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Editorial. Clinical pragmatics: an emergentist perspective

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Clinical pragmatics has been a major growth area in clinical linguistics and speech and language pathology over the past two decades. Its scope is vast: if we define pragmatics in broad terms, there are no communicative disorders which do not involve pragmatic impairment at least to some degree (Perkins, 2003). Early work in the area tended to focus on the application of pragmatic theory in the analysis of pragmatic impairment (e.g. speech act theory (Hirst, LeDoux, & Stein, 1984), conversational implicature (Damico, 1985) and, more recently, relevance theory (Leinonen & Kerbel, 1999)) and on the development of pragmatic assessments, tests and profiles which included a theoretically eclectic range of items drawn from both pragmatic theory and elsewhere (e.g. Bishop, 1998; Penn, 1985; Prutting & Kirchner, 1983). In more recent years there has been an increasing interest in the neurological and cognitive bases of pragmatic impairment (e.g. Paradis, 1998; Perkins, 2000; Stemmer, 1999) and in the use of interactional approaches such as conversation analysis (e.g. Goodwin, 2003). This special issue of *Clinical Linguistics and Phonetics* draws on all of these areas but focuses on a particular aspect of pragmatic impairment which has often been overlooked – namely, that the behaviours we describe as pragmatic impairments are in fact the outcome of very varied and highly complex processes. This neglect is partly due to a common tendency to see pragmatics as a separate ‘level’ or even ‘module’ of language, on a par with syntax and semantics. Influenced on the one hand by speech act theory, with its distinction between language structure and communicative acts, and on the other hand by clinical populations who were either able to communicate well despite being linguistically impaired or else were poor communicators despite having good linguistic ability, clinicians assumed there to be a clear dissociation between linguistic and pragmatic competence. Although there is still considerable neurological evidence for a broadly modular view in terms of the lateralisation of linguistic and pragmatic functions, there is also compelling evidence for seeing pragmatic impairment as a more complex, non-unitary phenomenon. Non-modular, or ‘interactional’, views of pragmatic impairment have been influenced by

connectionist and functional models of linguistic and cognitive processing (e.g. Bates, Thal, & MacWhinney, 1991), by a growing awareness of the role played in pragmatics by cognitive capacities such as inference, theory of mind and executive function (Martin & McDonald, 2003), and by approaches such as Conversation Analysis (e.g. Damico, Oelschlaeger, & Simmons-Mackie, 1999) which focus on those features of pragmatics which can only be accounted for in terms of interpersonal, collaborative activity. All of these interactional approaches share a view of pragmatic impairment as ‘emergent’, or ‘epiphenomenal’ (Perkins, 1998), rather than as a stand-alone, monadic entity.

The general notion of emergence is discussed in the first paper in this issue, though a brief preliminary introduction may be helpful. ‘Emergentism’ – i.e. the conceptualisation of phenomena as emergent rather than inherently unitary – derives from a view of the world which pays specific attention to association and interaction, as opposed to dissociation and discreteness. This does not mean that it is necessarily anti-modular, but that rather than focus on entities and categories which simply appear distinct or are deemed so *a priori*, it looks instead at the possible influence of underlying factors which may have determined their make-up. Emergentism is thus inherently reductionist and ‘bottom-up’ in the sense that it sees apparently unitary phenomena as the complex outcome of interactions between subordinate elements. The primary focus, though, is on the interactions rather than the sub-elements. Emergent phenomena are not merely the sum of a set of parts, but the result of the complex relationships in play among the parts. Indeed, the parts may themselves be seen as emergent in their own right, the result of an iterative set of “interactions all the way down” (Elman et al., 1996: 319). The natural tendency in scientific enquiry to apply categorial labels to phenomena, and thereby implicitly to reify them as distinct entities, derives from our need to understand and represent things in such a way as to enable rational explanation. Such a process is inherent in modelling, analogy and metaphor. This is perfectly acceptable, as long as we do not lose sight of the fact that these constructs are our own creations which exist solely in the metaworlds of scientific theory, heuristic enquiry and folk explanation. They are unlikely to mirror the phenomena they seek to explain except indirectly.

