

REVIEW

doi:10.1017/S1360674324000339

Miriam A. Locher, Andreas H. Jucker, Daniela Landert and Thomas C. Messerli, *Fiction and Pragmatics* (Cambridge Elements in Pragmatics). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. Pp. 76. ISBN 9781009095433.

Reviewed by Siobhan Chapman , University of Liverpool

Pragmatics is a famously broad discipline. It can be understood in a way which ‘encompasses all aspects of language use not falling strictly within formal linguistic theory’ (Horn & Ward 2004: xi) and as such includes the study of any feature of interactive speech or writing. For some scholars, however, it is defined as a more specific approach to language in use, one which Horn & Ward describe as ‘the more narrowly circumscribed, mainly Anglo-American conception of linguistic and philosophical pragmatics and its applications’ (p. xi), in which the focus is on theoretical frameworks to describe and explain aspects of meaning such as illocutions, presuppositions and implicatures. Recent developments in what has become known as the field of ‘pragmatic literary stylistics’ generally align to this second understanding of pragmatics. They are characterised by the analysis of various texts or genres in relation to the work of theorists such as Austin, Grice, Searle and Sperber & Wilson (see, for instance, the individual studies collected in Chapman & Clark 2019).

In *Fiction and Pragmatics*, Miriam Locher, Andreas Jucker, Daniela Landert and Thomas Messerli take the broader view. They explicitly eschew pragmatic concepts such as ‘conversational implicature, speech act theory, relevance theory’ (p. 3) in favour of a wider account of fiction as interaction. Their starting point is the twin importance of ‘the fictional contract between the creators of fiction and their recipients’ and of ‘the complexities of the participation structure of fiction’ (p. 1). Both, they argue, are at heart pragmatic in nature because both are concerned with how language is used interpersonally. Therefore, fiction provides rich data for pragmatics, while conversely pragmatics can offer fresh insights into fictional data. Indeed fictional artefacts are particularly well suited to pragmatics because they are the outcome of deliberate and careful linguistic choices: an insight which the authors supplement by emphasising the importance of ‘the co-construction of meaning by producers and audiences’ (p. 2).

Locher, Jucker, Landert & Messerli identify four areas in which this symbiotic relationship between fiction and pragmatics can be explored: areas which provide the four main sections of this study. These are: ‘Participation structure’ (pp. 5–20),

'Performance' (pp. 20–33), 'Interaction' (pp. 33–46) and 'Discourse and ideologies through character creation' (pp. 46–62). There is a pleasing regularity to the structure of the work; each of these four main sections contains the same set of subsections, which deal with different types of fictional data, namely 'written fiction', 'performed fiction' and 'televicematic fiction'. This structure is well judged. It allows the authors to include a wide range of examples from many different types of fiction, broadly conceived, while ensuring that no one area of pragmatic study is discussed exclusively or predominantly in relation to one type of fiction. As a result, the reader is offered examples, among other genres, from less well-known but apparently fascinating twenty-first-century novels, from Ancient Greek tragedy, from nineteenth-century poetry, from popular TV and film, and from contemporary improvised theatre. This last is a particularly striking inclusion. The reader is offered analyses of a number of extracts from recent performances, such as 'MOLLY' performed in Chicago, 'Ella & Stacey – Close Quarters' performed in Zurich and 'Fuck this Week', performed in Austin, all from 2021. All such extracts are interesting, well addressed and apposite to the pragmatic issues under discussion. They belong to a genre which has received relatively little attention in pragmatics and are therefore to be welcomed as a potentially exciting development of the field. But the number of such examples included could be seen as disproportionately high in this necessarily brief discussion of fiction. This is particularly so given that improvised material by definition lacks the elements of deliberation and pre-planning which are claimed at the start of the discussion to make fictional data particularly eligible for pragmatic analysis.

After the initial discussion in section 1 'Introducing fiction and pragmatics', section 2 addresses 'Participation structure'. This offers an overview of the complexities of fictional communication, highlighting the different roles involved in the production and reception of the three forms of fiction which are the foci of this study. The authors build on and extend recent models of fictional communication. Their argument is that previous models have tended to view creators, fictional artefacts and recipients as essentially independent entities, thereby overlooking the ways in which all these elements are both discursively and dynamically constructed. They conclude that 'the multilayered aspects of senders, recipients and the artefact itself need to be teased apart very carefully for a pragmatically adequate description, and they have to be understood as dynamic entities which mutually impact each other' (p. 19).

Section 3 understands its title term, 'Performance', in a wider sense than the use elsewhere in the text of the phrase 'performed fiction'. The latter applies to a specific subclass of fictional artifacts, namely those performed to a live audience, including stage plays and improvisations but excluding film and TV drama. In the broader sense of 'performance', the topic of this section, the term is relevant to all fictional artefacts, recognising the fact 'that fiction is created for an audience and that the language in fictional artifacts – alongside other modes of expression – is carefully designed for its effect on the audience' (p. 20). This allows the authors to explore performative aspects of all three types of fiction, including features of oral communication

included in written fiction, the use of rhyme, alliteration and punning in performed fiction and the holistic interplay of dialogue, image, music and other sounds in telecinematic fiction.

