper contexts.

In the next sections, I will examine some of the contexts where such manipulation occurs, and indicate ways of ‘re-contextualizing’ the users, that is, placing them and their languages in their own, appropriate contexts.

#### **4. Pragmatics and ecology**

What I am arguing for above is nothing but the need for a renewed consciousness of the human element in language use: an ‘ecology’ of language, as one could call it. Since languages are for use, the users of language deserve to be the prime center of

attention when we talk or practice language use. But humans do not exist in some abstract conservation environment, where one can control their movements and monitor their speech, ensuring that they ‘do the right thing’. The respect we pay to people should include our respect for their living conditions and our acceptance of their choices. In the following, I will discuss two cases from recent practice, and draw some conclusions based on a societal pragmatic perspective.

## 5. The case of the Guaraní

Two decades ago, a group of linguists and students from the Department of Applied Linguistics, Institute of Linguistic Studies, State University of Campinas, Brazil went on a fact-finding mission among local Guaraní-speaking settlements in the interior of São Paulo State, as part of an alphabetization program that their university was sponsoring. The intention of this ‘ecological’ effort was in part to protect, and possibly revive, the use of the native language among its speakers, in part to contribute to the official policy of bringing ‘primitive’ populations into the mainstream of current societal life. One precondition for such a move was thought to be the ability to read and write, commonly called ‘literacy’. The process by which literacy was introduced was called *alfabetização*, literally ‘alphabetization’, meaning: teaching people to use the alphabet in reading and writing.

However, the group quickly discovered that their efforts at promoting Guaraní literacy among the locals language did not meet with the expected positive feedback: even though the people initially had manifested great interest in the program, not many did turn up for classes and meetings. In order to find out why the ‘natives’ reacted so negatively, despite their initial enthusiasm, the linguists sat down with them and asked them how they felt about the program and their participation in it (something the group perhaps should have done in the very first round). It turned out that this particular village of 200 Guaraní speakers indeed desired to improve the quality of

life for its residents; also, they realized that acquiring literacy was an incontrovertible condition for reaching that goal—however, the *alfabetização* they were interested in was one that happened in Portuguese, not Guaraní!

So the linguists who thought they had been engaged in an ecological effort of saving a partially dying language, found that they actually were asked to lend assistance of quite another kind: alphabetization, yes, but not in the villagers' endangered language, Guaraní. In the latter's perspective, a world language like Portuguese was better qualified for the predicate 'ecological' than was their own. In other words, from a societal pragmatic viewpoint, these users expressed quite a different opinion of the way to go than did the experts who had sketched out the original program. (For details, see Cavalcanti 2001).

## **6. The case of the Toda father**

The Toda are a small isolated Indian tribe of around 1,100 people (most recent count; cf. Ethnologue 2007), living in the Nilgiri Hills of the State of Tamil Nadu, in the Southern part of the subcontinent; their language (although belonging to the Dravidian Kannada family) is not mutually intelligible to any of the major tongues spoken in the region. Visiting linguists and fieldworkers, fearing that the Toda language in fact was disappearing, sounded the alarm and initiated efforts to 'save' the local idiom. Here, they met with unexpected resistance: the Toda were not at all convinced that 'saving' their language was such a great idea. One particular Toda father even actively opposed any efforts by the linguists to enroll his boys in a 'language revitalization' program.

The person in charge of the program to protect Toda from extinction was the late Peter Ladefoged, a linguist from the University of California at Los Angeles. From his account of the failed attempt, it seems clear that this particular parent was not the only villager who opposed the program. As to the reasons why the tribal people



refused to ‘save’ their language, Ladefoged tells us that when asked to motivate his refusal, the father in question maintained that his children were entitled to a better life than the one they could look forward to by remaining in the village context (which included speaking their own language, Toda). To get ahead in the world, mastery of one of the main languages of the area and the subcontinent, like Tamil and preferably also English, was a necessary precondition; Toda was of no consequence in such a wider context. On the contrary, efforts to use and, if needed, to (re)learn Toda would only take precious time and resources away from the study of those more important idioms. In other words, this native speaker of an endangered language did not see the possible demise of his language as a ‘danger’; in effect, he would welcome it as a much-needed step on the way to greater prosperity. As Ladefoged remarks, ‘who are we as linguists to oppose this parent’s view, and tell him that he’s all wrong?’ (1992: 811).

