
**Reviewed by Cristina McKean Newcastle University**

*Introduction*

Michael Perkins is a Professor of Clinical Linguistics at Sheffield University in the United Kingdom. His book “Pragmatic Impairment” focuses on the nature of the pragmatic impairments which arise for individuals with a range of communication disorders. However its scope and ambition is much greater than this description would first suggest, aiming to create a new theory of pragmatics which not only describes pragmatics and pragmatic impairment but also explains it in cognitive, linguistic and sensorimotor terms.

The book’s intended audience is primarily linguists and psycholinguists rather than clinicians, as its focus is to use pragmatic impairment to explore and explain the nature of pragmatic ability “following the maxim that we only become truly aware of the nature of a mechanism or process by examining what happens when it goes wrong” (pp. 2) and thence to create an overarching theory which can address pragmatic ability and disability in a single framework: an “emergentist” model of pragmatics.

It is an ambitious and important book which has implications for clinicians, linguists and psycholinguists alike. It is based on a wealth of experience and knowledge and itself “emerges” from the author’s attempts to make sense of real life interactions using current theory and tools of analysis and finding them wanting.

In the following review I first present an outline of the book’s content and a summary of the emergentist theory of pragmatics presented and go on to present a critique, detailing how far the book meets its aims and considering the nature of its contribution to theory and to clinical practice.
Outline of the book

At the outset of the book Perkins clearly sets out his aims, they are

- to demonstrate that pragmatic theory and understanding can be informed by the study of pragmatic impairment
- to consider how successful current pragmatic theories are at accounting for pragmatic impairments
- to create a model which is applicable to both pragmatic ability and disability and which goes beyond the level of description to that of explanation
- to describe in detail the role of cognition, language and sensorimotor skills in pragmatic processing
- to compare modular and interactional approaches to pragmatics
- to use material from a wide range of communication disorders to inform and explicate the themes and aims above.

Perkins is explicit that his emergent approach involves a broad interpretation of pragmatics extending beyond linguistics to include behavioural and cognitive considerations. In this way Perkins follows the lead of clinicians attempting to make sense of pragmatically impaired individuals, so applying a semiotic view of pragmatics: “the study of the relation of sign to interpreters” (Morris, 1938, pp. 6). In addition to this breadth of definition Perkins also bring a highly interactionist perspective to Pragmatics. That is, the premise that the complex phenomenon of pragmatics emerges through a process of interaction, both in the individual, through interactivity between processing domains, but also between communicative partners, through interactivity, co-dependency and a focus on the interpersonal. Hence, Perkins views Pragmatics as emerging in the moment of communication from interactions within and between individuals.
After outlining the aims of the book in the first chapter, Perkins goes on, in the second chapter to consider the nature of the relationship between linguists and language pathologists in the field of pragmatics. He describes how linguists have largely ignored pragmatic impairment as a source of information for theory and how conversely, language pathologists have applied a wide range of theories and analytical approaches in their search for tools with which to understand the nature of pragmatic impairments. Language pathologists generally and Perkins in particular have found these tools and approaches useful but not entirely satisfactory. The key reason for this being that theories and analytical tools devised to date stop at the level of description when language pathologists require another level of analysis in order to devise interventions: that of explanation. As Perkins explains with respect to a transcript of a child with a pragmatic impairment “the child could be described as breaking Grice’s Maxims…but such descriptive labels do not get us very far when trying to design a remedial programme. One can hardly tell the child to ‘stop breaking Grice’s maxims’!”(pp. 31). Perkins’ close collaboration with clinicians and researchers in the field of language pathology has therefore resulted in a holistic approach to pragmatics, the primary motivation of the language pathologists being to discover what the underlying factors might be which create a pragmatic impairment in order to inform treatment. However as a by-product this approach results in attention being focussed on features of interaction which are not addressed by current theory and so which has the potential to create a more ecologically valid, holistic and over-arching theory of pragmatics than has yet been described.

In the third chapter Perkins tackles the issue of modularity versus interactivity in pragmatic processing concluding that an approach which acknowledges and seeks to explain associations, interactions and co-dependence is more informative and more able to accommodate the data from individuals with impairments than one which looks for dissociations and discrete systems. Hence Perkins’ “emergentist pragmatics” views
pragmatics as a behaviour emerging from interactions between cognitive and linguistic processes.