Section 4 is concerned with ‘Interaction’ and develops further the discussion of participants and their relationships to each other which was begun in section 2. Locher, Jucker, Landert & Messerli argue that any model dividing interaction in relation to fictional artefacts into a ‘production stage’ and a ‘reception stage’ has always been reductive and simplistic when compared to the actual processes involved. More recently, however, any such bifurcation has become even more inadequate in the face of the many ways available for those traditionally understood as the recipients of fiction to take part in its production. The authors discuss how in the case of written texts apparently established classics such as Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* or Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* reach a present-day readership in a form shaped by the mediation of editorial decisions, typesetting and book design which make the process of interaction much more complicated than a simple one-way communication between producer and receiver. Performed fiction also involves complex forms of participation; audiences have long interacted with productions by means of applause, heckling and encoring, while in more recent improvised theatre the audience often has direct input into themes and plot lines, and may even join the performers on stage. Films and TV are no longer viewed exclusively when they are screened or aired. Streaming platforms have made telecinematic fiction available in contexts and timeframes of the viewer’s choosing, while engagements with various types of social media as part of the viewing process ‘blur the boundaries between producers and recipients as well as between production processes of fiction and the no longer quite so final product’ (p. 46).

The final section before the conclusion, section 5 ‘Discourse and ideologies through character creation’, draws on and advances some of the ideas discussed in the earlier sections. The authors state their intention to ‘explore the idea of story world creation, especially how characters are created in multimodal and linguistic ways and how these characters tap into world-knowledge and ideologies’ (p. 46). This is a particularly rich section which draws on ideas from discourse analysis, conversation analysis and stylistics to investigate the multifaceted nature of characterisation. In written fiction characterisation is almost entirely dependent on language use and draws on resources such as overt description and the presentation of dialogue, including choices concerning the wording of particular speech acts, for instance apologies, and the representation of dialect. Characterisation in performed fiction draws not just on the production of speech but also on various choices made in casting, costumes and so on; the authors compare critical receptions of four different stagings of *Hamlet* with a female lead actor. In relation to telecinematic fiction, the authors summarise previous studies of characters’ linguistic profiles in the US *Gilmore Girls* TV series (2000–7), the dubbing in German of African American Vernacular speakers in US films and the use of English subtitles in Swiss films to present authorial interpretation, among other examples.

The study ends with a short section 6, ‘Conclusions and outlook’ (pp. 62–6), which summarises the previous sections, emphasising the interconnected nature of the topics they cover and the ‘fuzzy borders between the different fictional types that we had set up with a big brush’ (p. 63), and looks to the future of research in fiction and pragmatics.

There is no index. This is undoubtedly a product of the fact that this is a short monograph and, as part of the Cambridge Elements in Pragmatics series of ‘concise and accessible scholarly works’, is designed to be read mainly on screen. However, for the reader of the print version this can present some difficulties in locating particular topics. For instance, the different choices available to a writer in terms of speech presentation, an important and productive area in the stylistic analysis of prose fiction, is discussed here, but it appears, unsigned, in the ‘Written fiction’ subsection of the section on ‘Performance’ (pp. 22–5). Furthermore, even in relation to the length and scope of this work there are some surprising omissions from the references. For instance, ‘personal factors’ which are identified as relevant to realisations of particular speech acts are connected with ‘the staged face concerns of speakers and addressees’ (p. 49) but no reference is made to Brown & Levinson’s (1987) definition and detailed treatment of ‘Face threatening acts’. The ‘Written fiction’ subsection of section 5, ‘Discourse and ideologies through character creation’, includes an interesting discussion of the use of eye-dialect in Lorie Broumand’s short story ‘The Boy Who Stabbed People’ (2013) but makes no mention of the extensive existing literature on the representation of dialect (e.g. Hodson 2014). These shortcomings notwithstanding, Locher, Jucker, Landert & Messerli’s new work offers a valuable overview of ways in which pragmatics, broadly conceived, relates to the study of fiction. The variety and novelty of its examples offer a fresh approach which is likely to appeal to those both studying and teaching stylistics. It includes a number of intriguing suggestions for future research. I found the discussion of the research avenues suggested by the various communicative processes in film- and television-making, including the roles of ‘scriptwriters’, ‘filming’ and ‘post-production’, particularly compelling. Overall, the case is well made that fiction is a rich source of data for pragmatic theory, while pragmatics itself offers distinctive insights into fictional data.

Reviewer’s address:

Department of English

School of the Arts

University of Liverpool

19–23 Abercromby Square

Liverpool L69 7ZG

UK

src@liverpool.ac.uk

References

- Brown, Penelope & Stephen Levinson. 1987. *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Chapman, Siobhan & Billy Clark (eds). 2019. *Pragmatics and literature*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Hodson, Jane. 2014. *Dialect in film and literature*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Horn, Laurence R. & Gregory Ward. 2004. Introduction. In Laurence R. Horn & Gregory Ward (eds.), *The handbook of pragmatics*, xi–xix. Oxford: Blackwell.

(Received 7 June 2024)