Intercultural Pragmatics

In his recently published volume Istvan Kecskes introduces us to the emerging field of intercultural pragmatics that he himself has been instrumental in establishing, both through his work as founding Editor-in-Chief of the “Intercultural Pragmatics” journal, and through the establishment of a biannual conference series focusing on intercultural pragmatics. The underpinning spirit of intercultural pragmatics as a field is nicely summarised early in the book when Kecskes states that its aim is to “bring together the two seemingly antagonistic lines of pragmatics research: the ‘individualistic’ intention-based cognitive-philosophical line and the ‘societal’, context-based socio-cultural-interactional line” (p.6). This attempt to bridge the gap between these ostensibly competing approaches to pragmatics is clearly one that is necessary if the field is going to truly fulfil its promise of offering a comprehensive account of the use of language in social settings. As Kecskes reminds us, human beings are simultaneously individual and social beings, and so a key theoretical puzzle for pragmatics is how to best reconcile individual and social perspectives on language use. His response to the problem of how to reconcile these seemingly different perspectives in pragmatics is the proposal of a fresh and innovative theoretical framework, namely, the socio-cognitive approach to intercultural pragmatics.

The socio-cognitive approach (SCA) has been developed over the past decade through a series of published papers (Kecskes 2008, 2010, 2012, 2013; Kecskes and Zhang 2009), but this volume represents an invaluable crystallisation of those efforts. Notably, the SCA draws heavily, although not by any means exclusively, from examples of language use in intercultural settings, broadly defined by Kecskes as involving “interactions among people from different cultures using a common language” (p.18). In that sense, then, the book offers a sorely needed theoretical account of how meanings, in particular speaker meanings, attain in intercultural settings. However, it offers much more than that. Indeed, the title of the book itself somewhat understates the fact that the book is in many respects one about what might be more broadly termed “socio-cognitive pragmatics”. While Kecskes himself has resisted the use of such a term, electing instead to talk of the “socio-cognitive approach to pragmatics”, the book is at least as much about socio-cognitive pragmatics more broadly, as it is about intercultural pragmatics in the sense of the study of language use in intercultural settings. This dual focus means the book is a rich source of thought-provoking proposals for researchers more interested in theoretical or cognitive-philosophical pragmatics as well as those working in sociopragmatics. Notably, the key to bridging the gap is predicated on a move beyond the traditional focus on the pragmatics of utterances to a broader focus on meanings as they attain in interaction, or what Kecskes prefers to call “discourse-segments” (pp.7-8).

This emphasis on discourse is, of course, not new to pragmatics, and indeed, as Koyama (2011) argues, the so-called “interactional turn” from early accounts of pragmatics which were “much more intention- and individual-centric under the influence of Ordinary Language philosophy and modern British empiricism” has “characterised the discipline since
the 1980s” (p.155). However, as Kecskes quite rightly notes, the divide between the “‘individualistic’ intention-based cognitive-philosophical line and the ‘societal’, context-based socio-cultural-interactional line” has remained. Kecskes argues that in order to address this theoretical divide we need to seriously consider both perspectives, with the SCA constituting an important attempt to do just that.

The book itself is structured around presenting these dual lines of focus, namely, an account of language use in intercultural settings, and a broader account that encompasses individual and social dimensions of how speaker and word meanings attain through language use. In the first two chapters, the theoretical grounds for, and the major tenets of the SCA are outlined. A key theoretical claim made here is that what drives intercultural interactions is “blending” of the “interlocutors’ prior experiences” with their “actual situational experiences” in such a way that the two are “both distinguishable and indistinguishable from one another when needed” (p.49). These blends are argued to be accomplished through an ongoing, dynamic interplay between “co-operation-directed intention” that is inherently social in nature, and “egocentrism-governed attention” that is inevitably more individual in nature (p.49). However, given intracultural communication is not categorically different from intercultural communication, but rather lies on a continuum, as Kecskes subsequently explicitly points out (p.98), it is clear that while he often uses data from intercultural settings in explicating the SCA, it is by no means restricted in scope to such settings.

In Chapter 3 and 4, he then moves to outline two of the key notions underpinning intercultural pragmatics, namely, pragmatic competence and interculturality. Culture itself is broadly understood by Keckses to encompass “preferred ways of saying things and preferred ways of organising thoughts” (p.71), although he is very careful to characterise these “various kinds of knowledge structure” as “socially constituted” and “differentially distributed” (p.4). It thus follows that culture inevitably has “fuzzy boundaries” and “emergent features” (p.4), although Kecskes also argues that in acknowledging the dynamic and ever-changing nature of culture it does not mean that it does not have an a priori basis. Indeed, his position on culture might be best described as being simultaneously that of an epistemological constructivist alongside a position of social ontological realism (see also Kádár and Haugh 2013: 83-84). On the one hand, without language use there can be no culture, and so culture does not exist aside from language use. On the other hand, culture is invariably treated as part of our social reality by people, and in that sense is something which analysts cannot dismiss as a mere reification or misguided invention of ordinary users (p.90). One question that is left somewhat unanswered in this account, however, is the scope of these preferred ways of speaking and organising thoughts. Given this is an empirical issue this is perhaps understandable in light of the primarily theoretical focus of this book. However, it remains an open question just how the “fuzzy boundaries” of culture and its “differential distribut[ion]” might best be operationalised in analyses of language use in intercultural settings. The study and theorisation of how cultural knowledge structures and practices arise in the first place, and thus the grounds for their synchronic variation and diachronic change, is clearly a critical one for any theory of intercultural pragmatics.

