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Round table

The Study of Language Change in the 21st Century: Theories and Tools

A spotlight on Historical Pragmatics: Affirmatives and requests

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Data: Spoken data and historical pragmatics (HP)

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The problem:

Pragmatic theories largely developed with spoken interaction in mind (see labels such as “utterance”, “speaker”, “hearer”, “speech act theory”, or comments from scholars on what counts as authentic data). But there are no actual records of spoken data prior to the invention of the tape-recorder. HP is a non-starter.

Three arguments why HP is viable:

(1) Medieval (and earlier) texts tend to structure information in the way that spoken language does (Fleischman 1990: 23)

Data: Spoken data and historical pragmatics

(2) Much can be inferred about spoken interaction from historical "speech-related" text-types (e.g. trial proceedings, handbooks in dialogue form, plays, dialogue in prose fiction).

(3) Maybe pragmatic theory need not be restricted to spoken data: "written texts can be analyzed as communicative acts in their own right" (Jacobs and Jucker 1995: 10). (See work on the pragmatics of present-day academic writing).

Data: Interactive data and pragmatics

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- So, communicative or **interactive data** is key to pragmatics?
- Yes, though (almost?) all linguistic data is interactive. So, all is amenable to pragmatics.
- But pragmatics thrives on interactions that are rapid and complex. Hence a particular focus on **dialogic data**.
- Historically, that has meant a data preference for e.g. plays, trial proceedings, handbooks in dialogue form, dialogue in prose fiction, etc.

Data: Context and pragmatics

- Most pragmatics scholars agree that the necessary ingredients of pragmatics are e.g. language use, meaning and context.
- Historically, given that most of context is not recorded, HP would seem a non-starter.

However:

(1) We have co-text (cf. corpus-based approaches).

(2) Texts often create their own contexts, indicating who is talking to whom, in what situation, etc..

(3) Some texts describe contexts (e.g. reports, newsletters, fiction).

Methodological approaches in HP

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Investigating forms (form to function)

- Single words, fixed expressions, lexical bundles, etc. (cf. affirmative case study)
  - Historical/diachronic corpus analysis has come to dominate HP (we have access to texts, but not participants, context, etc.)

Investigating functions (functions to form)

- Speech acts, (im)politeness, genres, etc. (cf. requests case study)
  - The problem of the *tertium comparationis* (the feature(s) that the things to be compared have in common and constitute an essential part of any comparison)

Case study 1: Affirmatives in English

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Form to function

- Spanish/Italian/etc. ***si*** [Latin *sicut*, *sic* 'thus']
- Russian/Bulgarian/Serbo-Crotian/etc. ***da*** (Proto-Slavic *da** 'thus', with possible influence form Latin *ita*]
- Chinese ***shì***, 'right, correct', but also a bunch of other expressions, each with specific other uses.
- English ***yes*** [O.E. gea + is ??]

In Old English (OE)

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Two central affirmative forms meaning ‘yes’ in OE:

- ***gea*** *(yea)* – cf. Proto-Germanic **ja*
- ***gyse*** *(yes)* – Formed from *gea* + ??

Wallage and van der Wurff (2013):

OE gyse (yes) < < gea (hit) is swa
“yea, (it) is so”.

- Evidence that subjects like *hit* could be left unpronounced (cf. children today!)
- Regular phonological processes produce the final form.

The current ambiguity of responses to negative questions

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Clear generalization about usage in OE is possible (e.g. Wallage and van der Wurff 2013: 191):

- to give positive-polarity response to a positive utterance, use **gea** (yea) ("yes") [Did you …? Gea I did ..."]
- to give positive-polarity response to a negative utterance, use **gyse** ("yes") [Didn't you …? Gyse I did ..."]

The current ambiguity of responses to negative questions

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Emily: Didn't you take my costume out of the washing machine?

Jonathan: Yes.

Emily: What?

Interpretation 1: Yes, I confirm what you say that I didn't take your costume out of the washing machine [Confirms negative proposition in the question that Jonathan did not take the costume out]

Interpretation 2: Yes, I confirm what you suspect that I did take your costume out of the washing machine [In the light of doubt (she can't find it), Emily's question asks for confirmation of her belief that Jonathan did take the costume out. Confirms this positive implicature.]

The Emily example … and OE!

Emily: Didn't you take my costume out of the washing machine?

Jonathan: Yes (***=yea,* it is so]**

Ok.

~~Interpretation 1: Yes, I confirm what you say that I didn't take your costume out of the washing machine [Confirms negative proposition in the question that Jonathan did not take the costume out.]~~

Interpretation 2: Yes, I confirm what you suspect that I did take your costume out of the washing machine [In the light of doubt (she can't find it), Emily's question asks for confirmation of her belief that Jonathan did take the costume out. Confirms this positive implicature.]

Why the shift in usage as we approach EMODE?

