

LINGUIST List 19.1287

Tue Apr 15 2008

Review: Pragmatics: Fitzmaurice & Taavitsainen (2007)

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Message 1: Pragmatics: Fitzmaurice & Taavitsainen (2007)

Date: 15-Apr-2008

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Subject: Pragmatics: Fitzmaurice & Taavitsainen (2007)



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Announced at <http://linguistlist.org/issues/18/18-1159.html>

EDITORS: Fitzmaurice, Susan M.; Taavitsainen, Irma

TITLE: Methods in Historical Pragmatics

SERIES TITLE: Topics in English Linguistics 52

PUBLISHER: Mouton de Gruyter

YEAR: 2007

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This book is intended to be a state-of-the-art collective representative of the research field variously labeled sociohistorical linguistics (Romaine 1982), historical sociolinguistics (Milroy 1991), diachronic text linguistics (Fries 1983), linguistic history (Granda 1980), new philology (Fleischman 1990a), and, more recently, historical discourse analysis (Brinton 2001) or historical pragmatics (Jucker 1995). Different traditions, goals and methodologies can be uncovered in these alternative labels (they can also be found in this volume's articles), but they all share a common interest in bridging the gap between the historical and the discursive perspective in the study of language. More specifically, the essays in this volume address "the ways in which the conventions that mark particular genres are instrumental in characterizing and perhaps fixing (or not) the communicative functions associated with expressions or forms on the one hand, and the linguistic realizations of certain communicative functions on the other" (p. 2).

The editors of the volume are the Finnish scholar Irma Taavitsainen, well-known for her research on historical scientific English writing (e.g., 2002) and her participation (e.g., Taavitsainen & Phata 2004) in the development of pioneering Helsinki Corpus of English Texts (launched in 1991), and British scholar Susan Fitzmaurice, renowned for her research on historical pragmatics (e.g., 2002) and historical sociolinguistics (e.g., 2007). In chapter 1, "Historical pragmatics: what it is and how to do it", they review the various trends in the bibliography, trying to pinpoint the state of the art and render a working definition of the field. This article updates previous programmatic reviews, such as Jucker (1995, 2000, 2006), Closs Traugott (2004) and Brinton (2001), and signals the increasing heterogeneity and institutionalization of the field. It also explores some of the challenges researchers face, such as data limitations and corpus-based function studies.

The editors claim that the field can be better understood as consisting of two different methodological perspectives. The first, dominant approach relies on large, electronic corpora, adopts quantitative methods of analysis, and is more attached to discourse studies traditions (e.g., Dijk 1997). Chapters 2 to 8 (except 6) follow, widely speaking, this trend. These six articles are listed on a cline that goes from intra-language explanations (e.g., pragmaticalization), micro-discursive phenomena (e.g., discourse markers) and macro-quantitative methods of analysis, to more contextually-based explanations (e.g., sociohistorical structure), macro-discursive phenomena (e.g., communicative event types), and micro-quantitative methods of analysis. The second approach

adopts qualitative methods of analysis over complete case texts and their detailed contexts, and is more influenced by literary and philological traditions (e.g., Fleischman 1990b). Chapters 6 and 9 to 11 advocate, in general, this position. Curiously, in the "Introduction" it is wrongly stated (p. 6) that chapter 6 is actually in the 9th position, which nonetheless would have been more consistent with the editors' theoretical claims.

Chapter 2 presents Canadian scholar Laurel Brinton's "The development of 'I mean': implications for the study of historical pragmatics". Brinton examines quantitatively the functional development of 'I mean' as a discourse marker across time. Her method is semasiological as she considers form as the 'tertium comparationis' (cf. Connor & Moreno 2005) and traces function change (cf. Jacobs & Jucker 1995: 13-4), along with changes in the (syntactic) contexts of occurrence. Through this micro-analysis, Brinton discusses in depth the intra-language mechanisms that might be at work in the evolution of discursive phenomena: lexicalization, idiomaticization and pragmaticalization, as distinct from - but complementary to - grammaticalization. This topic is actually Brinton's specialty (cf. e.g. Brinton & Closs Traugott 2005). The article manages to balance these two goals, checking general hypotheses against results with changing 'I mean', which turns out to be the outcome of a complex grammaticalization process.

Interestingly, Brinton uses Modern English corpora and introspection as a methodological starting point. Brinton's research sheds light on grammaticalization explanations as complementary to lexicalization ones, and is probably one of the most relevant and solid articles included in the volume.

