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Bringing historical contexts and language use together,
or how to do historical sociopragmatics

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Bringing historical contexts and language use together, or how to do historical sociopragmatics

Jonathan Culpeper (ed.) (2011): Historical Sociopragmatics. John Benjamins, Amsterdam

Historical sociopragmatics, edited by Jonathan Culpeper, is a collection of five articles, preceded by the editor's introduction which sets out the research agenda for the book. The papers were published in *Journal of Historical Pragmatics* 10:2 (2009) as a thematic volume. Two years later this collection appeared as a monograph in the Benjamins Current Topics series, whose aim is to broaden the audience for especially topical research themes which have so far been presented only to the readers of a specific journal. The decision to republish this material already suggests a fresh perspective on language use in historical contexts and a groundbreaking character of the methodologies involved. The contributions to the book skilfully combine qualitative and quantitative methods and strive for a systematic approach to language use as seen from macro- and micro-perspectives in specific social, historical and pragmatic contexts.

The introduction is a crucial reading before one delves into subsequent chapters. Jonathan Culpeper sets the scene for historical sociopragmatics, a newly emerging sub-discipline of historical pragmatics, within a larger context of pragmatics and sociolinguistics, by carefully assessing the overlaps, affinities and differences between various frameworks proposed for the analysis of language in a social context. He goes back to the definitions proposed for the scope of pragmatics and its subfields by Leech (1983) and to the scope of historical pragmatics and its subdisciplines outlined by Jacobs and Jucker (1995). A scrutiny of these fields and their (frequently fuzzy) boundaries opens up another path of inquiry: starting with the context and correlating its features with linguistic choices and communicative effects. In other words, historical sociopragmatics "concerns itself with any interaction between specific aspects of social context and particular historical language use that leads to pragmatic meanings" (p.4). The chapters in the volume demonstrate that through the reconstruction of contextual factors on the basis of historical material and relating them to linguistic choices, one can discover regularities and patterns which characterize historical communicative events synchronically and also diachronically. The authors' engagement with the data varies from more qualitative to more quantitative, but it is one of the characteristic features of the field that one approach always feeds into and relies on the other.

The first chapter in the collection, "Structures and expectations: A systematic analysis of Margaret Paston's formulaic and expressive

language", by Johanna L. Wood, takes a qualitative approach. The author proposes an adaptation of Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis framework (1993) for the study of historical letter writing, placing the text in a discursive practice context, which, in turn, is embedded in social practice conditions (p.14). On each of these plains, certain "structures of expectations" emerge (Tannen 1993), which find a reflection in the linguistic choices employed in the construction of a particular text, in this case - a personal letter. Medieval letter-writing is typically perceived as a highly conventional genre where the scribe follows a prescribed model. Wood manages to trace Margaret Paston's own linguistic choices through a careful examination of the mismatches between the expected usage and the actual text of the letter penned down by a scribe.

Susan M. Fitzmaurice in her chapter "The sociopragmatics of a lover's spat: The case of the eighteenth-century courtship letters of Mary Pierrepont and Edward Wortley", aims to reconstruct pragmatic meanings on the basis of implicature and inference embedded in an exchange of letters between clandestine correspondents. Similarly to the previous chapter, three contextual layers are recovered here to reconstruct and understand the context: co-text, situational context and historical context. It is assumed, according to the Communicative Principle of Relevance (Sperber and Wilson 2004), that the participants in an exchange share key reference points and contextual assumptions, which allow them to dynamically reconstruct the intended reading in spite of ambiguities and implicit meanings. In a close analysis of four consecutive letters exchanged by the couple, Fitzmaurice interrogates the intended meanings in a systematic manner, employing a series of subroutines: from disambiguating the expressions, through resolution of reference and bringing in context (saturation, Huang 2007), to concept construction on the part of the recipient. The author of the chapter is careful not to let her knowledge of subsequent events skew the synchronic reading. Her interpretation of the three letters by Edward gains merit in view of the addressee's response: Mary answers the explicit and also the implicit questions revealed by the study.

In the next contribution, "Altering distance and defining authority: Person reference in Late Modern English", Minna Nevala uses data from eighteenth-century letters (the Corpus of Early English Correspondence Extension, CEECE) to investigate the construction of social identities through personal reference. The author recognizes two levels of historical sociopragmatics: the macro-level (social, socio-cultural, sociological factors) and micro-level (personal, situational, stylistic factors) and looks at how deictic elements, such as terms of address and personal pronouns, construct the social space and its users. Nevala works with the assumption that deictic elements simultaneously situate not only the hearer (addressee) but also the speaker (writer) in social hierarchy and in relation

to each other. She discovers that friend is a term reserved for the closest circle of correspondents but it is also employed strategically for status-formation in asymmetrical power relations. She also explores third-person self- and addressee-reference as an indicator of in- and out-group membership or as a face-saving device. A juxtaposition of public and private correspondence reveals similarities: in both cases the selection of deictic tools creates the stance of the writer as well as that of the addressee.