## 7. To save or not to save?

A societal pragmatic view of the two situations described here must first of all inquire about the conditions in which the language is, and can be, used by which speakers. Without a living community of speakers, all languages are sooner or later going to be extinct; but who is responsible for the societal context in which languages live or die? This may sound like a platitude, but the consequences of this insight are weighty. In practice, this means that the use of a particular language depends on the practices of the people speaking it; this is why a language used in the context of a particular community of activity always has greater chances of survival and growth than mere *linguae francae*, as exemplified by trade languages such as *pasar melayu* (‘market Malay’) or *russenorsk* (‘Russian Norwegian’) that are (or were) exclusively used for buying and selling at markets.

Similarly, the persistence of languages like Sanskrit or Latin down through the ages can only be explained by the fact that they were kept in active use by scholarly and/or religious communities for thousands

of years. The sovereign position of Latin as a scientific *lingua franca* during the Middle Ages and much of the Renaissance, even extending into the Enlightenment and beyond (the last university dissertation to be defended in Latin at Copenhagen University occurred as late as 1906!), can only be explained in this way. The community provided the societal-pragmatic basis for the langue and its users; as soon as the community ‘betrayed’ its language users, they had nowhere to go but to another community, in most cases the one speaking the vernacular. The activities of these communities represented a practice that was instrumental in establishing a community of language users, interacting through and in language, and a communal practice, dialectically interacting with the users. The priests of the ancient Vedic rituals did not just teach their apprentices sacred sentences, let alone magic words: the formulas used were inculcated through and in the use of sacrificial and ritual activities.

The societal pragmatic view that, several millennia later, an educationalist such as the Brazilian Paulo Freire taught us, is that language instruction and promotion of literacy (*alfabetização*), in order to be successful, has to include, and depends crucially on, ‘consciousness raising’ of the participants in the instructional activity, in a process Freire called *conscientização* (literally: ‘making conscious’; Freire 2000). This interaction-in-language is the hallmark of societal pragmatics, and it is safe to say that any ecology of language in the last resort must be based on such a pragmatic view of linguistic interaction.

The next few sections will deal with another aspect of societal pragmatics, insofar as they touch upon abuse, rather than use of language.

## **8. Abusive language**

In every day usage, ‘abusive language’ is thought of as consisting of abusive and vituperative words and expressions, as when we call people names, or diminish their dignity as humans by comparing them to low-prestige animals (as the Iraqi journalist did when he threw his

shoes at then President George W. Bush during a press conference in Baghdad and called him a ‘dog’).<sup>3</sup> The language of religious fanaticism (as in ‘unclean unbelievers’) belongs here, and in general all ideology-laden invective and depreciative discourse.

In a broader context, the terminology we create for controversial natural and social phenomena often is abusive in that it puts the user in a double bind: thus, some of our political leaders have been instructed to use a term like ‘climate change’ in order not to offend their constituents, who may be shocked to hear that the ‘global warming’ their own actions are actively promoting, is the current ecological downturn’s real cause and name. A societal pragmatics should look for ways to express sensitive matters in such a way that we neither offend our listeners, nor discredit the integrity of our words.

Consider the past decades’ heated international debates on whether or not to interfere in other nations’ internal affairs (the former Yugoslavia and the conflict in the Darfur region of Sudan come to mind). Here, the expression ‘right to interfere’ (RTI) expresses an attitude that puts itself above other nations’ sovereign aims and wishes; hence this way of dealing with the problems in Yugoslavia and Darfur is apt to generate controversy in a variety of international and national fora. By contrast, if we proactively define our intervention as a ‘responsibility to protect’ (RTP), we express our feeling of obligation to assist other nations in safeguarding respect for human rights and in building a democratic society. As a result, very few people will be offended (both nationally and internationally) by a non-abusive discourse of this kind.