German scholar Ursula Lenker in chapter 3, "SoPlice, forsoothe, truly - communicative principles and invited inferences in the history of truth-intensifying adverbs in English", adopts a similar approach. Present day English functions as a 'control group' for the immense task of depicting historically distant language use. Although Lenker claims to have followed a onomasiological approach (i.e., same function - the 'tertium comparationis' - across time and changing form), the methodology is more complex: Lenker is interested in understanding how the function (truth-intensifying) of a set of discursive items (adverbs) in English expands across time from clause span, through sentence span, to discourse span. In the case of truth-intensifying adverbs, their original propositional meaning leads to emphasizing and, eventually, to discourse-marker use. Lenker suggests that the use of

truth-intensifying adverbs in positive or non-emotional contexts triggers inferences that explain this adverbial cline change (cf. e.g. Schwenter & Closs Traugott for an extensive consideration of this process).

Despite the obvious relevance of the above studies, I wonder if the macro-quantitative approach they favored does not narrow the span of potential objects of study and jeopardise the micro and macro socio-contextual factors motivating language change (cf. Ridruejo 2002). According to Magnuson (this volume), "while language use in context is the sine qua non of pragmatics, nonetheless pragmatics as practiced on this increasingly dominant empirical model for linguistic inquiry seems under pressure to reduce any lifelike plurality of contexts to a strictly limited set of variables" (p. 171). These disadvantages of macro-quantitative analysis are obviously balanced by its extraordinary representative power. Nonetheless, internal factors alone cannot account for discursive phenomena in all their implications. I believe that the social and contextual use and distribution of meaning should not be omitted in any usage-based approach to language.

Irma Taavitsainen and Andreas Jucker, distinguished scholars in the field, co-authored chapter 4, "Speech act verbs and speech acts in the history of English". They propose a possible way of solving the ultimate challenge in corpus linguistics: how to identify and quantify automatically complex functional phenomena that realize in various formal ways (e.g., speech acts; cf. McEnery, Xiao y Tono 2006: 41). Each community creates labels for relevant speech acts. These labels, as they are formal, can be easily traced in large scale electronic corpora (cf. also Jucker and Taavitsainen 2000). Although speech act verbs do not give any direct access to the speech acts they name, they do provide some very enriching insights as they refer to the specific speech acts that are considered "important enough to be labelled" (p. 108) by the speech community. This methodological procedure expands the speech act verb lists at hand because it considers not only performative but also descriptive speech act verbs; therefore, a non-performative verb like 'insult' can easily be taken into account as a label for an actual relevant speech act (as in "he insulted them"). The authors aim to describe quantitatively the changing distribution and use of English verbs belonging to the semantic field of verbal aggression. They identify aggression verbs in historical dictionaries and select genres where the verbs are more likely to be used (e.g., drama, fiction and trial records). They found that aggression verbs almost exclusively appeared in descriptive formats and that their contexts of appearance gradually shifted from

religious texts to descriptions of interactions between speakers (e.g., so as to negotiate the intentions of the interlocutor as in "Do you mock me?").

I believe there is a possible weakness in Taavitsainen and Jucker's most basic assumption: the claim that the speech act importance for the community (and thus for the research) and the speech act label existence are closely linked. This assumption, a weak form of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, is obviously central to the relevance of the whole study. However, I think there might be speech acts that are important enough to a community and have no corresponding explicit speech act labels, or rather the label is not always, or not accurately, used. For example, in "Gloys seid he lyed", which the authors paraphrased as "Gloys accused him of lying", they agree "there are no expressive speech act verbs as such" (p. 116). These cases, therefore, are difficult to be accounted for in a macro-corpus-based study. There might be opposite cases, too, where labels describe past speech acts which are no longer active in the community. I am thus not quite sure speech act labels develop and disappear with the same dynamic actual speech acts have, and, in any case, this relation should be proved and not assumed. In addition, it would be enriching to explore how speech acts are labeled and reported.

In sum, I very much doubt whether speech act labels simply mirror actual speech acts hierarchy as perceived by a historically-situated community and whether they "may shed some light on the development of the associated speech acts" (p. 135). Taavitsainen and Jucker's method reminds me of the ethnographic study of genre nomenclatures recommended by John Swales as "an important source of insight" (1990: 54). However, 14 years later, Swales agrees that they are "at best a rough guide" because "sociohistorical traditions may preserve the symbolic value of a label despite considerable [functional] chronological change" (2004: 73), such as "colloquia" that are basically monologues, etc. Although speech acts and genres are obviously not the same, following Swales' arguments I can still wonder if labels are necessarily updated, accurate evidence that allow jumping directly to functional conclusions. If my argument turns out to be valid, the challenge of automatically quantifying speech acts will remain intact and the relevance of this essay will be limited. I must add that Taavitsainen and Jucker's essay describes speech act contextual usage change but does not explain this change explicitly.

