

**INTERVIEW WITH DR. JACOB MEY, CO-EDITOR OF  
*JOURNAL OF PRAGMATICS.***

**Ignacio VÁZQUEZ ORTA**  
**Universidad de Zaragoza**

**I. Vázquez.:** You've come to Zaragoza to take part in the Seminar "Language and Power." In your lecture you argued for the view that language politics is a form of social control. Could you explain that a bit more?

**J. Mey.:** Language politics, in its most visible incarnation, is called language planning. Consider such activities as setting standards of pronunciation and orthography, promulgating guidelines for the elaboration of textbooks, dictionaries, readers and other educational material, promoting "correct" language use in the public domain; devising measures for language conservation, e.g., by controlling neologisms and loans, by setting standards for language teaching, and so on... All these enterprises in some way or other count as "language politics," that is, a form of social activity that aims at an authoritative manipulation of people's use of language by the use of prescriptive decrees and sanctioning measures.

**I. V.:** Apart from all those activities of social control mentioned, are there any other manipulative activities aiming at the same social control?

**J.M.:** Manipulation is a common feature of language use in our society. Those who are in power will do almost any thing to perpetuate their rule. But for some to be in power, others have to be out of it. By sheer power logic, the question of the former thus becomes to keep the latter out. Here, the single most important

requirement is to let the oppressed powerless stay unaware of their own oppression. Consequently, the oppressors want to keep their power under cover: they want to "veil" it, and this is where language comes in. Language, society's veil, serves this system-dominated state of mind in a most appropriate way.

J. M.: Language is often associated with power: one is familiar with the expression "the power of words," as if there was some power resident in the words themselves. Of course this is pure magic. Power is based in society, and the societal relations determine who is in power, and who is not. So it would be better to speak of the language of power, instead of the power of language.

I. V.: Is the language of power the language of oppression?

J. M.: To be linguistically oppressed means not to be able to freely use one's words, not to be the master or mistress in one's house of language. The ultimate humiliation of the linguistically oppressed is to have to accept their oppressor's wording of the world, eating words out of the hand that keeps them down.

I. V.: Let's turn now to pragmatics. The subject of pragmatics is very familiar in linguistics today. Fifteen years ago it was mentioned by linguists rarely, if at all. In those days, pragmatics tended to be treated as a rag-bag into which recalcitrant data could be conveniently stuffed... and forgotten. How do you see pragmatics today?

J. M.: We cannot understand the nature of language unless we understand pragmatics: how language is used in communication. Pragmatics has meant a widening scope of linguistics, and it involves a change in the view of what language is, and how linguists should define its subject. In essence, the claim is that grammar (the abstract formal system of language) and pragmatics (the principles of language use) are complementary domains within linguistics. We cannot understand the nature of language without studying both these domains, and the interaction between them.

I. V.: In one of your papers you have argued for the view that "pragmatics is the *magister ludi* of the language game." What do you mean by that?

J. M.: Pragmatics builds the bridge between the system of language and the context in which language is used: it relates the pre-structured system with the "structurable," with what still can be structured in novel ways through the process of creating meaning, of *semiosis*.

I. V.: The main task of semiotics has been described as accounting for the conditions that enable humans to produce meaning. Pragmatics, by contrast, examines the implicit, hidden conditions for any use of language.

J. M.: Historically, the rise of pragmatics within linguistics has had a lot to do with the failure of syntax to provide the ordering principle for any higher levels of description. What syntax has been able to do, and has done very well within its limited domain, was to bring a structure in the chaos at the lower levels of

linguistic structure. But any attempts by syntacticians to account for the whole of language have been terrible disasters. Pragmatics has been an upstart from the very beginning: the ugly duckling in the wastebasket.

I. V.: Does pragmatics introduce a new linguistic paradigm in Kuhn's sense?

J. M.: I should think so. We cannot consider language as an isolated collection of linguistic signs: pieces of substance, realizing a form in which a particular concept is wedded to a particular acoustic image, or viceversa. Language is not the simple union of sound and meaning that many North American linguists would have us believe in. What I am advocating is an altogether different concept of language, language used "on another scene," as Freud put it. Such a conception of language, of course, implies a revaluation of the classical framework of modern linguistics, in which the description of language phenomena is couched exclusively in terms of phonemes, morphemes and sentences. That framework has to be supplemented by a descriptive mode which also takes other considerations into account. In particular, I am thinking here of the intricate and often mysterious relationships between signifier and signified, such as have been pointed out to us by Freud and, more explicitly, by Lacan.