

Pragmaticizing Understanding

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2nd proofs

Pragmaticizing Understanding

Studies for Jef Verschueren

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On how to pragmaticize understanding

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1. An understanding of pragmatics

Understanding is at the core of all scholarly research in the humanities and in the behavioural and social sciences. We may try to work in the direction of finding rationally explainable 'truths' in the way a natural scientist needs to go about investigating his or her objects of study, but for most of us in the 'soft' sciences, the very attempt at dissociating the object of study from the studying subject is sooner or later doomed to failure. And that is precisely what is so challenging and what fills our daily work with surprises – and, yes, with deeper and deeper understanding(s).

Understanding the history of the discipline of pragmatics is not an exception. The question of whether pragmatics constituted a subfield within linguistics was for long a central and important one, and we probably never received a true-or-false answer to it. But it is the pre-understanding of pertinent questions asked in the second half of the twentieth century that paved the way and built the ground on which the field of pragmatics stands today. The early impetus for getting into the functions of language and language use came from outside linguistics: in the late 1960s, linguists like Haj Ross 'by chance' happened upon what scholars in sociology, anthropology, philosophy, and psychology were doing with language, and made this known to mainstream linguists. Sure, there had been an interest in language function before the generative semanticists 'rediscovered' its relevance – just think of Boas, Malinowski, and Sapir – but it was the generative semanticists and the children of ordinary language philosophy who started the avalanche of systematic research in the field in the 1960s. At the time, language use and function were already an integral part of research in other disciplines – it was only the linguists, many of whom were more concerned with form than with function, who were late.

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