Vennemann (2009) notes:

- Mod. German *ja* (same root as *yea*) much more frequent then English *yes*, even in the same contexts.
- In addition, you get 'modal only' types of response (Filppula 1999), e.g.

Emily:	Didn't you take my costume out of the washing machine?
Jonathan:	**I did / I didn't**
Emily:	Ok

Why the shift in usage as we approach EMODE?

Vennemann (2009) notes:

- Irish has no exact equivalent of ‘yes’ or ‘no’.
- Similarly, Welsh favours modal only responses.

In short, perhaps Celtic influence destabilized the neat answering system of earlier stages of English.

But when?

Investigating forms: Single words and collocations

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Three ways of saying "yes" in EModE and their frequencies in the *Corpus of English Dialogues 1560-1760* (*CED*)

Yes	1,237
Yea	179
Ay	187

Comedy plays: Use of *Yes, Yea* and *Ay* after negative questions

100 randomized instances of *Yes* and *Ay*

All 45 instances of *Yea*

	Yes	*Yea*	*Ay*
Following Questions	51% (51)	53% (24)	16% (16)
Following Neg. questions	13% (13)	0% (0)	3% (3)

The Old English pattern can be detected in EMODE, but *yea* was declining anyway.

Yes, yea and ay: Collocations (in brief)

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Affirmative collocates (CQPweb; ordered in decreasing strength outwards from the collocate, log dice)

Left collocates	*Affirmative*	*Right collocates*
! . O ? yes	*Yes*	yes Madam sir , ;
, . : ?	*Yea*	but , I and .
Sir ? . ! ay	*Ay*	ay but come ! ,

- hath not a Snail, a Spider, yea, a Neut [newt] been found there? (D2CJONSO)

Case study 1: Requests

Default approach:

Form to function

Alternative solution:

Function to form

(1) Read through the data and identify requests, (2) insert annotation or coding (e.g. <req>can you pass the salt?</req>), (3) analyse requests for directness formulae, frequencies and co-texts.

- The upside of this method: we can capture *all* types of request formulae, not just the ones we already know about.
- The downside of this method: labour intensive.

Case study 1: Requests

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Requests in Early Modern English

Culpeper and Archer (2010): Study of 1,200 requests in trial proceedings and drama from around Shakespeare's time.

- **1 in 3 requests** were made with the simple imperative, e.g. "Fetch me the water", "Get thee gone", "Bake the bread", "Go!"

- Today, only **1 in 10 requests** (cf. Blum-Kulka et al. 1989) are made with the simple imperative. Most use indirect forms such as "Could you fetch me the water?" (cf. Aijmer 1996).

Case study 1: Requests

Who was using the EModE conventional *in*direct request strategies (e.g. *Will you go, Let us walk* rather than *Go, Walk*)?

- In the trial data, the only clear pattern to emerge was that more than 50% were used by judges and prosecution lawyers, and also by people (witnesses, etc.) of high status;
- In the drama data, most (i.e. 30) of the 34 conventional indirect requests were utilised by speakers of high status;

This flies in the face of modern politeness theory which predicts that more indirect strategies are used by people with *less* power.

Bringing it all back to the issues of this panel: The relevance of HP to synchronic linguistics

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- Labovian point on the relation between synchronic variation and diachronic development.

<u>Theory</u>

HP shows that

- the spoken bias is not merely surmountable (through e.g. speech-related text-types), but not a good reflection of pragmatics; and
- all pragmatics thrives on rapid and/or complex interaction.

In tune with theory development (e.g. ‘pragnemes’ and ‘practs’ rather than speech acts), and the expansion of pragmatics studies addressing digital communication (e.g. beyond simple speaker-hearer dyads).

Bringing it all back to the issues of this panel: The relevance of HP to synchronic linguistics

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Methodological approach

- Form-to-function (e.g. affirmatives)
- Function-to-form (e.g. requests)

All applicable to synchronic work, but HP does have a bias towards form (lack of access to context), and has promoted corpus pragmatics.

Lack of access to context (due to e.g. economic issues) can be a feature of synchronic work too.

So corpus pragmatics is the solution?

Bringing it all back to the issues of this panel: The relevance of HP to synchronic linguistics

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Corpus pragmatics, good for ….

- Examples
- Quantifying regularities (conventionalized structures, etc.)
- Identifying meanings and discourse contexts associated with regularities (collocations, genres, etc.)
- Exploring functions and/or contexts via annotation/coding
- Etc.

But there are many limitations, problems, dangers ….

Bringing it all back to the issues of this panel: The relevance of HP to synchronic linguistics

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They include (blindly!) assuming:

1. The corpus data is all that there is.
2. The corpus is big enough.
3. The corpus is representative or represents what you think it does.
4. That it can act as a proxy for other kinds of data.
5. That the meanings (incl. functions) of pragmatic units are stable across a corpus or corpora.
6. That you've got the relevant context.
7. That numerical patterns interpret themselves.
8. Etc.

And these issues are relevant to both diachronic and synchronic work.

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