In the fourth chapter Perkins outlines his emergentist approach to pragmatics in detail, identifying the constituent parts or “elements” which interact to produce the emergent behaviour of pragmatics and outlining a framework for the description of an emergent model. This framework then identifies the content of the subsequent chapters such that they go on to describe in turn the elements of pragmatics as he sees them: the cognitive, the linguistic, and the sensorimotor elements, followed by a chapter detailing the nature of the interactions between them and elucidating how their interactions create pragmatic behaviour and pragmatic impairments. Finally Perkins reviews his emergentist pragmatics approach and considers both its clinical implications and its relationship to current theory.

The Emergentist Model of Pragmatics

Perkins’ thesis is that pragmatics is emergent and as such is the product of numerous interacting elements rather than being a discrete entity. As previously identified Perkins’ theory of emergentist pragmatics applies a broad interpretation of pragmatics extending beyond linguistics to include behavioural and cognitive considerations. His model is comprised of five “principles” and three “key notions”. The five principles concentrate on a crucial central argument of Perkins theoretical approach, that of choice. The first positing that “pragmatics involves the range of choices open to us when we communicate” (pp. 51); the second and third that this “choice” happens in language processing and in broader semiotic systems, and is applied to a range of elements within these systems, for example, in language processing “from discourse down to phonetics” (pp. 51); the fourth principle is that the choices individuals make are defined as pragmatic if they are motivated by the requirements of interpersonal communication; and the fifth introduces the idea that pragmatic impairment is
the result of “compensatory adaptation” to an underlying deficit. This compensatory adaptation emerges in the communicative dyad through adaptation of either or both communicative partners. As a result, Perkins argues that there is no direct link between an underlying deficit and a resulting pragmatic impairment. Rather it emerges from inter-individual and intra-individual interactions.

The three “key notions” of Perkins’ emergentist pragmatics are “elements” “interactions” and “domains”. The elements are the constituent parts or “entities” of the emergent system from which pragmatic behaviour emerges of which there are three kinds: the cognitive systems of theory of mind, inference, executive function, memory, emotion and attitude; the semiotic systems of gesture, gaze, facial expression posture and language (including all of its subcomponents); and the sensorimotor systems of motor control of the vocal tract, and body and of sensory abilities of hearing and vision.

The interactions are the dynamic relationships which exist between these elements and Perkins argues that the essence of pragmatics lies in the way in which the elements detailed above interact with one another. He goes on to suggest that a driver of this interactivity is the need for the maintenance of equilibrium arguing that this is crucial for understanding pragmatic impairment and links to the principles outlined above relating to compensatory adaptation and choice. That is Perkins suggests that optimal equilibrium occurs where none of the elements involved in pragmatics or the relationships between them is malfunctioning. Where a malfunction does exist disequilibrium occurs. That is, competent pragmatic functioning is not seen by Perkins as a single entity but as the emergent product of multiple competitive and facilitative interactions functioning in perfect equilibrium. An impairment in even a single contributory element will create a disequilibrium in these interactions and hence alter the emergent pragmatic behaviour to one of impaired pragmatic functioning. Such disequilibrium can be compensated for through reallocation of functions to different elements.
This reallocation occurs not simply at the intrapersonal level but also at the interpersonal. Hence compensatory adaptation can occur within the individual with a communication disorder or by the unimpaired communicator. This points up the final “key notion” of Perkins’ approach, that of domains. That is the premise that interactivity in the emergent pragmatic systems occurs within the individual (intrapersonal) but also extends beyond the individual to the interpersonal domain of the communicative dyad and so Perkins regards “the human dyad as a coupled cognitive system” in which “disorders of language and thought become common property, rather than solely the problem of an individual” (pp. 67). Perkins relates the notion of domains and the concept of equilibrium to Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1995) suggesting that intrapersonal equilibrium relates to the properties of an individual’s cognitive system which is governed by the first principle of relevance theory (human cognition is geared to the maximisation of relevance) and interpersonal equilibrium relates to the second principle of relevance (every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance).

In summary therefore Perkins defines pragmatics as

the full range of choices (actual or potential) involved in communicative behaviour as a whole…pragmatics is therefore an exclusive property of neither language (as many linguists seem to assume) nor cognition (as many language pathologists seem to assume), nor is it restricted to a specific semiotic system or a particular medium such as the vocal-auditory channel or the gestural-visual channel…The key systems in question are those of the individual – i.e. the intrapersonal domain – and the conjoint system of pairs or groups of individuals – i.e. the interpersonal domain. These systems and their contributory subsystems comprise the elements of pragmatics. Pragmatic
competence may be defined as the choices implicit in the relationships between elements, and pragmatic behaviour as the exercise of such choices. (pp. 69).

