Ritual and Language

While ritual is often associated with phenomena such as ceremonies, cursing and etiquette, it actually encompasses something much more important: it includes all instances of communally oriented language use. As such, ritual manifests itself in many forms in our daily lives, such as politeness, swearing and humour, and in many different life situations, spanning trash talk in sports events, through market bargaining, to conventional social pleasantries. This pioneering book provides an introduction to ritual language use by presenting a cutting-edge, language-anchored and replicable framework applicable for the study of ritual in different datatypes and languages. The framework is illustrated with a wealth of case studies drawn from Chinese and Anglophone rituals which demonstrate how to use it effectively. The book is essential reading for both academics and students, and is relevant to pragmatics, applied linguistics and other fields.

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Contents

vi   Contents

Figures

Tables

List of Tables   ix

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x

Foreword

This book covers an important phenomenon of language usage: interaction ritual. When pragmatics gained momentum at the beginning of my academic career in the 1970s, everyone in the circle of academics I worked with, my late husband Willis Edmondson, my friends Shoshana Blum-Kulka and Gabriele Kasper, and many others in our research group had an interest in ritual in one way or another, and we mentioned ritual in different contexts in various of our studies. Interestingly and regretfully, the study of ritual then largely faded in the 1990s, along with the early pragma-linguistic criteria that Willis Edmondson and myself always advocated: the necessity of using a strictly language-anchored and bottom–up approach to language use where one only employs linguistic pragmatic units of analysis. This is why it is so refreshing to see the present book: the author Dániel Z. Kádár not only provides a ground-breaking theory of ritual – he also proposes a strictly language-anchored and bottom–up pragmatic framework which is replicable for the study of ritual phenomena across various languages and different types of data.

I knew this book was on the way because Dániel is a dear friend with whom I have now collaborated on a daily basis for half of a decade, and I have also contributed to the research presented in various chapters. When he reached out to me to write this foreword, I initially felt that this may not be a good idea because it is difficult to be objective when one comments on one's friend's work which includes one's own academic input. However, I nevertheless accepted Dániel's request because he wanted me to tell the reader why a language-anchored and bottom–up pragmatic framework is so important for present day pragmatic inquiries.

In the 1980s, the circle of scholars with whom I conducted the renowned Speech Act Realization (CCSARP) Project profited a lot from the earlier work by Edmondson and myself on a pedagogic interactional grammar which also included a radically minimal and finite typology of speech acts that enabled us to interpret interaction in a replicable way across many different languages and datatypes. Our goal was to avoid falling into the trap of claiming pragmatic universals, and instead we worked towards methodological replicability and rigour which meant that we created categories which could be used to describe

phenomena across various languages, without claiming that these phenomena are the same across various languages.

While the work by the CCSARP group has had a large influence through cross-cultural pragmatics from the 1990s to the mid-2010s, it had been mainly replicated in the form of 'applied' research – many scholars worldwide used this methodology to study language use in Chinese, Japanese, Arabic and various European languages to this day. It was in the mid-2010s that Dániel reached out to me through what he called 'a crazy email' in which he proposed that he and myself should engage in a cross-generation collaboration. He said he wanted to go back to what we were doing in the 1980s, and renew it by cross-fertilising it with more recent views on language use, as well as his own work on ritual. In the years to come, we produced together many studies in which we breezed new life into cross-cultural pragmatics, and meanwhile Dániel prepared the present book, which is now finally ready.

Why is it important that Dániel Kádár's framework, the first of its kind, captures ritual – which is arguably the most ancient form of interpersonal interactional phenomenon – in a bottom–up way? The answer to this question is that the present framework allows us to have a clear vision of what 'ritual' involves from a linguist's point of view, and also how this phenomenon is realised in many different linguacultural contexts. A key problem since the beginning of pragmatics has been that ritual is such a broad phenomenon that we often use it either in a simple way to describe social symbolic communication, or in a vague manner to describe ceremonies. The present book creates an order in the fuzzy world of ritual, without oversimplifying it – in fact, it successfully shows how complex ritual phenomena can be from a linguist's point of view, while at the same time providing a rigorous academic framework through which the reader never feels at loss. I expect this book to become a must-read, not only in pragmatics but also in other areas of linguistics and other fields where ritual is studied.

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