1. Introduction

The notion of critical pragmatics can be dated back to 1979, when Jacob Mey published his article titled ‘Toward a Critical Theory of Language’, in which he discussed the basic requirements for the development of 'language emancipation'. Later on, in his work *Whose Language? A Study in Linguistics Pragmatics* (1985), he used Marxist dialectics to analyse language use issues in society, especially the labour disputes reflected in media language. In that article, he argued that, to study the issues of public discourse, it is important that we pay special attention to the purpose of language use, the social identity and other relevant characteristics of the language user in order to dig out the factors underlying the way they use language; in other words, it is important to explore and analyse how they use language to ‘word the world’. In 1993 he initiated the term ‘critical pragmatics’ in his work *Pragmatics: An Introduction*. He stressed in the book that to do
pragmatics and tackle social issues we need to put the ‘language user’ under our focus. Despite all this, he did not go full length to construct a coherent and operationalisable framework for doing critical pragmatics, leaving it at an abstract and notional stage.

To make critical pragmatics an applicable theoretical construct, Chen made a special effort to elaborate on the aims, targets, and methodology of critical pragmatics in a 2009 article, and followed up by publishing the present book, *Critical Pragmatic Studies of Public Discourse* (2013), in which he proposed an analytical framework for conducting pragmatic analyses of public discourse critically and exemplified the critical analysis of a variety of Chinese public discourse, which might serve as an impetus and an example for further work in critical pragmatic analysis.

As the first attempt devoted to the development of critical pragmatics as a branch of pragmatics, the book reviewed here is noteworthy in that it demonstrates how pragmatic theories of reference, deixis, presupposition, implicature, politeness, relevance, and the like can be utilised in the exploration of a variety of public discourse mainly including news discourse, advertising discourse, publicity discourse, public signs, naming discourse, and weather forecast discourse and how such an exploration can contribute to our understanding of societal discourse from a critical perspective.

2. Contents of the book

This book has two major focuses, one being the theoretical build up of critical pragmatics as a branch of pragmatics and the other being the application of the analytical framework to the analysis of public discourse across various genres of language use in public spheres. In the book, public discourse is defined as the language used in public places (like airports, railway/bus stations, docks, scenic spots), on public media (such as newspapers, magazines, television, and radio), or on the Internet, to transmit information intended for the general public by some social entities or institutions featuring some administrative purpose, commercial purpose, or other public concern. As the author points out in the Foreword, as a kind of so-called soft environment public discourse is widespread and highly transmissible across various social public spheres. Thus, public discourse can be an important window on the whole of society, reflecting the spiritual world of a society, and directly influencing the international image of a country, district or community. The book includes a Foreword and nine chapters.

Chapter 1 is an overview of the whole book, which introduces the object of the study, previous relevant studies, objectives, main features, as well as theoretical orientations of the book.

Chapter 2, after providing an overview of previous critical discourse studies
and evaluating their methodologies and theoretical framework employed, presents the origin, subject matter, and objectives of critical pragmatic studies, as well as some pragmatic theories and methods that can be used therein, thus laying a theoretical and methodological foundation for the studies developed in the subsequent chapters.

Chapter 3 focuses on the naming issues of stores such as those of hotels and beauty shops in Nanjing, discussing some problems with the support of interviews of some Nanjing citizens. According to the author's surveys and analyses, while most of the names of Nanjing stores are 'healthy', with proper attention paid to psychological needs such as individuality, fashion, style taste, and sense of beauty, a small proportion of them are inappropriate owing to adaptation to negative values and ideologies such as pandering to bad taste and seeking excessive novelty or inappropriate foreignisation. To solve those problems, the author proposes some suggestions for the government departments concerned to tighten up the censure and approval of store names.

Chapter 4, based on previous related studies, delves into some suspected deceptive or misleading language phenomena in Chinese advertising discourse. Under the guidance of relevant pragmatic theories, the author analyses large amounts of Chinese advertising discourse and discloses various so-called 'pragmatic pitfalls', thus arousing public awareness against those commercial traps.

Chapter 5 investigates suspected discrimination, found in Chinese street banners or Internet news, against certain social groups such as farmers, manual workers, old people, youngsters born since 1990, or people from certain geographical areas. While pointing out that some public discourses tend to impose a stereotypical negative image upon certain groups of people as a whole, the author calls on the government and the public to avoid imposing discrimination against these social groups.

Chapter 6, through field investigations, shows that the use of obscenity and violence in public discourse can actually diminish or undermine the sociopragmatic effect of the discourse, as they arouse negative feelings in the public. The chapter also singles out some verbal practices in public discourse which highlight some positive rules and values important to people and institutions.

