

Book Reviews



Kiaer, Jieun, *Pragmatic Particles: Findings from Asian Languages*. London: Bloomsbury, 2021. 240 pages, ISBN 978-1-350-11846-1.

Jieun Kiaer's book, *Pragmatic Particles: Findings from Asian Languages*, explores Asian pragmatic particles and offers a unique perspective on the interpretation of particle function and meaning in interaction. In the vast majority of works on pragmatic particles, scholars have made consistent progress in theorising the highly cultural and interactional meanings of pragmatic particles. This book offers invaluable insights into the development of a formal framework for investigating pragmatic particles, by using examples from a number of Asian languages. The words in the book title ring true as data from various Asian language families are presented, including focus particles (Burmese *hma*, Vietnamese *nam*, Mongolian *ch*), topic particles (Chinese *a*), case particles (Japanese *yo*) and emphatic particles (Korean *-i/ka*, Japanese *-ga*). Additionally, references to non-Asian languages, including English and French, help to guide the reader through the cornucopia of unfamiliar configurations and expressions in the structure of an Asian language.

The nine chapters in the book detail the range of distinctive views on pragmatic particles, such as socio-pragmatics and prosody or suprasegmentals, and help the reader to grasp current issues concerning functions and categories as well as the need for the discipline to consider more comprehensive data analyses in order to establish a formal framework for pragmatic particles.

Chapter 1 provides a succinct overview of major discussions in pragmatics, shedding light on larger issues in theoretical linguistics, for instance, competence versus performance issues related to pragmatics. In this chapter, Kiaer highlights that Asian language research is underrepresented despite the existence of a large number of languages and a large speaker population. She also brings to the fore particles as structural or discourse markers in general, and Asian particles in particular, and the pragmatic implications of particles. The author is careful to include the main Asian languages as the target for

discussion in this book, including those spoken in the Middle East, South Asia, Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia.

Chapter 2 describes the major frameworks that are used to explain meanings through the use of particles. Kiaer indicates the challenges involved in characterising different word-order frameworks, on both mono- and multi-clausal levels, and discusses the most challenging approaches as being transformational, minimalist program and lexicalist frameworks, lexical-functional grammar and combinatory categorial grammar (p. 24).

Chapter 3 involves a further explanation of frameworks and focuses on the minimised domain framework to capture flexible-word order and meaning in some Asian languages. Kiaer highlights locality as being the major precursor of verbal interaction, which enhances meaning and solidifies efficiency in communication. A number of structural buildings are described for a number of Asian languages, particularly Korean, Japanese and Mandarin Chinese. In this chapter, the author discusses Preference Asymmetry (pp. 43–44), a construction that overlays almost all Asian verbal interaction. In most cases, seniority, social status and other personal aspects, which would be less likely to take precedence over a verbal or first interaction in a non-Asian setting other than for politeness purposes, instead take centre stage as indicators of preference in most Asian cultures. As such, interactions depend on whether both speakers are comfortable about addressing each other, by locally testing whether the hearer is senior ($S < H$) or the speaker is senior ($S > H$). This constituency check serves as the point where a locality is determined to create efficiency in the utterance. Kiaer pinpoints the fact that socio-pragmatic sensitivity is significant in Asian language interaction, in that sentences might risk sounding ‘unnatural’ if the wrong particle is used. For example, in Korean, the honorific verbal particle *-nim* could not be used in a sentence along with the command-denoting ending particle *-e-la*, as the latter would typically be used by a superior to a junior (p. 48).

Chapter 4 explores how language users choose pragmatic particles to express emotion and clarify interpersonal meanings in interaction. Kiaer draws on Potts’ (2005) view on expressive semantics and argues for attitudinal modality, to further explain the dynamic meaning that a particle could carry in a sentence. As far as expressive semantics is concerned, this section offers a comparison of ‘normal’ pragmatic markers by examining the use of emoji in modern day electronic communication. Emoji deliver a wide range of expressions and emotions that enables the speaker to freely take charge of the intended message and formulate meaning in general. Such a turn in a discussion may actually help students of generative linguistics or those who wish to comprehend the empathic workings of particles to understand particle function in a new light, for emoji

use is shared among all language users across geographical language families. Moreover, the insertion of emoji in informal texts softens, strengthens or invariably emphasises the writer's message. However, without such an insertion, a basic understanding can still be obtained from the sentence. Yet, a speaker may also use particles to indicate stances such as 'being humble' and 'avoiding tension,' as the extensive use of "hedges, softening, distant or vague expressions" (p. 81) is common in Asian languages.