## 9. Language and sex

The British feminist linguist Dale Spender coined the expression ‘Man made language’ and used it as the title of an

---

3. The journalist (by many Iraqis considered a hero) was subsequently given a three-year prison sentence (later reduced to one year).

important early work on sexual discrimination by way of language (Spender 1980). Awareness of the social oppression that is built into the common assumption of a male use of language being superior to a female use (where ‘male’ and ‘female’ are considered to represent, respectively, authority and submission) is essential to initiating possible changes. Language is often an obstruction here: the female members of society may be made ‘invisible’ by the universal use of the male pronoun *he* and the general referring term for ‘humans’ *man*. Much of this is so to speak built into the very foundations of one’s language, such as when the German word for (generalized) ‘one’ is *man*, and words such as German *jemand* ‘somebody’ or *niemand* ‘nobody’ carry the word for ‘man’ as a component element: *-mand*. The grammatical consequence of this situation is that in German, we are forced to use the male pronouns for referring to ‘somebody’ or ‘nobody’, even when the person referred to is typically female! Here is an example from personal experience:

Somebody had left her lipstick holder in the ladies’ toilet on the Stena Line ferry from Kiel to Oslo. A loudspeaker announcement came through saying (in German):

*Hat jemand seinen Lippenstift in der Toilette hinterlassen?*, which literally translates as:

‘Has anybody left his lipstick behind in the ladies’ room?’ (the lipstick holder in question was evidently of some value).

Here, the male pronoun *his* was used to refer to a (traditionally) female owner. The grammatical force of the German expression *jemand* overrode the factual situation and its gender-based conditions: *jemand* in German grammar is irreducibly male, irrespective of the gender of the referent.

In other situations, we are able to remedy some of these grammatical incongruities, e.g. by not saying just ‘he’ when the person we refer to could be either male or female, but use a form like ‘he or

she' (in writing, one could use 's/he'). The main thing is to be aware of the invisible oppression of one of the human sexes by omission or 'erasure', as it is now commonly called.<sup>4</sup>

In all this, we have to realize that, for tens of thousands of years, the social conditions in which our species has lived have been dominated by males. In such an 'oppressive' societal situation (see Mey 1985: 25 ff), the powerful dominate the powerless, not only in material respects, but also regarding other, less tangible matters, such as the use of language. Becoming aware of this oppression is the first condition for engaging oneself actively on the side of the oppressed, first of all, of the women, for whom the fact that 'Man' has made language is the very cause of their linguistic oppression.

But by itself, awareness does not make oppression go away. Forcing ourselves to bring out the problem in the open, 'wording it' (Mey 1985: 166 ff), is a major, if not the only way for us to deal with it in a practical perspective, through a use of language that is *societally pragmatic*, that is, a use of language that does not subscribe to the commonly established prejudices about, and skewed images of, women. will change men's ways of thinking of women, while it makes women conscious of the importance of language in their lives. Every time we force ourselves to use a form like 'she or he', rather than the so-called generic 'he' (supposedly covering both sexes), a little step is taken towards the realization of the fact that 'man-made language' is an historical accident, not a natural condition which cannot be changed.

The presence of women in the world can be emphasized and protected through this seemingly insignificant small shift in the language — and therefore, it is not useless or in vain. The next, final sections will treat in more detail of why, and how, an 'emancipatory' view of social conditions should be part of any decent societal pragmatics.

4. The American linguists Treichler and Frank ironically comment on the way traditional grammars operate, as follows: "... the word man functions to encompass human beings of both sexes: "Man stood upright, and a new day dawned"' (1989:3).

## 10. Emancipatory pragmatics

The term ‘emancipatory pragmatics’ is an extension of what I earlier have called ‘emancipatory linguistics’ (Mey 1976, 1979, 1985, 1994, 2001, 2010; see also Signorini 2009). The first question to ask is what is meant by ‘emancipatory’? What or who emancipates, and from what?

The ancient Romans used the term to characterize the process by which a slave was freed from his or her bonds. The slave’s relation to the master was termed *mancipium*, literally: a ‘taking by the hand’; when the slave gained freedom, in a legal process called *manumissio*, literally a ‘sending off from the hand’, this legal bond and the ensuing obligations were extinguished. Similarly, in later times the freeing of the slaves was conducted according to the prevalent laws, as it happened in several European countries in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, and finally after the Civil War, also in the US.

The abolition of institutional slavery in the US in the 19<sup>th</sup> century served as a mighty inspiration for the oppressed working classes in the Western world everywhere. The words of the *Communist Manifesto*, “The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win”, epitomized the social situation in which the workers of the early capitalistic period found themselves and thus spurred them on towards the goal of emancipation: the freeing of the workers from their industrial shackles.

