Over Interpretatie: Een Studie in Cognitieve Sociolinguistiek by Titus Ensink
Review by: Pieter Muysken
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guistics, the reader is left wondering what the rationale was for including them and why articles more representative of function-based frameworks in Western hemisphere linguistics were not included. The end result is a progressive diffusion of focus in the volume.

Reviewed by Linda Schwartz
Department of Linguistics
Indiana University
Bloomington, IN 47405

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Titus Ensink, Over interpretatie: Een studie in cognitieve sociolinguistiek.

Few people would disagree that the interpretation of an utterance depends, among other things, on the frame of reference of the person doing the interpreting, the communicative context in which it is made, features such as pitch and intonation, and its grammatical and lexical content. Although study after study has illustrated the importance of these features, little progress has been made in weighing the different components as to the contribution they make toward the ultimate interpretation. Ensink’s monograph, defended as a doctoral thesis at the University of Groningen, The Netherlands, tries to advance this domain of inquiry. In an epilogue, the author acknowledges the dilemma of either experimentally easing apart the different components, with the risk of losing sight of the intricacy of the overall interpretative process, or continuing to study various communicative acts as wholes, with the risk of just being able to note time and again how interestingly intricate it all is. Ensink tries to steer a middle course, along the lines of Gumperz’s work, which provides the paradigm for what is attempted here.

Over interpretatie consists of three main chapters: a long theoretical introduction (1, pp. 1–70), a study of contextual interpretation processes (2, pp. 71–167), and a study of differentiation in interpretation processes (3, pp. 168–91). In addition, there are some concluding remarks and appendices with details about research procedure and illustrative transcripts.

A major topic in the first part of the book is a detailed review and critique of Gumperz’s notion of contextualization cue: the ensemble of means by which the interpretive framework of an utterance is conveyed. They include “code, dialect, and style switching processes, . . . prosodic phenomena . . . as well as choice among lexical and syntactic options, formulaic expressions, conversational openings, closing and sequencing strategies” (Gumperz 1982:131). Ensink considers the notion of contextualization cues worthwhile in itself, but the fact that it is impossible to say what element of an utterance would not be functional in communicating interpretive frameworks makes it hard to say when a given element would be functional. A second problem
that he notes is that Gumperz in some places suggests that contextualization cues are nonverbal, in others, as in the passage cited, that they are verbal. A third point of criticism is that Gumperz is rather eclectic sometimes in choosing either verbal data or situational data or data pertaining to the cognitive background as the basis for his analysis. On the whole, Gumperz has produced a plausible model with considerable descriptive potential but little explanatory power, the author concludes.

Ensink’s own research was aimed at trying to get a firmer hold on the way in which contextualization cues steer the interpretive process. He makes use of the technique called enjambing, in which readers are confronted with transcripts of interactions without an indication of the context in which these interactions took place. They have to think out loud when they interpret these transcripts, filling in the information withheld from them. Two sets of experiments were carried out, one aimed at generally finding out how interpretation proceeds, one directed at (in this case, generational) differences among groups of speakers in the way they interpret text fragments.

In the first set of experiments, 10 text fragments of slightly over one minute of spoken text were selected, and subsets of this material were presented to 22 readers. The text fragments came from radio and television programs and from recordings of spontaneous conversation. The participants were men between 18 and 53 years old, with various levels of education, but mostly college and university students. The fragments were carefully transcribed and presented to the participants either word for word, phrase for phrase, or in groups of phrases. They were asked about and invited to comment on the nature of the material, and these comments are the basis for Ensink’s analysis.

Since the nature of the research was exploratory, there is no attempt to quantify or even systematize the results. Neither are the men differentiated in terms of age or education in the analysis. What we have is simply a set of interpretations, on the basis of which Ensink draws the following general conclusions. (a) Activated foreknowledge is the dominant factor in interpretive processes, but it is certainly not an absolute factor. (b) There are two main interpretive strategies that speakers use: the “fruitmachine” and the “laundry-basket” strategy. In the former, guesses are made on the basis of individual cues in the text as to the global characteristics of the interaction, and consequently it is tried to fit all subsequent information into this global picture. In the laundry-basket strategy, all incoming information is fitted into a loose interpretive network. Speakers differ in the extent to which they use either strategy. In addition, there are specific results relevant to individual text fragments, which the author briefly discusses one by one.

This chapter of the book is much richer than the outline I have been able to give here, but the richness lies in detailed observations that do not yield an overall picture very easily. Presenting 10 rather different text fragments
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in three procedures to 22 readers, Ensink surely has cast his net very widely. The catch has been varied and has not yet yielded very definite conclusions for the most part. Possibly, a more limited and less varied set of materials would have yielded results easier susceptible to systematization.

The second set of experiments was conducted with 6 female students, aged about 20, and 5 mothers of students who did not have a university background themselves, aged between 45 and 55. The older and younger women were recorded in pairs and from these recordings fragments were selected, with which the two groups were again confronted in the enjambing procedure. The fragments were as neutral as possible in terms of specific contents relating to either group, and no speaker was confronted with a text fragment in which she had participated herself. When we compare the interpretations of both age groups, we find that (a) both age groups were better able to identify and interpret the transcriptions from their own age group; (b) the younger group was on the whole better able to interpret the materials from the older group than vice versa.

From this book, Ensink appears more comfortable in a research library than in dealing with speakers and setting up experimental research. The bibliography contains over 200 references, but somehow the author was not able to find more than 11 speakers total for the second set of experiments (female students and mothers of female students). There are surely large and easily accessible groups of potential participants in the sizeable university town Ensink carried out his research in. Thus, the scarce systematic results can be no more than suggestive for further research, as the author acknowledges. More solid results could have been reached, in my view, paying just a bit more attention to the design.

On the whole, my impression is that Ensink has not yet reached his ambitious goal of making a more precise model of the way contextualization cues steer interpretive processes. This erudite but difficult and not always very well-organized book contains much material that can inspire further experimental research. One could imagine Ensink teaming up with a cognitive psychologist to produce a series of more substantial, empirically based results.

Reference


Reviewed by Pieter Muysken
Institute for General Linguistics
Universiteit van Amsterdam

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1012 VT, Amsterdam, The Netherlands