Chapter 5 discusses sociocultural issues concerning the use of particles. Kiaer argues that a comprehensive formal framework certainly helps to explain the vast cultural features represented in pragmatic particles, in particular the issue of politeness in Asian languages. She proposes a lexical matrix to describe the active and interpersonal facets of particles that includes "social hierarchy, interpersonal relations, mood and emotion, style, and perspective and attitude" to promote socio-pragmatic meaning (p. 84). For instance, the author highlights how Korean speakers use two different particles *-nim* and *nim-kkeyse*, the latter being more respectful than the former, following the name of the interlocutor in a statement to indicate a degree of respect to that person (p. 87). Furthermore, the author discusses the non-verbal expressions in Asian cultures that often accompany particle use to enhance attitudinal meanings in the section *Navigating interpersonal dynamics through non-verbal expressions* (pp. 87–92), in which she argues that studies of non-verbal expressions, particularly in Asian cultures, have not fully explored the importance of deference in social situations. Case in point, eye contact, avoidance, nodding, hand movement, and touching or patting are some of the few non-verbal expressions commonly used in Asian cultures (p. 89) that work simultaneously with verbal expressions. The author also points out that Asian language learners find it particularly challenging to synchronise non-verbal expressions with the verbal message. The cultural notes discussed in this chapter provide a practical platform by which the reader can expand his/her understanding of how delicate and complex the Asian communicative setting might be, compared with a non-Asian culture or Western context.

Chapter 6 highlights Kiaer's proposal of a four-dimensional lexical matrix, i.e., constructive, mood/emotion, interpersonal and style that could be used to theorise particle function, meaning and distribution based on its multifaceted complexes. First, the author discusses the subjectivity of particle use as far as glossing is concerned. The chapter demonstrates that particles in some Asian languages have different functions and behaviour that may not be adequately interpreted by the categories found in most non-Asian/European languages. The author presents some examples of particle function and behaviour in a number of Asian languages, including plural markers that also often

function as emphasis (Tagalog *mga*, Bengali *-(e)ra*), focus particles (Hindi *hii*, Vietnamese *nam*) and topic particles (contemporary Chinese *a/ne, me, ba*), underscoring that specific markers or particles are sometimes glossed interchangeably. Furthermore, in current research on pragmatic particles, confining topic and focus particles in some Asian languages to a single semantic feature can prove problematic. Second, the author offers the general terms 'perspective particles' and 'attitudinal particles' to clearly explain the fact that particles can have multiple meanings (p. 122). Perspective particles comprise subjectivity/objectivity, emphasis/focus and topic, while attitudinal particles comprise softening/hedging, hesitation/doubt or certainty (p. 123).

Chapter 7 explores further a pragmatic framework that could consolidate and explain the variety of meanings, functions and distribution of particles syntactically. The author introduces the Dynamic Syntax (DS) framework and 3E (efficiency-expressivity-empathy) models, which delineate Kiaer's claim about the importance of creating appropriate socio-pragmatic communication. The DS framework essentially outlines a top-down hierarchy of structure that lends a hand to viewing or accepting particles, so that additional meaning can be negotiated in the interaction while the interaction is taking place. Such language behaviours, particularly of Asian language speakers, bring to the fore the importance of the communicative context. In addition, such linguistic behaviours help to explain the 3E model, in that they exchange the quality of communication by interplaying the speaker's empathy, expression and efficiency in putting forward meaning. The model also recognises that the interlocutor is adept at interpreting the particles through different methods of conveyance, including prosody, which confirms the benefit of the communication. Foreign language speakers or students of Asian languages may have to launch themselves into the real interactional environment to experience first-hand the meaning of particles and to respond appropriately to the utterance.