In Chapter 5 and 9, Kecskes selects two key areas of focus for researchers in intercultural pragmatics, formulaic language use and im/politeness, respectively. Given coverage of all the potential topics for research in understanding language use in intercultural
settings is a virtually impossible task in a single volume, the selection of these two topics of focus offers a very useful contrast and point of reference for readers. On the one hand, it enables him to highlight the importance of various kinds of formulaic language use in not only intercultural but also in intracultural settings, and so argue against the ongoing neglect of them in both theoretical and applied pragmatics. On the other hand, it allows him to demonstrate the value of intercultural data for ongoing attempts to theorise im/politeness. It thus represents an important attempt to theorise intercultural im/politeness on its own terms, something which has been surprisingly neglected, as I have also argued in a previous review of the field (Haugh 2010).

Sandwiched between these two chapters is an account of the three pillars of the SCA, namely, context, common ground, and salience, in Chapters 6-8, respectively. Each of these chapters follows a similar pattern of first expanding upon the original exposition in Chapter 2 of the SCA in various ways, and then exploring how each plays out in intercultural settings. In Chapter 6, building on his prior dynamic model of meaning (DMM) (Keckses 2008), the importance of not only the local, situational context but also the prior context that individual speakers bring into interactions for the ways in which speaker meanings attain in interaction are discussed. The importance that users themselves sometimes place on “literal” or compositional meaning is also argued by Kecskes to be needed as a corrective of the emphasis to date in most accounts of meaning in pragmatics on its contextual dependency. In focusing on word choice or selection in intercultural settings, he makes the point that in such cases users may have to rely more on the “coresense” of expressions rather than on the actual situational context in interpreting their meaning.

In Chapter 7, the DMM is extended to a consideration of the role of common ground. As Kecskes points out, the ways in which meanings attain in intercultural settings, where interactants are drawing from multiple language backgrounds, is inevitably complex, given there may at times be quite a high degree of uncertainty on the part of participants about the knowledge and values of other participants. It is thus argued that a comprehensive theory of pragmatics also needs to be able to account for instances of language use in cases where users do not necessarily assume a high degree of common ground.

Finally, in Chapter 8, the importance of salience for the ways in which meanings attain in discourse is considered. It is first argued that in some cases “salient interpretations may not be filtered out even when contextually inappropriate” (p.183). It is then suggested that in intercultural settings the most salient meaning may in fact be the “literal” meaning. Both these arguments challenge the standard assumption in pragmatics that word meanings are invariably contextually dependent.

In sum, the volume offers an innovative new framework for analysing how meanings attain in intercultural interactions. It also challenges the long-standing tradition in many branches of pragmatics of relying primarily on data from intracultural settings, that is, between speakers of the same language (or language variety). The theoretical value of drawing from language use in intercultural settings is amply demonstrated throughout the volume, as Kecskes offers fresh accounts of key foundational notions in pragmatics, including speaker meaning, context, and common ground. It also opens up hitherto under-researched areas in pragmatics for further study, including that of formulaic language use and the ways in which the meanings of words or expressions attain in discourse, as well as
opening up new perspectives on well-trod topics in pragmatics, such as im/politeness. We are left wondering, perhaps, about the implications of the SCA for other key topics in pragmatics, including implicatures, speech or pragmatic acts, referring expressions, and other relational aspects of communication, but all this means is that there remains much yet to be explored from this perspective. For all these reasons, then, the book will no doubt provide inspiration for a range of exciting new research projects, as intercultural pragmatics inevitably takes its place as a central part of the broader pragmatics enterprise.

It might also be argued that the book can be productively understood as a socio-cognitive account of pragmatics that is informed by studies of language use in intercultural settings. On this reading, it has much to offer researchers interested in more cognitive or formal pragmatics, as well as those interested in more social or cultural aspects of language use. It also powerfully makes the point that if we are really to develop a truly comprehensive theoretical and empirical account of language use in social contexts, then data from intercultural settings needs to be treated not as something somewhat peripheral to the concerns of theoreticians, but rather as central to that endeavour. While the emergence of multiple branches of pragmatics over the past three decades is a sign of vitality in the field, it also can lead to siloing effects. The explicit promotion of dialogue between researchers in pragmatics that Kecskes advocates in his book, *Intercultural Pragmatics*, is thus a very welcome and important contribution the field.

References


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