# Society and Language Use

Edited by Jürgen Jaspers,
Jan-Ola Östman
and Jef Verschueren

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Society and Language Use

# *Handbook of Pragmatics Highlights (HoPH)*

The ten volumes of *Handbook of Pragmatics Highlights* focus on the most salient topics in the field of pragmatics, thus dividing its wide interdisciplinary spectrum in a transparent and manageable way. Each volume starts with an up-to-date overview of its field of interest and brings together some 12–20 entries on its most pertinent aspects.

Since 1995 the *Handbook of Pragmatics (HoP)* and the *HoP Online* (in conjunction with the *Bibliography of Pragmatics Online*) have provided continuously updated state-of-the-art information for students and researchers interested in the science of language in use. Their value as a basic reference tool is now enhanced with the publication of a topically organized series of paperbacks presenting *HoP Highlights*. Whether your interests are predominantly philosophical, cognitive, grammatical, social, cultural, variational, interactional, or discursive, the *HoP Highlights* volumes make sure you always have the most relevant encyclopedic articles at your fingertips.

## Editors

Jef Verschueren
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**Volume 7**

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# Preface to the series

In 1995, the first installments of the **Handbook of Pragmatics (HoP)** were published. The HoP was to be one of the major tools of the International Pragmatics Association (IPrA) to achieve its goals (i) of disseminating knowledge about pragmatic aspects of language, (ii) of stimulating various fields of application by making this knowledge accessible to an interdisciplinary community of scholars approaching the same general subject area from different points of view and with different methodologies, and (iii) of finding, in the process, a significant degree of theoretical coherence.

The HoP approaches pragmatics as the cognitive, social, and cultural science of language and communication. Its ambition is to provide a practical and theoretical tool for achieving coherence in the discipline, for achieving cross-disciplinary intelligibility in a necessarily diversified field of scholarship. It was therefore designed to provide easy access for scholars with widely divergent backgrounds but with converging interests in the use and functioning of language, in the topics, traditions, and methods which, together, make up the broadly conceived field of pragmatics. As it was also meant to provide a state-of-the-art report, a flexible publishing format was needed. This is why the print version took the form of a background manual followed by annual loose-leaf installments, enabling the creation of a continuously updatable and expandable reference work. The flexibility of this format vastly increased with the introduction of an online version, the **Handbook of Pragmatics *Online*** (see www.benjamins.com/online).

While the HoP and the HoP-online continue to provide state-of-the-art information for students and researchers interested in the science of language use, this new series of **Handbook of Pragmatics *Highlights*** focuses on the most salient topics in the field of pragmatics, thus dividing its wide interdisciplinary spectrum in a transparent and manageable way. The series contains a total of ten volumes around the following themes:

- Key notions for pragmatics
- Pragmatics and philosophy
- Grammar, meaning and pragmatics
- Cognition and pragmatics
- Society and language use
- Culture and language use
- The pragmatics of variation and change

- The pragmatics of interaction
- Discursive pragmatics
- Pragmatics in practice

This topically organized series of paperbacks, each starting with an up-to-date overview of its field of interest, each brings together some 12-20 of the most pertinent HoP entries. They are intended to make sure that students and researchers alike, whether their interests are predominantly philosophical, cognitive, grammatical, social, cultural, variational, interactional, or discursive, can always have the most relevant encyclopedic articles at their fingertips. Affordability, topical organization and selectivity also turn these books into practical teaching tools which can be used as reading materials for a wide range of pragmatics-related linguistics courses.

With this endeavor, we hope to make a further contribution to the goals underlying the HoP project when it was first conceived in the early 1990's.