In Chapter 8, Kiaer argues that particles can behave like 'little predicates' in a sentence because they could contain structural information and are defined as constructive particles. The way in which constructive particles operate is examined by considering examples from two groups of speakers: Group A represents languages with distinct case particles, including Korean, Japanese and Hindi; Group B represents languages with a wider, much more flexible structure, such as Thai, Indonesian and Burmese. In this chapter, the author also addresses syntactic competence by using examples from both language groups within a specific linguistic environment that allows speakers to be flexible when establishing meaning. The examples reveal a comparable configuration of structures practised by both language groups, in which particles play a significant role in decoding information.

Chapter 9 highlights specific attributes of the socio-pragmatic meanings of a particle, i.e., interpersonal, mood and emotion-related, style-related, and perspective and attitude-related attributes. Kiaer considers, in some depth, the multiple applications of the linking tree relation (LINK). In this chapter, a variety of examples from both East and Southeast Asian languages are deployed. The socio-pragmatic model of particle attributes that Kiaer proposes underscores the flexibility, yet consistency, of particle function when it is modulated in various sentence or utterance placements. To illustrate, examples of the locating of particles in sentences or in utterance initial and final positions are presented to underscore not only the flexibility of particle function, but also the possibility of different sentence or utterance meanings.

Overall, this book is recommended for anyone who has conducted, or at least read, a study of Asian pragmatic particles and can therefore appreciate the range of perspectives the book offers. Jieun Kiaer discusses linguistic modelling specifically and offers a handful of examples from a couple of languages, yet, at the same time, towards the end of each chapter points out the overarching umbrella context of language, culture and interaction which makes a formalisation challenging. Throughout the chapters, discussions are anchored on seminal works in pragmatics (Brown and Levinson, Bolinger, Grice), generative linguistics (Chomsky, Halliday), Asian linguistics (Enfield, Goddard, Ide, Huffman, Jun), and prosody-suprasegmentals and sociolinguistics (Jenkins, Kachru), offering a lucid overview of the frameworks that are relevant to understanding the obscure yet vast spectrum of Asian linguistic theorising. In addition, the author's own previous works on syntactic theory (cf. Kiaer, 2014), Korean prosody (cf. Kiaer, 2012), and translanguage and intercultural communicative competence (cf. Kiaer, 2018) lend a hand to the future study of Asian pragmatic particles that have hitherto not received adequate attention.

Finally, the author also reiterates the urgency required of further research to deal with large-scale data analysis (p. 203) across gender and age groups, especially the effort to explore particle meaning through intonation and emotion analysis, and calls for a more workable framework for charting the theoretical landscape of pragmatic particles. Some theoretical takeaways from this book include the urgency to create a comprehensive, functional and theoretical profile of pragmatic particles by considering tangible and substantial spoken data across a variety of interactions in Asian languages, in order to uncover currently problematic variables such as, amongst others, prosody and theoretical learnability. First, I concur with the insight provided by the author's argument that "prosody is one of the most important driving forces for structural realization" (p. 51) and is pertinent to the variety of intonation contours that are often represented in many Asian languages. The second takeaway

involves the practical side of formal theorising, that is, the pedagogical implications for pragmatic particles. The author highlights a poignant sentiment that generative theories may be not be sufficient to help Asian language learners or linguists to understand more about the language they are learning or researching because the relevant language theories are still in the process of development (p. 63). Evidently, conventional generativist points of view would benefit from insights into the socio-pragmatic and less explicit features of the language, to project a vigorous approach that informs a holistic description of a linguistic framework. At the same time, however, as research in the field of linguistics continues, a notion of language preservation and accessibility for potential learners of an Asian language of their choice, including current researchers and speakers, could benefit from learning formal theories and structural frameworks. Both takeaways direct attention towards credible, overarching linguistic spoken data across the landscape of Asian linguistics.

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