

## Culture and Language Use

**Edited by Gunter Senft, Jan-Ola Ostman and Jef Verschueren, published by  
John Benjamins Publishing Company**

**Reviewed by Boi Hoang Nguyen**

*University of Tasmania*

Culture and Language Use, edited by Gunter Senft, Jan-Ola Ostman and Jef Verschueren published by John Benjamins Publishing Company, is one of the ten volumes of Handbook of Pragmatics Highlights, which are meant to "focus on the most salient topics in the field of pragmatics". Settling itself neatly into the resurgent interest in the close interdependence between culture and language use, this book draws together twenty two stand-alone papers, forming a multi-perspective yet integrated approach to cultural pragmatics. The principle merit of this book lies in its ambitious endeavour to explore the vast interlocked territories of culture and language, each of which is an umbrella concept itself, shading a multitude of categories. Readers would therefore be impressed by the range and diversity of issues being covered here. Interestingly, most of these ostensibly disconnected topics turn out to have subtle underlying links. So as to allow for a more systematised reviewing approach, the individual contributions are purposefully clustered on the grounds of their shared fundamental concerns.

Gunter Senft, as an editor and contributor, sets the scene with a brief introduction, outlining the milestone developments of the field, each of which is marked by the contributions of the most prominent pragmatically-oriented linguists such as Austin and Searle, Michael Silverstein, Boas, Sapir, and Whorf. Senft thereafter proves his dominant presence in this volume with a noteworthy contribution of four different entries on various pertinent topics. Senft's first paper 'Elicitation' briefly examines some typical types of elicitation namely questionnaires, interviews and participant observation with regard to their relevant contexts in field research. His second contribution 'Fieldwork', dovetailing with the previous paper in its focus on the methodological aspects, presents a clearer account of what fieldwork is and how to do it properly in different research settings.

In his next paper, Senft seeks to pay tribute to Bronislaw Kasper Malinowski (1884-1942), who has a remarkable influence in the field with the "study of culture as a universal phenomenon". This paper is entirely devoted to Malinowski's achievements, opening with a biographical sketch, continuing with his extensive study of culture as well as theories of language and closing with Senft's general appraisal. One of the significant contributions of Malinowski, phatic communion, is later on further discussed by Senft in his fourth paper. Senft is quite successful in clarifying the meaning of "phatic communion", a type of speech mainly to "highlight the bonding function of language" as opposed to other seemingly similar phrases, which are often mistakenly used as equivalents.

Other contributors then take up the baton in doing justice to the important roles of the eminent fore-runners in the pragmatics field. In their paper on "Firthian linguistics", Ostman and Vandenberg positively evaluate the contributions of "the British school" of linguists, who were depicted to have very different views from their American and European counterparts. Malinowski, Firth, and Bartlett are among the notable researchers whose linguistic theories and views are extensively discussed in this entry. Likewise, in their article about Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835), whose philosophy of language laid the foundation for later works in the field, Nerlich and Clarke go from an overview of his life to his philosophy of language. The merit of this paper resides in the analysis of Humboldt's theories/theses (Language and thought, language and world, language and languages, language, culture and creativity, language dialogue and pronouns or the ideologues) in relation to those of other prominent linguists of his time. This helps provide readers with a wider view of the linguistic context in its infancy stage.

Vermeulen continues this theme with a comprehensive account of the “continuously changing views about language and culture of Edward Sapir (1884-1939), an outstanding American linguist and anthropologist, while Lee thereafter directs his praise for the work of Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897-1941), another distinguished American linguist renowned for his idea about linguistic relativity. These two contributions have convincingly asserted the governing roles of Sapir and Whorf’s theories with in-depth analyses of their relevance to contemporary work in pragmatics.

Fitting nicely into this on-going stream of praise-singing, Darnell devotes her entry to the acknowledgement of the enormous contributions of Fraz Boas, who is extolled to be the “pre-eminent figure in the development of the 20th century North American anthropology” (p.41). Starting with a brief biography as a clear-cut timeline for Boas’s numerous achievements, Darnell goes on to individually address and examine his most influential contributions such as the American tradition, his time perspective in aboriginal languages, his essential ideas in the handbook of American Indian Languages and his pioneering though implicit distinction between phonetic and phonemic analysis. Darnell’s effort to evaluate Boas’s contributions against the works of his intellectual heirs as well as other noteworthy researchers decidedly places her discussion in the larger historical linguistic picture.

Another group of contributions centers around the theoretical and analytical discussions of relevant linguistic subfields. Blount begins his entry ‘Anthropological linguistics’ by seeking to refine the terminological distinction between Anthropological linguistics and Linguistic anthropology, pointing to their subtle variations with regard to history and focus. This is a praiseworthy attempt to shed certain clarity on the obscured disciplinary boundaries of these two overlapping branches of linguistics. Short as it is, the entry can be seen as an exhaustive summary of this linguistic subfield. Looking first at its earliest history and types of research, Blount goes on to examine the influence of Sapir-Whorf hypothesis by tracing the relativism-related studies since the 1960s. The author also glances at other contemporarily-renewed aspects of anthropological linguistics such as ethnographic semantics, the ethnography of communication, and socio-linguistics before closing with a report on some recent research and current directions.

