Historical Pragmatics

A H Jucker, University of Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland
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Introduction

Historical pragmatics is a field of study that lies at the intersection of historical linguistics and pragmatics. It has established itself as an active field of inquiry since the mid-1990s as a result of a broadening of both historical linguistics, which started to replace a view of language as a coherent and homogeneous system by a more corpus-driven approach, focusing on genre-specific conventions and the internal variability of older stages of language, and a simultaneous broadening of pragmatics, which started to accept an increasingly wide range of data, including also written data. As a consequence, historical pragmatics defines itself as the study of pragmatic aspects in the history of specific languages. The field is also called historical discourse analysis or historical dialogue analysis (e.g., Brinton, 2001; Jucker et al., 1999). The choice of terms may sometimes imply a specific perspective, but often they are used interchangeably.

Data

Spoken interaction from the past is not directly available for inspection, but this is no longer seen as problematic for historical pragmatics for several reasons. Instances of recorded spoken language abound in historical data. Court records, for example, contain verbatim accounts of the words spoken during the course of legal proceedings in a law court. Plays consist almost entirely of fictional accounts of spoken language. Early scientific textbooks are often written in the form of fictional interactions between a master and a student. Narrative fiction may contain long stretches of reported discourse. And language teaching textbooks often provide model conversations, e.g., for the merchant travelling to a foreign country.

In all instances, the reliability of these data are an issue. Court proceedings were presumably formal and thus not typical of everyday language. Prescriptive models in language textbooks and representations of conversations in drama or fictional narratives cannot be taken as accurate renderings of the spoken language of any particular period. Therefore, on the one hand, these historical records of spoken language may give us an approximation of the real spoken language in different historical and sociocultural contexts; on the other hand, these instances warrant a pragmatic analysis in their own right. Thus, we may analyze the use of discourse markers in a play by Shakespeare, not because we believe that this is a particularly good approximation to how discourse markers were used in spoken conversations of Shakespeare’s time, but because we are directly interested in how Shakespeare used discourse markers in his plays. (see Discourse Markers).

In addition, Koch and Oesterreicher (1985), in a widely adopted model, have argued for a need to distinguish between the realization of language in a particular medium, and the way language is realized on a scale ranging from the language of immediacy to the language of distance. As to the first, language may be realized either in the phonic code or in the graphic code. But this dichotomy has to be distinguished from the scale formed between instances of the language of immediacy, which is more typically (but not exclusively) realized in the phonic code, and the language of distance, which is more typically (but not exclusively) realized in the written code. While no historical language realized in the phonic code is still available, there is sufficient data on the language of immediacy, as for instance in diaries or in personal correspondence.

Moreover, even written texts that lack any connection to the spoken language and that are manifestations of the language of distance are always produced in a communicative context by writers who want to communicate with their readers, and as communicative events they are amenable to pragmatic analyses.

Topics in Historical Pragmatics

Several distinct subfields of historical pragmatics can be distinguished. The first approach, which has been
called ‘pragmaphilology’ by Jacobs and Jucker (1995), studies pragmatic aspects of historical texts in their sociocultural context of communication. Such studies are not new, except for their more explicit reliance on recently developed descriptive tools from the fields of pragmatics and discourse analysis. These may range from ethnographic descriptions of communicative events to the various forms of politeness attested in historical data and to discourse analytical investigations. They also include an approach that may be termed ‘literary historical pragmatics.’ Fitzmaurice (2002), for instance, provides a pragmatic reading of familiar letters in 17th- and 18th-century England which takes into account intended and unintended meanings implied and inferred by writer and audience. Sell (2000) deals with literary texts of the past. He argues that literary activity should be seen as communicative in a strongly interactive sense, as it is affected by the different situationalities of sender and receiver. In the case of literature, sender and receiver are often separated not only in place but also in time. In this case, the literary critic, or the historical pragmatist, has the task of mediating between the situationalities.

The second approach, diachronic pragmatics, studies the historical development of pragmatic elements, such as discourse markers or speech acts, or it studies the pragmatic causes of language change. To the extent that different stages in the history of a language are compared, historical pragmatics is a kind of contrastive analysis. As in any contrastive study, it is important to specify the tertium comparationis, i.e., the element that remains constant when different diachronic stages are compared. It has become standard to distinguish between ‘diachronic form-to-function mapping’ and ‘diachronic function-to-form mapping’ (see Jacobs and Jucker, 1995: 13). An example of the former are discourse markers or pragmatic markers, which are typically marginal forms with little or no propositional meaning that occur outside the syntactic structure and which function on the interactional or pragmatic level. Brinton (1996) examines a variety of such markers in Old English and in Middle English. In this case, linguistic forms that stay relatively stable are taken as a starting point, and their different functions at different stages of their diachronic development are traced.

If, on the other hand, a linguistic function, such as the expression of politeness, is taken as starting point, the term diachronic function-to-form mapping is used. In this case, the different realizations of this function in the course of time are studied. Arnowick (1999), for instance, traces the histories of a number of speech acts, such as promises, curses, blessings, greetings, and entire speech events, such as flying and sounding, which she collectively calls illocutionary biographies. Jucker and Taavitsainen (2000) argue that histories of individual speech acts have to be situated within a multidimensional pragmatic space in which the speech act can be contrasted with neighboring speech acts.

Often, however, the distinction between these two perspectives is not easy, because in the course of time a particular linguistic element may change both its form and its function. And in some cases the object of investigation is not a particular form or a particular function but a more comprehensive system of interconnected entities, as in the case of address term systems (see Taavitsainen and Jucker, 2003). Many languages distinguish between a more polite and a more intimate personal pronoun of address, such as French vous and tu or Early Modern English you and thou. Some languages have more than just two such pronouns of address (e.g., German at some stage of its development, see Listen, 1999). Such systems undergo multivariated developments at different levels. Busse (2002) investigates the morpho-syntactic variability of the second person pronouns in the plays by William Shakespeare and seeks to identify the factors that influence the choice of you versus thou and ye versus you.

The cover term diachronic pragmatics is also used for approaches that study the pragmatic causes of language change. Traugott and Dasher (2002), for instance, argue on the basis of extensive corpus data from English and Japanese that there are predictable paths of semantic change because such changes are pragmatically motivated, that is to say they are bound up with mechanisms called invited inferencing and subjectification.

Recent Advances

To date, a disproportionate amount of research in historical pragmatics is devoted to the history of English, but important work has been carried out in several other and less well-researched languages. Xing (2004), for instance, investigates the pragmatic factors affecting the development of a specific focus particle in Mandarin Chinese. Lunde (2004) examines reporting strategies in medieval East Slavic hagiography and homilies, and Collins’s (2001) study is devoted to the distribution of reporting strategies in a corpus of medieval Russian texts.

The papers published by Bax (2003) testify to the importance of rituals in language change in diverse language situations, ranging from ancient Indo-European religious poetry (Vedic hymns) to ritual politeness in early modern Dutch letter writing and ritual aspects of contemporary mass sports events. The language of the mass media has also received
increasing attention from historical pragmatists, for instance in the papers published by Ungerer (2000) and by Herring (2003), which provide an historical view on mass media communication, and thus show that historical pragmatic analyses can also be applied to changes in progress.

See also: Discourse, Foucauldian Approach; Discourse Markers; Literary Pragmatics; Media: Pragmatics; Politeness; Pragmatics: History; Pragmatics: Overview; Speech Acts

Bibliography