When it comes to emancipatory linguistics, the term was originally intended to signify the freeing of the language users from the societal oppression as it was manifested in language. In the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, sociolinguists such as Basil Bernstein remarked on the fact that social origin often leads to societal inferiority in matters of education and use of language. The socially inferior were also underprivileged with regard to culture and the workings of democracy. An emancipatory linguistics was thought of as ideally serving the underprivileged, the ‘proletarians of the word’, and as such was seen as part of the social struggle. Especially in the realm of education, these thoughts were instrumental in various attempts to reform the

curricula of the various levels of the educational system, in particular there where the weakest recipients of instructional benefits were found: the primary schools in developing and 'threshold' countries.

## 11. The limits of emancipation: Anticipation

As I said at the beginning, pragmatics is all about the use of language and the people who use language; freeing them from the bondage of false beliefs and societal oppression is thus an appropriate task of a societal pragmatics that is true to the ideals of emancipation. But emancipation in and by itself is not enough: there is a life after emancipation, as the freed slaves of the American South came to experience, mostly to their disadvantage. Without knowing where to go, or whom to approach for a 'free' labor connection, many of them sunk into a misery that was often worse than the slavery they had been emancipated from. Pragmatics has a paramount role in the liberation of the users, but it must follow up the emancipatory process in sustained supportive action. In other words, in order to be successful, emancipation presupposes an anticipatory activity.

Such a task is not just confined to the here and now; we must look ahead, and this is where anticipation comes in.<sup>5</sup> Since pragmatics is about the use and users of language, an emancipatory pragmatics deals with how to use language in a non-oppressive, even liberating way. Looking ahead, then, we will see that our task is to proactively promote and create a language use that will prevent people from abusing the gift of language to their own egoistic ends. The task of an anticipatory societal pragmatics is to foresee and prevent such abuses,

---

5. My use of the term is inspired by what anthropologists such as Robert B. Textor have called 'anticipatory anthropology', described as "a disciplined effort to discover proactively what members of a human group want and what they fear, and what sacrifices they are prepared to take, toward realizing the former or avoiding the latter" (2009:21).

and enable the users to counteract all sorts of abusive language (in the sense defined earlier), even before they start being accepted as normal ways of dealing with the world and its inhabitants.

## 12. Manipulative discourse

The term ‘discourse’ is often used to characterize not just (a) speech (as in the French term *discours*), but the ensemble of attitudes that people have vis-à-vis their ‘life world’, to use an expression dear to Ludwig Wittgenstein. Discourse not only manifests itself in language: it is handled and nurtured by language, specifically through the ways in which we express our ideological preferences linguistically. In this sense, discourse not only creates and recreates the social fabric on which it is predicated; in a dialectical turn of the screw, our discourse disposes us towards accepting the particular societal order that we happen to live under, as universally valid and natural.

The discourse of manipulation can be thwarted by adopting a societally pragmatic stance, for example by practicing a (pro-)active understanding of one’s adversaries. As an instance of such a proactive use of discourse, consider how Abraham Lincoln, in the years that preceded the Civil War, had to oppose, not only the secessionists, the Southern politicians who wanted to disrupt the Union and preserve an institution like slavery that had been instrumental in creating its prosperity, especially in what was later to become the Confederate States of America, but in addition, the members of his own party who were not at all sure that abolition was such a good idea. Lincoln himself was adamant on the question of abolition and consequently also had to fight those among his own people who, while wanting to preserve the Union, were not at all convinced that slavery was at the root of the secessionist discourse.<sup>6</sup> Lincoln skillfully turned the

---

6. Actually, five of the Southern states of the Union that were loyal to Lincoln (among these Kentucky and Maryland) were slave states, whose governments had little or no interest in abolishing slavery.



problem on its head and persuaded these people that the discourse of slavery had to be replaced by a discourse of freedom, as the only way to preserve the Union. His anticipatory pragmatic view prevailed in the end, albeit at the cost of many lives; it also inflicted a deep wound on the minds and collective consciousness of the American people—a wound whose scars even today are not entirely healed.

Other manipulative discourses that come to mind in the context of a societal pragmatics are embodied in the language of social oppression, of sexual discrimination, of (neo-)colonialism, and so on. Recently, we have witnessed the rise of a specific ‘discourse of terrorism’, by which acts of violence are glorified as heroic deeds, and their perpetrators are lionized as ‘martyrs’. Among the young immigrants living in the cities of the US and Europe, a new attitude takes the discourse of terrorism as embodying their own resistance to global capitalism, their kinfolks’ fight for independence, and their own desire to improve their livelihoods (the populations of the inner cities of France and Britain may serve as egregious examples).

