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BOOK REVIEW

Karen Grainger and Sara Mills: Directness and indirectness across cultures. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, pp. 177.

1. Introduction

Directness and indirectness (henceforth (in)directness) are among the most frequently studied phenomena in linguistic pragmatics. Norms of (in)directness are subject to significant variation across languages and cultures. Due to this lingua-cultural variation, perceptions of what counts as 'appropriate' in terms of (in)directness in an interactional scenario may cause (intercultural) interactional mismatch. *Directness and indirectness across cultures* written by Karen Grainger and Sara Mills explores the intricate relationship between (in)directness and (im)politeness (henceforth referred to with the generic 'politeness'), by devoting special attention to the role of culture in this relationship.

Conventional or 'first-wave' politeness research (see Kádár 2019, in the present issue) holds the assumption that indirectness and politeness correlate (see, as the perhaps most representative reference, the seminal monograph of Brown and Levinson 1987). However, real-life data may contradict this rather stereotypical interpretation of the indirectness–politeness interface, even in languages that are popularly understood as 'indirect' ones, such as British English (e.g., House 1989). Indeed, in British English the assumption that it is polite to be indirect is based on middle-class norms of language use, i.e., it is ideologically-loaded. There are many social scenarios in which this norm does not prevail: it is sufficient only to refer the context of friendly talk between working-class Brits, in which *Give me a lift* may be more polite than *Could you possibly give me a lift?* (Grainger & Mills 2016, 2). Grainger and Mills argue that research that has come

into existence after the 2000s, and which is often referred to as 'discursive' in the field (see and overview in Kádár 2019) provides a better alternative to analyse this complex phenomenon than 'first-wave' approaches. While discursive research does not offer a 'systematic' approach inasmuch one understands 'systematic' as a macro-level and replicable model of language use – i.e., it only allows the researcher to study politeness on the micro-level (i.e., in particular groups rather than cultures) – it makes it possible for the researcher to rigorously explore the dynamics of individual interactions.

2. Contents

The book is divided into seven chapters, plus Notes, Bibliography and Index.

Chapter 1 introduces the objectives of the volume. Grainger and Mills interconnect their discursive uptake on to politeness with variational pragmatics, to capture the complexities that surround (in)directness in terms of language use and evaluation. Such complexities are due to the fact that culture is loaded with linguistic ideological notions, and as such perceptions of 'appropriate' (in)directness are subject to (cultural) variation. For instance, on page 19, Grainger and Mills argue that

> 'there is complex relationship between those elements that are encoded in the language and the particular set of language that circulate within any particular community [...] the language that is spoken in a particular country needs to be kept distinct from the culture values of that country, since although there is often a great overlap and interplay between the two, a language cannot be said to represent a unified culture; culture values frequently cut across several languages.'

Following the summary of research approach, Grainger and Mills overview their corpora, which consist of naturally occurring interactions, role plays and interviews with bilingual speakers. The book conducts a comparative exploration of various corpora, without the intention of reaching summative results: in accordance with the discursive paradigm, the authors want to problematise rather than systemise instances of language use drawn from the corpora.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of previous research on (in)directness and politeness. It organises the overview around six (in)directness-related areas that previous research has explored, namely:

1. literal and intended meaning and its relationship with (in)directness
2. the role of the hearer in evaluating indirectness
3. conventional politeness as a form of indirect language behavior
4. indirectness and speech acts
5. the applicability of a directness–indirectness continuum
6. the default relationship between (in)directness and politeness.

As this list may indicate, the overview that Grainger and Mills provide is innovative, since it does not limit its scope to strict sense politeness research, but also draws on, for instance, studies on pragmalinguistics.

In chapter 3, Grainger and Mills explore the question of why it is fundamental to apply the micro-level discursive approach to analyse how people from different cultural backgrounds evaluate directness and indirectness in interaction, instead of using more 'systematic' theories. They argue that 'making judgment about whether a language is broadly speaking direct or indirect similarly presents a number of problems' (p. 51). For instance, Chinese is often described as an 'indirect language' because of the prevalence of face in many Chinese interactional situations – yet, scholars such as Stadler (2011) have convincingly demonstrated that this is only a stereotype since in various Chinese interpersonal settings trigger direct rather than indirect communicational style. The same can be argued practically all lingua-cultures studied in the politeness field as cases for (in)directness, such as Hebrew, Arabic, Polish, German and African languages to mention a few. In addition, the English technical term '(in)directness' may not even be sufficient to capture the semantic and pragmatic implications of the directness–indirectness continuum in many cultures, as Kádár (2013) has noted. To propose a better alternative than conventionally understood '(in)directness', Grainger and Mills deploy this notion beyond the national cultural boundary, by taking age, class, ethnicity and gender as analytic variables, and by focusing on the contextual variation of (in)directness instead of attempting to 'systemise' it.