The papers in this special issue all regard emergence as a key feature of pragmatic impairment. In particular, their authors agree that a) pragmatics is an emergent

consequence of interactions which take place both within and between individuals; b) the behaviours that we identify as pragmatic impairments represent an interactional solution to competing demands made on a limited or reduced set of linguistic/ cognitive/ neurological/ anatomical/ sensorimotor/ interpersonal resources; c) compensatory adaptive processes typically play an integral role in such behaviours. The last point is particularly important. Compensatory adaptation has been a common topic in research on communication disorders for a considerable time, but within an emergentist framework it becomes an integral feature, rather than an exceptional or incidental process. The common perspective of the papers does not mean that the articles are all cut from the same cloth in every respect. The authors include both linguists and clinicians, use a range of theoretical approaches and analytical methods and present data from a diverse set of communication disorders including aphasia (Ahlsén, Rhys), traumatic brain injury (Body and Parker), autism (Damico and Nelson), Alzheimer's disease (Müller and Guendouzi) and specific language impairment (Perkins).

The first paper (Perkins) introduces the notion of emergence and argues that emergentist accounts of pragmatics afford more thorough explanations of pragmatic impairment than approaches derived directly from pragmatic theory, and are therefore of more immediate use to clinicians. An emergentist model which encompasses both pragmatic ability and disability is outlined, and is illustrated using data from a child with specific language impairment. Jack Damico and Ryan Nelson examine two distinct types of atypical systematic behaviour in a 13 year old boy with autism using the analytical method of conversation analysis (CA). They show that these behaviours are in fact compensatory adaptations to underlying deficits in symbolic meaning-making capacity, and that their very atypicality may lead them to be perceived as communicative deficits in their own right. In their discussion they trace the notion of emergence in pragmatics back to earlier theoretical work by Vygotsky and Piaget. Catrin Rhys also makes use of CA to explain instances of compensatory adaptation, but in her case in the communication of an adult with Broca's aphasia. Focusing in particular on the use of gaze, she is able to show the complex way in which meaning may be distributed across different modalities – namely, how linguistic impairment triggers a redeployment of gaze which in turn results in a redeployment of gesture. A key feature is the way in which both participants collaborate in this reallocation of

semiotic resources. Richard Body and Mark Parker provide an analysis of topic repetitiveness in interactions with a man with traumatic brain injury. They show that what may superficially be labelled as pragmatically anomalous behaviour is actually the emergent consequence of underlying problems with executive function and memory in conjunction with the conversational strategies used by his interlocutors. They argue that repetitiveness can only be properly understood as a product of joint interpersonal activity. Elisabeth Ahlsén's paper compares the way in which two separate individuals with limited linguistic ability compensate for this in a role play. One has aphasia, and the other is a second-language learner. Each deploys a range of strategies with some success, and the re-division of labour between linguistic expression and gesture is evident in both. Although some of the strategies are attributable to the specific type of deficit, others appear to be result of unrelated individual differences. Nicole Müller and Jacki Guendouzi present conversational data from two individuals with dementia of the Alzheimer's type (DAT) and discuss ways in which systematic patterns in the data may be attributable to a combination of underlying factors including memory, linguistic, affective and sensorimotor problems, within a conversational setting. Once again, the joint contribution of both conversational participants is integral. The central theme in all the papers is the emergence of pragmatic impairments via a process of compensatory adaptation from the impact of linguistic, cognitive or sensorimotor deficits on interpersonal communication.

The articles published in this special issue are not unique. They are representative of research currently being carried out in several areas of clinical pragmatics, and it is not hard to think of other recently published work that could sit comfortably in a collection such as this – particularly that which takes the perspective of CA. However, by focusing explicitly on the *emergent* nature of pragmatic impairment, it is hoped that its centrality and significance may be better appreciated by researchers and clinicians working in all areas of clinical pragmatics and also beyond. Emergence is by no means unique to pragmatic impairment but is integral to all communication disorders.

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