In order to turn back the wave of violence that is rolling in over our society, we need to redefine the mentality that is expressed in this discourse; but also, proactively and emancipatorily, we need to replace the language itself that is being used in the terrorist discourse. Why should a suicide bomber be called a martyr and not a mass murderer? Replacing the discourse of terror with a discourse of ‘doing no harm’ (for instance as in the Gandhian tradition of *ahimsa*) is a first, and very necessary step towards eliminating terrorism itself. Similarly, in the current calamitous situation of the world’s finances, we should proactively deflate the discourses glorifying the ‘captains of industry’, when they in reality are robber barons and committers of grand larceny, often in collusion with the politicians (only a few of whom get caught...). In this connection, a proactive discourse that propagates a societally pragmatic approach to these and other societal evils may point the way to ending abusive discourse, and emancipate us from the tyranny, not only of the language of evil, but of the social evils that are at the bottom of the abusive language.

### 13. Anticipation and control

A caveat is in order here. Anticipating a person's needs may be used to manipulate him or her to ends that the manipulated person does not perceive as justified, or simply does not agree with (Norrick 2009). This kind of manipulative anticipation oversteps the boundaries of other people's 'territories of information' (as the Japanese linguist Akio Kamio has defined it; Kamio 1994 and ff.), or impinges on the private spheres of the very people whose sufferings we empathize with (as John Heritage has pointed out in his discussion of the boundaries of 'empathy'; Heritage 2007). An emancipatory pragmatics with a proactive, anticipatory thrust should be aware of these dangers, and not fall back in the old groove of paternalistic colonialism, by which the 'poor natives' were considered as unruly children, to be educated in accordance with the beliefs of the colonizers and 'formed' in their images.

Societal pragmatics, while being aware of this danger, even so should stride boldly ahead. In social affairs, as in life in general, a wrong decision may be less damaging than making no decision, as British author Gilbert Keith Chesterton once remarked (in his book *Orthodoxy*, 1934). At the end of the day, even less preferable actions are better than taking no action at all, as we have seen demonstrated repeatedly in the various crises that have plagued the former Yugoslavia, or the civil strife that is still rampant in many countries of Central and East Africa. But our actions should be informed by correct, theoretical insights, and this is where societal pragmatics, in its proactive, anticipatory version comes in. Above, I said that pragmatic linguistics has as its aim to unveil the abuses of language; societal pragmatics, in force of its emancipatory potential, will have to anticipate such abuses of language and prevent manipulative discourses from being acknowledged as the only correct way of talking about our actual problems, be they of a political, social, and even ecological nature.

Moreover, it is important for societal pragmatics to proactively engage in the counter-discourse of emancipation. This is done by

what I above have called ‘unmasking’ manipulative language and other linguistic abuses. This unmasking (which I earlier have called ‘unveiling’; see Mey 1985: 25 ff) has as its primary aim to deprive all corruption in politics, all impunity in crime, and all terrorism in international affairs of the protective cloak of manipulative discourse that language (ab-)users consistently have wrapped around their abusive practices. Thus, societal pragmatics does not stand for a mostly academic exercise in politically correct use of language, but embodies the practice of a socially motivated and socially responsible societal discourse.

## **Pragmatics and society: Looking to the future**

The past decades have seen an increasing attention to the ways societal interests interrelate with societal practices. This interest has not only to do with theoretical issues, but centers around what broadly might be called the area of ‘people discourse’. This area comprises all the subfields that earlier were assigned to sociolinguistics and societal pragmatics, but also contributes a new direction to these studies, by incorporating them into the changing semiotics of modern society.

The current trends toward globalization of communication and human relationships, both in the market place and in the various areas of private life, are reflected in our changed attitude towards what was earlier considered the private area of interacting individuals. The cultures that individuals bring into the common forum are markedly different, yet tend to become more and more homogenized in the name of what is called ‘intercultural communication’. Here, we need a clearer definition of what communication is, and how it can be ‘intercultural’ without becoming ‘a-cultural’ in the sense that nobody identifies with it.