Jan-Ola Östman (University of Helsinki) &
Jef Verschueren (University of Antwerp)

# Acknowledgements

A project of the HoP type cannot be successfully started, let alone completed, without the help of dozens, even hundreds of scholars. First of all, there are the authors themselves, who sometimes had to work under extreme conditions of time pressure. Further, most members of the IPrA Consultation Board have occasionally, and some repeatedly, been called upon to review contributions. Innumerable additional scholars were thanked in the initial versions of handbook entries. All this makes the Handbook of Pragmatics a truly joint endeavor by the pragmatics community world-wide. We are greatly indebted to you all.

We do want to specifically mention the important contributions over the years of three scholars: the co-editors of the Manual and the first eight annual installments, Jan Blommaert and Chris Bulcaen were central to the realization of the project, and so was our editorial collaborator over the last four years, Eline Versluys. Our sincerest thanks to all of them.

The Handbook of Pragmatics project is being carried out in the framework of the research program of the IPrA Research Center at the University of Antwerp. We are indebted to the university for providing an environment that facilitates and nurtures our work.

Jan-Ola Östman (University of Helsinki) &
Jef Verschueren (University of Antwerp)

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# Introduction – Society and language use

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> "The simplest and yet most important contribution of sociolinguistics [and similar disciplines willing to go under that flag] to social scientific knowledge is its insistence on recognizing the considerable variation in speech that exists within even the most homogeneous of societies. The second important contribution is the insistence that this variation is neither trivial nor a pale reflection of 'real' language, but that it is systematic and that the systematicity of linguistic variation is an imperative object of study in itself. Having recognized that different people talk differently, and that the same people talk differently at different times, a central problem of sociolinguistics is – or ought to be – to understand why people talk the way they do. It then becomes clear that the research questions of sociolinguistics are preeminently social questions."
> (Woolard 1985: 738)

Formulated a quarter of a century ago, Woolard's words have not lost their edge in emphasizing that the analysis of systematic linguistic variation is key to understanding the societies we live in. Undoubtedly the insistence underlying her words stems from the earlier paucity of attention given to social questions in much of linguistics, not unrivalled by the long-term neglect for language use in sociology. Indeed, it cannot be underestimated that fifty or sixty years ago, Woolard's words may very well have risked derision, indifference or swift oblivion. And beyond the limits of the academy today, sociolinguistic questions are still far from being viewed as social questions. In Flemish Belgium, for example, a region that can hardly be accused of indifference to linguistic issues given its history of fighting for Dutch linguistic rights (a fight which militant voices say still continues), it is not uncommon that sociolinguists are interviewed by public media about multilingualism as a primarily cognitive phenomenon affecting children in their personal and educational development. But as soon as attention turns to language as a socio-political issue of concern to adults, usually only politicians or political scientists are asked to comment on policy measures with regard to speakers of other languages on Flemish territory (such as, recently, making a willingness to learn Dutch or a competence in speaking it conditional to obtaining social housing, welfare benefits or information from local authorities). Hence, whatever sociolinguists may have to say about multilingualism as a social issue is effectively sidelined by such media preferences and preserves the acceptability of an emphatic monolingual policy. Also within the academy, it would probably be naive to presume that social and sociolinguistic questions now form a united front. In Flanders at least, some soci-

olinguists, accused of being over-tolerant of linguistic variation, maintain that their only concern is the neutral description of existing linguistic variation; yet at the same time they can also be heard reassuring their worried audiences repeatedly that they will not hesitate to send away students at exams if the latter use a substandard, 'inappropriate', Dutch variety. Clearly, however, these two concerns cancel each other out or depend on putting up a wall between one's practices as a sociolinguist and as an (authoritative) language user. Besides their edge, therefore, Woolard's words have neither lost their relevance.