In chapter 5, "Text types and the methodology of diachronic speech act analysis", Thomas Kohonen explores the challenges posed by the evasive nature of

speech acts in earlier periods of the language, such as the above mentioned problem of their multiple manifestations and what Kohnen calls the "hidden manifestations" of a speech act; that is to say, the difficulty in tracking the change in those manifestations across time. He advocates the construction of genre-based micro-corpora. Genre-specific corpora allow tracking and comparing predictable forms and functions, whereas micro-corpora have proven useful to balance qualitative manual analysis and quantitative representative power (cf., e.g., Salager-Meyer & Zambrano 2001). Kohnen focuses on directive speech acts by means of micro-analysis of (relatively) small corpora of English sermons (comprising more than 129,000 words). He finds that most directives are modal expressions to be found in the Old English data; directives decrease till the seventeenth century and then increase in the late twentieth century. Kohnen suggests that variation may stem from genre focus (e.g., narration vs. regulation), stylistic preferences, or wider language change (e.g., more polite manifestations during the Early Modern period).

Kohnen's contribution is probably the most illuminating methodological proposal in the volume. I truly think this is the finest methodological solution to date to the study of speech acts and other discursive phenomena, at least until corpus linguistics sharpens its tools for doing the task automatically. On the other hand, despite the fact that this approach narrows down the possible forms and functions to quantify in the selected micro-corpora, the problem of indirect manifestations of speech acts remains and, as Kohnen concedes (p. 158-9), requires more micro-analysis.

Lynne Magnusson's "A pragmatics for interpreting Shakespeare's sonnets 1 to 20: dialogue scripts and Erasmian intertexts", chapter 6, advocates a multidisciplinary literary-linguistic approach to the study of Shakespeare's sonnets. In particular, she reasonably argues that historical pragmatics "has much to learn from the specialized skills that have developed in literary and cultural studies for the interpretation of context" (p. 167). Magnusson follows a strictly qualitative, case analysis. She studies "dialogue scripts", a neo-Bakhtinian concept (cf., e.g., Bakhtin 1981) that refers to "the textual manifestation of the culturally given interaction genres upon which a playwright -for example- might be drawing to build up a dramatic dialogue" (p. 172). She argues that Shakespeare's transformation of Erasmian rules of address help explain the changing forms of address in his sonnets. For example, 'thou' of intimacy unexpectedly used to address social superiors follows some of Erasmus' precepts for Latin.

Magnusson's general argumentation for pro qualitative analysis is very appealing, although this methodology seems particularly illuminating for the kind of author-based studies she is interested in. I must add that the study of pronouns of address, regardless of how interesting and methodologically manageable they are, has probably hoarded too much research in sociohistorical linguistics and other research areas (from e.g. Brown & Gilman 1960 to e.g. Fernández Lávaque 2005), whereas other research areas have been largely ignored.

Dawn Archer's chapter 7, "Developing a more detailed picture of the English courtroom (1640-1760): data and methodological issues facing historical pragmatics", advocates a mutual understanding between social history and linguistics, in particular when it comes to studying such verbal social events as courtroom interactions. Archer adopts a quali-quantitative approach which pinpoints discursive practices of specific participant groups through the analysis of the patterns of speech acts and discursive strategies that they follow. This approach is typically pragmatic in that it studies specific contextual factors motivating discursive choices, which are in turn quantified. Archer studies the relationship between the role and other sociohistorical variables of the participants (e.g., judges) and the verbal action categories and other pragmatic variables (e.g., quantity and type of questions addressed) in the English courtroom in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. She finds, for instance, that judges were the most active questioners in the courtroom during the period 1640-1679; the greater involvement of the lawyers during the Early Modern English period led to a more 'reactive' and 'presiding' role for judges and to the use of more clarification-seeking only questions.

In chapter 8, "What do you lacke? what is it you buy? Early Modern English service encounters", German scholar Birte Bös proposes a very useful methodological approach to the study of remote oral social events. Bös' starting point is her former study of Present Day English service encounters in Britain from an ethnographic perspective. Bös uses several historical sources to depict former Britain's service encounters practices and, interestingly, she draws from Early Modern English coursebooks for foreigners to understand prototypical global and local verbal structure (cf. also Ridruejo 2002: 172). Although the general aim of service interactions has remained the same since then, Early Modern English global structure included a 'bargaining' section as prices were negotiable in the market conditions of the time. In addition, service encounters displayed direct imperatives, not usual in present day more indirect asking

strategies.