Pragmatics has always emphasized the role of the user in communication. One of its main interests from the very beginning has been the examination of the conditions under which language users are able to develop their communicative competences, and

especially what hindrances are put in the way of their language use by the institutionalized structures of society. One of the pragmatic approaches to this problem was earlier identified as developing 'linguistic awareness' (Fairclough, 1992), and this awareness was thought of as being practiced through a 'critical' approach to language and its users, e.g. in 'Critical Linguistics' (Mey, 1979; 1985) or 'Critical Discourse Analysis' (van Dijk, 1993). Much attention was paid to the ways language is used and abused in the media and in the institutions that govern our daily lives (such as the official, governmental power brokers at the local and national level), in the social institutions of supportive and assisting care, mediated through the medical and hospital sector, in the educational establishment at all levels, from kindergarten through tertiary and post-tertiary education, and in the discourse of technological innovation, especially in the areas of computerized information handling and knowledge sharing.

Pragmatics has learned to adjust to all these new trends, and has defined itself away from an earlier, more lapidary definition of the societal contradictions, where class and social macro-mechanisms were considered the main players. The new development focuses on local discursive structures and tries to make sense of what happens on the ground level of the organizational bodies; here, changing societal discourses manifest themselves in new approaches to communication, as they are practiced in communities of activity such as the scientific laboratory or the interactive classroom. Other developing areas comprise the organization and activities of the labor market at the various levels of production; a new understanding of the roles of health care workers and their interaction with the people in their care; the enhanced interaction both between humans and computerized devices on the one hand and between humans interacting through the electronic media on the other (in websites, blogs, e-mail, face-book and twitter and other internet-based information-sharing and activity-oriented environments); and so on.

The new approaches to what earlier was called a 'social semiotics' have to take into account the rapidly changing conditions of the means of communication themselves. From being a handy tool

in personal and professional communication, the computer has made possible a wholly new vision of our social relationships. High-tech discourse and use of computerized facilities such as web blogging have not only had repercussions on the individual level of the single user, but are now seen as conditions for a successful interaction on the global level, a ‘people discourse’, as one might call it. This development has had wide consequences for the way languages are being considered not just as devices for personal development, but as necessary elements in innovative technologies, such as the computerized access to information and communication.

The societal impact of the new technologies is one of the areas where pragmatics and society interrelate in new and hitherto unexploited ways. A new journal, called *Pragmatics and Society*, founded in 2009, wants to be part of this innovative discourse, where science, technology, and society influence one another and stimulate forays into new territory, such as the discourse of the multimedia, the renewed interest in questions of language education, language identity, lingua franca, web interaction, and innovative technology of any kind. In the true pragmatic tradition, this new journal wants to promote pragmatic research not only as a form of scientific, abstract theorizing, but as a mode of real life intervention, by asking questions such as what kind of public discourse around science and technology is acceptable? Here, as argued by Rick Iedema, “analysts’ questions and conclusions are kept in tension with practitioners’ interpretations” (2009:11), in order to avoid what Srikant Sarangi has termed “the twin paradoxes of discourse research: the participant’s and the analyst’s (2009:12).

Convidado especial para este volume comemorativo  
[jacob\\_mey@yahoo.com/](mailto:jacob_mey@yahoo.com)  
[inmey@mail.utexas.edu](mailto:inmey@mail.utexas.edu)

## References

- CAVALCANTI, Marilda. 2001. 'Collusion, resistance, and reflexivity: Indigenous teacher education in Brazil'. In: Heller & Martin-Jones, eds. pp. 317-333.
- Ethnologue, Languages of the World. 2007 (M. Paul Lewis, ed.). Dallas: SIL International. (17<sup>th</sup> ed.)
- FAIRCLOUGH, Norman. 1992. Critical language awareness. Longman, London.
- FRANK, Francine Wattman & Paula A. Treichler (eds). 1989. Language, gender, and professional writing: Theoretical approaches and guidelines for nonsexist usage. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, Commission on the Status of Women in the Profession.
- FREIRE, Paulo. 2000. Pedagogy of the oppressed. (trad. Myra Bergman Ramos). New York: Continuum.
- HAUGEN, Einar, 1972. 'The ecology of language'. In: Dil, Anwar S. (ed.), The Ecology of Language: Essays by Einar Haugen. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press. p.325-339.
- Heller, Monica & Marilyn Martin-Jones, eds. 2001. Voices of authority: Education and linguistic difference. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press.
- Heritage, John. 2007. Territories of Knowledge, Territories of Experience: (Not so) Empathic Moments in Interaction. Keynote speech at the XVth Symposium About Language and Society, Austin (SALSA), Austin, Tex., April 14, 2007.
- Heritage, John & Sefi, Sue. 1992. Dilemmas of advice. In: Paul Drew & John Heritage, Talk at Work: Interaction in Institutional Settings. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. pp. 359-417.
- Iedema, Rick. 2009. Discourse research that intervenes in the quality and safety of care practices. Plenary Talk, 2d International Discourses and Cultural Practices Conference, Sydney, 7-9 July 2009.
- Kamio, Akio. 1994. The theory of territory of information: The case of Japanese. Journal of Pragmatics 21(1): 67-100.