Chapter 4 delivers a comparative study of directness and indirectness in interactions that took place between a Zimbabwean English-speaking musician who lives in UK and British English-speaking members of a choir. In spite of the role of English as a lingua franca in these interactions and the joint natural cultural surrounding, the Zimbabwean musician and British choir members adopt different strategies when they ask favours

from friends, change social arrangements, give direction in rehearsal, and so on. This data represents a noteworthy scene of intercultural communication, in that the participants do not share the same or similar interpretation frames, and ultimately misunderstandings occur in their conversations. The case study demonstrates that cultural differences in understandings of 'appropriate' (in)directness lurk even in interactions of seemingly homogenous groups like the choir studied.

In chapter 5, Grainger and Mills use role plays to examine potential differences between the polite evaluations of (in)direct utterances in settings where the participants have similar cultural background. The data studied here was elicited as the authors asked speakers of British English to act in certain ways in videoed role plays, and then they showed the videos to other participants from different countries that are stereotypically labeled as direct or indirect. The results of the data analysis reveal that differences in terms of (in)directness are gradual rather than absolute, and that they are highly situation-dependent. Thus, no national culture can be defined as predominantly direct or indirect.

Chapter 6 also delivers a case study by examining how bilingual speakers perceive the role-play data examined in the previous chapter. The inquiry presented here reveals that British respondents with multicultural origin tend to value directness in communication compared to others who have no such cultural background. Yet, such seemingly uniform interpretations are subject to variation when the multicultural correspondents are asked to explain why they prefer directness as a form of interpersonal communicational style.

Chapter 7 summarises the findings, by arguing that ultimately directness and indirectness interrelate with linguistic ideologies of language use and that they are linguistic resources; at the same time, language users may not necessarily follow such ideologies in actual language use. Because of this, according to Grainger and Mills one can only capture the operation of (in)directness in polite language use by deploying the critical discursive approach, since it is a mission impossible to systemise (in)directness.

3. Summary

Grainger and Mills's book has been a rewarding read. The volume is written in a reader-friendly style, its structure is well designed, and the examples are genuinely interesting. Thus, I highly recommend this monograph to readers interested in politeness and pragmatics, as well as culture studies in a more general sense.

In my view, the book has three innovative features. Firstly, Grainger and Mills convincingly demonstrate that the relationship between politeness and (in)directness is not straightforward, which is a particularly important argument to researchers like the author of this review who come from cultures in which (in)directness is an integral part of language ideology. Second, Grainger and Mills utilises the discursive approach to politeness in a convincing fashion. Kádár and Haugh (2013) have argued that there are potential issues with this approach; yet, Grainger and Mills successfully demonstrate that in spite of such issues the discursive uptake has a lot to offer to the politeness scholar, due to its focus on small cultures and individual evaluations. Thirdly, the book includes a wealth of data types, such as naturally occurring interaction, interviews and so on.

A review is supposed to describe the weaknesses of the book introduced. As far as the present volume is concerned, I could find the following two issues: Firstly, the authors claim various times that linguistic ideology has a crucial impact on language usage. Yet, the reader gets insufficient help to understand actually how ideology influences culturally-situated understandings of politeness, i.e., the influence of ideology on language use often remains assumed, or at least it is not discussed in sufficient detail. This may make it difficult for students of linguistic politeness and pragmatics to use the monograph as a textbook. Secondly, various discussions are a way too complex/abstract for early-career researchers like myself. For instance, I would have expected chapter 7 to provide a clearer overview of the complex relations of culture, ideology, meanings and particular language groups, and after completing my reading I found it challenging to summarise what I have learnt from the book.

In spite of these points of criticism, this book undoubtedly offers an insightful and highly innovative discussion of a key pragmatic phenomenon.

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