This volume topicalizes the importance of addressing the mutually constitutive relation between society and language use. It highlights a number of the most prominent approaches of this relation and it draws attention to a selected number of topics that the study of language in its social context has characteristically brought to bear. Notwithstanding some of the theoretical and methodological differences between them, all chapters in this book assume that it is necessary to look at society and language use as interdependent phenomena, and that by attending to microscopic phenomena such as language use at a given moment (and to the phonological, morphological and other elements that together make up 'speech'), one is also keeping a finger on the pulse of broader, macroscopic social tendencies that at the same time facilitate and constrain language use. The study of 'society and language use' obviously covers a much broader terrain than can be covered in this highlights volume. And given the fairly recent nature of most of the contributions, I shall in this introduction provide a sketch of their intellectual antecedents in the volume's two 'mother disciplines', viz., linguistics and social theory (although admittedly these concepts sometimes draw neater boundaries around scientific practices than can often be found in actual fact) before pointing at recent common ground in the rising attention for discourse and what has come to be called late-modernity.

## 1. Linguistic antecedents

Attention for society and language use had to wrestle itself away in the 1950s and 60s from under the hegemonic hold of 'formal' or 'Chomskyan' linguistics where consideration for the social context of language use was virtually non-existent. This neglect was not unreasoned. Chomsky's intention was to isolate language from its social surroundings in order to study its intrinsic generative creativity – humans' ability to make endless new sentences with only a limited set of verbal building blocks. In this frame, it made sense to work with an abstract notion of language, to strip those phenomena that were seen as unrelated to this capacity, and to ignore for whatever reasons humans would use language. Rather than denying linguistic heterogeneity and variation, therefore, Chomsky and his followers saw these phenomena as largely

superficial and irrelevant outcomes of 'real' language, that is, a deeper-lying systematics in individual cognition. Even so, language use remained a necessary heuristic device to trace the underlying fundamentals that generated it and it was felt that an efficient description of these fundamentals would only be possible if the input was kept under control by reducing the noise and the other limitations of language use by specific speakers in specific socio-cultural contexts (such as interruptions, hesitations, lapses, muttering, etc.) – whence Chomsky's postulation of speakers and hearers in a completely uniform linguistic community (Chomsky 1965: 3). Consequently, in this view language users become mere "implementer[s] of language as it is" (Fishman 1972: 216) or "hosts for language" (Kroskrity, p. 194, this volume), rather than social agents who accomplish something by talking to others.

Chomsky's relegation of language use to the margins of serious study had been preceded by a part-European (de Saussure), part-American (Bloomfield, Boas, Sapir) structuralist tradition. This tradition itself ushered in a paradigm shift in linguistics, which in the closing decades of the 19th century had been dominated by the Neogrammarian hypothesis that strict laws could be formulated which described regular sound change within a particular language or language family. In contrast with this focus on the historical trajectory of individual sounds, structuralists insisted (1) that languages be approached as systems or structures where the relations between sounds prevail over the sounds themselves, ruling out the historical comparison of isolated sounds from different systems of relations; (2) that these systems needed to be studied first and foremost synchronically, before one would be able to study their change over time; (3) and that language systems be regarded as autonomous from so-called external (e.g. sociological, psychological) influences or human intervention. This autonomy principle motivated the distinction between an 'internal' linguistics, concerned with the language system proper, and an 'external' linguistics, of secondary importance, that would investigate the uses of language without a concern for, say, its hardware. Social and cultural meaning was thus generally considered an external, optional aspect of language that did not lend itself well to a truly empirical linguistics or which was merely derivative of the linguistic structure (Van de Walle et al. 2006). In sum, and passing over the major fissures between structuralist and Chomskyan approaches, mainstream 20th century linguistics up to the 1960s worked with an abstract notion of language and perceived systematicity only within language rather than in its use.

These assumptions were increasingly opposed in the 1960s and 70s by Labov, Fishman, Gumperz, Halliday and Hymes, among others. These scholars questioned the exclusion of external factors as secondary or less empirically tameable elements and the idea of language use as a conceptual wastebasket for heterogeneity and variation; they had serious reservations about the assumption that systematicity implied or could be equated with linguistic synchronicity, and they disputed the postulation of linguistic homogeneity as either a methodological prerequisite in generative models