Chapter 7 focuses on stylistic shift in public discourse, especially in advertising discourse, addressing the pragmatic phenomenon of personalisation in terms of its motives and communicative values. The chapter reveals that personalisation in public discourse can be interpreted as a kind of 'linguistic civilization' as it appeals to the positive feelings of being cared about, but in commercials it is better interpreted as a strategy of persuasion.

Chapter 8 uncovers the subjectivity hidden in news reports from different perspectives. Adopting a combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis, the
Chapter shows that some news titles involving the use of negation often contain wrong or misleading presuppositions aimed to grab readers’ attention; different angles of reporting selected in news reports often result in different interpretations. The author points out that positive personal involvement in news reports can be encouraged while negative personal involvement for ill purposes should be eliminated.

Chapter 9 concludes the whole book by reviewing the major achievements of this study while pointing out the main deficiencies of the research. Some suggestions are also proposed for future research in this field.

3. Comments

Since the 1980s, Chinese scholars working in their homeland have been bringing Western pragmatic theories and methodologies to the analysis of Chinese societal pragmatic phenomena. However, most of them, if not all, remain largely at the level of direct ‘application’ despite their contribution to the understanding of public discourse in the Chinese context. However, the author of this book, like those with scholarly experience in the West such as Xu Shi (2012), Rong Chen (1985, 1986) and Yueguo Gu (1994), not only absorbs the theoretical nutrients from Western scholars, but also works out an analytical framework of his own, thus grabbing a share in the theoretical development of the related field. Specifically, the book distinguishes itself in the following respects.

Theoretically, this book, published by a pragmaticist, complements the existing critical approaches advocated by Roger Fowler, Norman Fairclough, and others, who are critical discourse analysts by tradition. While previous critical discourse analysts generally adopt theoretical tools from systemic functional grammar such as transitivity systems, thematic organization, and grammatical metaphor, focusing primarily on the linguistic forms of public discourse, Chen demonstrates the rigor and power of pragmatic theories in their critical analyses of public discourse, thus adding a new theoretical perspective to those existing critical studies.

On top of that, this book adopts a combination of both positive and negative critical analysis, as opposed to the solely negative critical analysis in most of previous critical discourse studies. As the author stresses in the book, critical pragmatics should also undertake to advocate appropriate ways of public discourse while revealing corruption, discrimination, and deception pertaining to public discourse. Critical pragmatics analysis is a kind of review, positive and negative alike. By commenting on the civilised and reasonable societal pragmatic practices and disclosing negative or inappropriate ones, critical pragmatic researchers can aim to influence people’s thinking and action through their commenting and criticism.
In addition, with first-hand data of public discourse, the book not only extends the application scope of existing pragmatic theories, but also puts some theories to the test. Previous research in pragmatics has focused on the analysis of daily conversations, with inadequate attention paid to public discourse. This book, however, focuses on the study of public discourse and investigates its pragma-linguistic features, which can verify the applicability of existing pragmatic theories. In addition, it also exemplifies a number of ways in which the theories, like politeness theories, need some modification when used to interpret some distinctive features of public discourse not shared by daily conversations.

Practically, this book promotes our understanding of Chinese public discourse. While previous pragmatics researchers tended to focus on the discursive properties, pragmatic strategies, and societal meanings of public discourse, this book pays exclusive attention to the societal problems inherent in it, including some problems not touched upon before, such as naming problems and fraud issues in the Chinese context. In this connection, the book can be seen as a pioneering and exploratory attempt at the critical study of Chinese public discourse.

Clearly, the author seems to be aware of a few things that are yet to be done in the future. To start with, as public discourse involves a wide range of topics and fields, there remains a large gap for further investigation, as the book mainly focuses on a few types only, such as advertising discourse, news discourse, public notices, site slogans, names of business stores and brands, with little attention being paid to other types of public discourse. So future researchers are advised to expand the scope and delve into public discourse such as social service discourse, tourist discourse, and so on.

Next, in terms of research topics, this book only touches upon naming problems, discrimination, deception, subjectivity, etc. Future research may concern itself with other topics such as linguistic creativity, pragmatic variation, and cultural specificity of public discourse. In particular, future efforts in this field could conduct cross-linguistic and cross-cultural comparison and contrasts, in order to disclose commonalities and differences among various cultures and societies in the domain of public discourse, thus providing an important cultural perspective for foreign language learners to get more insights into other social cultures and improve their cross-cultural communicative capabilities.

Methodologically, the data collected in this study for analysis is often not large or representative enough, as they only come from a few towns and cities. More conclusive findings are yet to be drawn from larger amounts of data.

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