Central to the controlling topic of this volume, Sarangi’s paper entitled ‘Culture’ is an exhaustive examination of the notoriously elusive notion of culture, where it is viewed as an interdisciplinary project – “the term means what we want it to mean in specific contexts of use” (p.81). Sarangi initially undertakes the task of demonstrating the historical transformation of the culture concept, tracing back as far as the medieval time. Culture here is depicted as a sophisticated multi-faceted and ever-growing entity, evolving from “a noun of process to a noun of generalization” (p.82), sprawling from one field to another and finally “encompassing a whole way of life” (p.83). With a view to adequately and structurally analysing this broadly-covered concept of culture, Sarangi addresses this issue from three dominant approaches: the mentalist, the behaviourist and the semiotic, each with a brief description followed by a thoughtful evaluation of its theoretical as well as practical significance. The next part, ‘Culture as ideology’, presents and contrasts the consensual and differentiated views of culture whereas the subsequent part, ‘Doing cultural analysis’, is perhaps the most interesting and methodologically-valuable section, seeking to pinpoint the basic problems underlying different elements of cultural analysis, namely fieldwork, participant observation and ethnography. The following two parts offer a cursory glance at the seemingly inextricable relationship of culture and language, as well as the current cross-cultural and intercultural analysis in pragmatics research. The entry then comes to a close with some possible directions for future research into inter-cultural pragmatics with a special emphasis on “discovering what culture does, historically and in contemporary terms” (p. 101). This highly elaborated entry offers an informative and thought-provoking read.

The focus on culture in conjunction with language is also evident in “Intercultural communication” by Hinnenkamp. The author starts his contribution with a brief overview of the long-standing relationship between language and culture. Hinnenkamp then continues to consider the re-emergence of intercultural communication as a field of inquiry, the notion of culture, the loci of culture-in-communication as far back as the 1960s up to the present time and most interestingly rounds off with the methodological sub-discourses of the field. The entailing long list of references is certainly of enormous use to interested researchers.

With a view to casting some light on the more neglected areas of research, Levison’s contribution called “Cognitive Anthropology” attempts to give tentative explanations for the roller-coaster ride with abrupt ups and downs of anthropological studies of cognitive since as early as 1950s. His paper also deals with how to reconstrue cognitive anthropology with sketches of current approach and possible future steps to revive this subfield. Similarly, Niedzielski and Preston’s contribution touches upon the

seemingly abandoned sector of 'Folk Pragmatics', whose main aim is to "discover and analyse beliefs about and attitudes towards language ... by examining over comments by non-linguistics" (p.146).

The next collection of contributions alternatively looks at the smaller and more concrete elements of the field under review. Risakoo, for example, closely examines the routine formulae of Aisatsu in Japan, through a detailed description of its different pragmatic functions and a comprehensive ethnographic account of how Aisatsu conducts are acquired. This culture-specific case study is an applaudable attempt to "bind together the pragmatics and meta-pragmatics in explaining the Japanese interaction formulae of Aisatsu" (p. 26). In a broader approach, Irvine elucidates the forms of speech that signal social deference in her paper on 'Honorifics' and MacLaury explicitly deals with the applications of 'Taxonomy' in various fields.

The final cluster of papers gives precedence to a variety of methodological aspects of cultural pragmatics, including 'Componential Analysis' and 'Cultural Scripts' both contributed by Goddard, 'Interview' by Briggs, 'Ethnography' as a research method by Agar and 'Ethnography of Speaking' by Fitch and Philipsen. Their preference to explore the more ill-lit and minimally-documented areas of inquiries with a surprisingly long list of related controversial issues manifest an urgent need for more future research to be done.

As a whole, this volume is as broad in its theoretical coverage as it is deep in scholarly discussions. The length and quality of individual papers nevertheless vary considerably. Readers may find papers from four to approximately twenty-five pages long and it should be pointed out that few of the articles move beyond the theory-oriented towards a more practical approach. Besides, despite the editors' initial attempt to justify the somewhat confusing format, critical readers would expect a better-structured organization with explicit relationship between the papers being juxtaposed. Another concern lies in the out-dated air brought about by the references to literature, a large majority of which are limited to studies from the early 1940s to 1990s. On the upside, however, one of the noticeable strengths of this book lies in the fact that the contributors suggest many original pathways whereby pragmatic fields of investigation can be broadly applied and further examined.

For all of those reasons, the volume under review presents a sensible choice for readers interested in both historical depth as well as the contemporary breadth of research in pragmatics. The dedicated readers should find an inspiring point of departure for their own research journey.