Kamio, Akio. 1995. Territory of information in English and Japanese and psychological utterances. *Journal of Pragmatics* 24(3): 235–264.

Kamio, Akio 1997. *Theory of territory of information*. John Benjamins, Amsterdam & Philadelphia. (= *Pragmatics and Beyond*, Vol. 48).

Ladefoged, Peter. 1992. 'Another view of endangered languages'. *Language* 68(4): 809-811.

Levinson, Stephen C. 2000. *Presumptive Meanings: The theory of generalized conversational implicature*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Mey, Jacob L. 1976. Qualification, emancipatory language and pragmatic linguistics. In: Fred Karlsson, ed.. *Papers from the Third Scandinavian Conference of Linguistics*. Åbo/Turku: Academy of Finland. pp. 245-269.

Mey, Jacob L. 1979. Towards a critical theory of language (original in German: *Zur kritischen Sprachtheorie*). In: J.L.Mey, ed., *Pragmalinguistics, theory and practice*. Mouton, The Hague. pp. 411-434.

Mey, Jacob L. 1985. *Whose language? A study in linguistic pragmatics*. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: Benjamins. (*Pragmatics and Beyond Companion Series*, 3)

Mey, Jacob L. 1994. How to do good things with words: A social pragmatics for survival. *Pragmatics* 4(2): 239-263.

Mey, Jacob L. 2001. *Pragmatics: An introduction*. Oxford & Malden, Mass.: Blackwell. (Second ed.) [1993]

Mey, Jacob L. 2010. *Anticipatory pragmatics*. Paper read at the Third International Workshop on Emancipatory Pragmatics, Japan Women's University Tokyo, March 24-27, 2009. (forthcoming in Sachiko Ide & Neal Norrick, eds. *Special Issue on Emancipatory Pragmatics*. *Journal of Pragmatics*, vol. 42).

Norrick, Neal R. 2009. *Contribution to Discussion*, Third International Workshop on Emancipatory Pragmatics, Tokyo, March 24-27, 2009. Tokyo: Japan Women's University.

*Pragmatics and Society* (Jacob L. Mey, Kerstin Fischer & Hartmut Haberland, eds.) Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins. (Volume 1, 2010)

Sarangi, Srikant. 2009. *The research-practice conundrum: Rethinking 'translational research' in professional discourse studies*. Plenary Talk, 2d

International Discourses and Cultural Practices Conference, Sydney, 7-9 July 2009.

Signorini, Inês. 2009. Emancipatory Linguistics. In: Jacob L. Mey, ed., *Concise Encyclopedia of Pragmatics*. Elsevier, Oxford. pp. 237-239. (Second Ed.)

Spender, Dale. 1980. *Man made language*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Textor, Robert B. 2009. Practicing anticipatory anthropology with Austrian national leaders. *Anthropology News*, 50(1), January 2009. p. 21. (See also [www.stanford.edu/~rbtextor](http://www.stanford.edu/~rbtextor))

Treichler, Paula A., Richard M. Frankel, Cheri Kramarae, Kathleen Zoppi & Howard B. Beckman. 1984. 'Problems and *Problems*: Power relationships in a medical encounter'. In: Cheri Kramarae, Muriel Schulz & William M. O'Barr, eds., *Language and power*. Beverly Hills & London: Sage. pp. 62-88.

Treichler, Paula A. & Francine Wattman Frank. 1989. 'Introduction: Scholarship, feminism, and language change'. In: Frank & Treichler 1989: 1-34.

van Dijk, Teun van. 1993. *Principles of Critical Discourse Analysis*. *Discourse and Society* 4(2): 249-283.