Monika Fludernik's "Letters as narrative: narrative patterns and episode structure in early letters, 1400 to 1650" (chapter 9) studies qualitatively linguistic features marking the slots of the narrative structure in early personal letters. Fludernik is a narratologist and her essay is part of a wider research project on the development of narrative structure in different English genres between 1250 and 1750. She proves that fifteenth and mid-seventeenth century letters are, in contrast with the modern letter, not predominantly narrative and that, when they are, they do not employ discourse markers consistently. These formulaic, unemotional early letters are therefore not very illuminating to study narratives. However, qualitative analysis of the few narrative letters (especially intelligence reports) supports Fludernik's macro-hypothesis: narrative structures of that period take recourse to the 'episodic' narrative structure (i.e., a series of episodes strung together), although the evolution from episodic to more teleological structures (e.g., novel) occur mostly at different times in different genres.

I should add that I doubt that "conversation between linguists and literary people has again arrived at a degree of correspondence long absent from their scholarly discourse" (p. 260), as Fludernik puts it. It is paradoxical to read, just a few pages later, that "rather than a bridge, there now exists a substantial gap between the disciplines of literature and linguistics" (p. 267), as Fitzmaurice claims in his article. It appears to me that this dialogue between both disciplines is still a desideratum, although this collection of articles does collaborate to bridge that gap.

In chapter 10, James Fitzmaurice's "Historical linguistics, literary interpretation, and the romances of Margaret Cavendish" compares general and genre-specific (romance) literary texts corpora so as to pin down particular uses of reporting clauses associated to the latter. This corpus-based, literary-oriented study attempts to demonstrate literary influences by means of tracing Margaret Cavendish's shift in style in the revised edition of her "Nature's Pictures" (1656). Fitzmaurice seeks to explain why many initial position, inverted reporting clauses like "said the Duke", typical of romance prose, are reversed and placed at the end of sentences in the second edition (1671) of that volume. He claims that Cavendish might have favored uninverted last position forms, common in realistic travel narratives (e.g., "This short revelation" (1662)) and jest books, to shift her style partly away from the

linguistic conventions of the highly fictional romance genre and, in so doing, to write a 'true romance'.

This methodological approach is particularly solid because the analyst can support alleged literary influences, which are often speculative (e.g., Fitzmaurice says (p. 276) that "because of its notoriety, Margaret Cavendish would have had known of the volume ["This short revelation"]"), with linguistic evidence. In addition, linguistically intriguing phenomena, such as reporting clauses change, can be explained using the literary and cultural tools for contextual analysis advocated by Magnusson (see above).

Finally, in chapter 11, "Discoursal aspects of the Legends of Holy Women by Osbern Bokenham", Gabriella del Lungo Camiciotti studies literary genre traditions, echoes and innovations, as Magnusson does in chapter 6. Her perspective is qualitative, rhetorical and contextualized, and proves to be particularly enriching for studying individual authors and texts. She claims that fifteenth century writer Osbern Bokenham re-elaborates the well-established narrative pattern of Saint's legends genre by increasing the prominence of dialogue. The Saint's legends genre, a historical narrative read aloud in church, promoted social cohesion and the ideal of sanctity. In Bokenham's work, dialogue is less rooted in oral performance and serves other textual functions in narrative framed texts, such as marking climaxes in the plot; these changes in the genre are due to gradual changes in text production and consumption in the late Middle Ages.

EVALUATION

In sum, this volume really brings together alternative, enriching methods to face the functional study of historical discourse. What seems clear is that there cannot be a universal method for this task. On the contrary, methodological tools deeply depend on the object under scrutiny, the available sources and, not less important, the creativity of the researcher.

As a final remark, I wonder if this book should not have been more properly called "Methods in English historical pragmatics". All the articles included deal with historical English only, but at the same time many theoretical positions are claimed to be general. This dilemma can be found in this book, where, for instance, we read that "we conduct historical pragmatics research in English" (p. 1) which can help "spur a collective review and assessment of what it is we do when we do historical pragmatics" (ibid.). Many previous studies

within this Anglo-European tradition present the same, often implicit link between English and general historical pragmatics (cf. e.g. Jucker 1995's cover title "Historical Pragmatics" and inside subtitle "Pragmatic developments in the history of English"). Perhaps this should not be understood as a critique to English studies, but, on the contrary, as a demand on non-English studies to develop language-specific problems and proposals.

I would also like to mention that the volume lacks a biographical sketch of the contributors. This would have been especially useful as to understand how some of the heterogeneous methodological choices may be based on different trainings, traditions and geographic origins.

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