Self-reference comes to the fore again in the next chapter, "Variation and change in patterns of self-reference in early English correspondence" by Minna Palander-Collin. This study uses corpus-driven and corpus-based methods to extract the uses of the first person pronoun from sixteenth- and eighteenth-century gentlemen's letters in CEECE. Self-reference as a stance-creating device should be on the rise in correspondence, according to findings based on ARCHER (Biber and Finegan 1989, Biber 2004). This study confirms the expected trend but also provides a wider contextualization for the employment of the first-person pronoun. I is a special indexical which works to construct multiple meanings and set the writer in various roles (p.86-87) and to situate him physically and morally by pertaining to his duties, obligations and rights. Repetitive appearance of I in the same co-text and context is revealed by the lexical bundle, or cluster method. To tame rather diverse material rendered by automatic extraction of repetitive clusters with I, Palander-Collin designs six functional categories to reflect the degree of formulaicity of a given cluster. In a comparison of two synchronic states it turns out, for instance, that later letters contain more attitude clusters and fewer request markers with the pronoun I than earlier correspondence. Overall, the pronoun combines most readily with specific groups of verbs, most notably with auxiliaries (which, unfortunately, does not prompt a more extensive discussion in the chapter) and with mental states. Also, gentlemen's letters to family differ in terms of the frequency and character of self-reference clusters from correspondence in professional contexts where I-clusters are used to maintain formulaic humility discourse and deference.

The volume closes with a chapter by Dawn Archer and Jonathan Culpeper, "Identifying sociophilological usage in plays and trial proceedings (1640-1760): An empirical approach via corpus annotation". The authors add a clearly delineated methodological dimension to the tools of historical pragmatics: the "context-to-form/function" mapping, or sociophilology. The chapter serves to showcase this novel approach and takes the reader step-by-step through definitions, corpus annotations, applications and methodological decisions. A sociophilological study thus starts with corpus methods to establish what is statistically characteristic of "particular constellations of social categories", or, in other words, what elements make up the context of a communicative event. Key elements (local

contextual norms) are established with reference to "more general norms" (p.111, italics original), similarly to keywords in a corpus linguistic study. This stage requires sociopragmatic and semantic annotation in the corpus, which is labour-intensive, as the authors concede. Still, with the use of part-of-speech tagging and semantic tagging (CLAWS and USAS respectively; both tools developed at Lancaster University) it becomes possible to identify key communicative elements on the level of word, part of speech and semantic domain. To illustrate this method in practice, Archer and Culpeper explore the following asymmetrical dyads: female and male examinees vs examiners in trial proceedings, and mistresses and masters vs female and male servants in play-texts in the Sociopragmatic Corpus, a subsection of the Corpus of English Dialogues (1560-1760). The authors are able to highlight specific salient features of communication in each of these exchanges, e.g. the striking salience of first-person reference in the language of witnesses, which then differs contextually between females and males. It thus becomes possible to study contextual identity creation in a systematic and replicable manner.

In sum, Historical sociopragmatics contains original research and poses crucial methodological questions for the field of historical pragmatics. A clear construction of individual contributions, with plenty of signposting, makes the book easy to use with students and can showcase this new approach in a coherent and persuasive manner. Even though the research presented here was carried out several years ago for the initial publication in the journal, the methodological tools and software (e.g. semantic annotation for historical texts or VARD used to standardize varied spelling) are still being employed, developed and improved. In this volume, we witness the new subdiscipline of historical pragmatics at its inceptive stages and we are better equipped to observe its further growth. It is true that the chapters here come across as homogenous in terms of their temporal and textual span, typically dealing with the period between the late fifteenth and the eighteenth century and with correspondence (four chapters). This is a reflection of the availability of data and tools which have been developed for working with historical texts so far. Early modern printing and writing are less demanding in terms of their physical form for a researcher who attempts to create a digital repository or a corpus. They are relatively closer to the English of the present, which makes linguistic analyses easier. This is not to say that the projects recounted in the volume, or developing in the field of historical sociopragmatics in general, are easy to carry out. Rather, they work as a testing ground for more difficult applications, for instance to earlier medieval texts or genres other than letters, as the final chapter by Archer and Culpeper already shows.

The strength of the volume lies in its methodological rigour. The editor and all contributors pay utmost attention to the theoretical ramifications of the historical sociopragmatic approach, bringing the notion of context to the

fore of their studies. At the same time they are sensitive to the neighbouring disciplines and approaches, as well as recognize difficulties embedded in reconstructing context for historical texts, be it on the basis of various external materials, corpus methods or more qualitative means of recovering interconnected layers of meanings. How to define context and what tools to apply to relate it to language use is still open to tests and discussion, which ensures a lively future for historical sociopragmatics.

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