The above must be interpreted bearing in mind that “choice” in this definition is not a conscious process but occurs as an emergent consequence of states within the elements, interactions and domains of pragmatics. There is no central executive or “ghost in the machine”.

**Pragmatic Impairment**

Perkins uses the majority of the remainder of the book to use clinical case studies in order to explore the consequences for communication of a malfunction in the constituent elements of pragmatics (i.e. the systems of cognition, semiotics and sensorimotor functioning) through interactive, emergent processes. In this way pragmatic impairments are explicated and in addition his theoretical approach supported. That is, he uses the clinical case studies to provide evidence for the role of each element in pragmatics and also for the fundamental principles of his theory around choice, compensatory adaptation and interactivity in pragmatic competence and impairment.

Perkins argues that “any cognitive, semiotic, or sensorimotor deficit has pragmatic consequences in that it limits the range of choices available for communication” (pp. 70). This premise has important consequences for language pathologists. It challenges us to be more rigorous and theoretically precise in our use of the term “pragmatic impairment” and to recognise that it describes a range of communicative consequences arising from a myriad of underlying impaired subsystems. Speech and Language Pathologists are guilty of using the terminology both too loosely and too categorically. Too loosely such that pragmatic difficulties are identified in may individuals without detailed consideration regarding whence
they emerge, and too categorically such that it has been common practice to use pragmatic impairment as a diagnostic label for a subgroup of individuals with a particular pattern of cognitive impairments. That is, the term tends to be reserved as a diagnostic label for children with an Autistic Spectrum Condition and the associated cognitive impairments which accompany such a diagnosis. These practices not only minimise the pragmatic consequences of communication impairments arising from other types of “malfunctioning” systems but also create a “tick list” approach to the nature of pragmatic impairments. Rather than searching for the cause of the pragmatic impairment in individuals and in communicative dyads which a descriptive approach would promote, the “categorical” and “loose” approaches identified above tend to encourage clinicians to spot particular behaviours which are deemed to be “pragmatic” and to fail to look deeper for the underlying cause.

Perkins’ approach acknowledges that pragmatics will be affected in all individuals with communication impairment and provides the clinician with a framework within which to describe and explain this difficulty. Hence through the consideration of the elements, choice, interactivity, domains, equilibrium and compensatory adaptation an explanation for an individual’s difficulties rather than simply a description can be developed and thence an intervention.

For the linguist or psycholinguist Perkins argues that pragmatic impairments provide evidence for his emergentist approach which he suggests provides new insights for theory in terms of broadening the scope of pragmatics, acknowledging multi-modality, identifying causality for pragmatic behaviour and in creating a heightened focus on interpersonal synergies.

This book therefore has direct implications for pragmatic theory and for intervention and practice in pragmatic impairment. It has in addition a broader application as it also provides a model for the scholarly explication and application of emergent theory to empirical data. Such models hold great promise for our understanding of complex cognition and language but at
present often lack detail and hence are difficult to test empirically. If we are to begin to test these theories and apply them to practice then emergent theories need to be more highly specified. In this book Perkins provides a model of how to explicate an emergent theory. Proponents of emergent theories can learn from this approach and follow Perkins rigorous and detailed method of describing the emergent behaviour in terms of its subcomponents, its interactions and the mechanisms underpinning those interactions and in addition relating these to empirical data. In this way not only can emergent theories be tested but also their application can be appropriately explored.

In conclusion I would recommend this book to linguists, psycholinguists and language pathologists. The lessons for clinicians are important and timely and the contribution to theory important. There is still work to do to describe the nature of pragmatics in detail and indeed to test this emergentist theory of pragmatics but Michael Perkins has produced an important and innovative contribution to this undertaking which deserves to be read widely. I highly recommend this book.
References


Reviewer's address

Dr Cristina McKean
Lecturer in Speech and Language Pathology
Speech and Language Sciences Section
School of Education Communication and Language Sciences
King George VI Building
Newcastle University
Queen Victoria Rd
NE1 7RU
cristina.mckean@ncl.ac.uk
http://www.ncl.ac.uk/ecls/staff/profile/cristina.mckean

About the reviewer

Cristina McKean is a Lecturer in Speech Pathology at Newcastle University. She has practised as a Speech and Language Therapist for 20 years specialising in developmental speech and language disorders. Her current research focuses on applying a developmental emergent perspective to the understanding of Specific Language Impairment (SLI) in children. This research seeks to understand the nature and influence of the developmental process in the ontogeny of SLI.