

The evolution of pragmatic markers

Introduction

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1. Introduction

In the past twenty-five years or so, the linguistic study of “pragmatic markers” has exploded. For quite some time, the bulk of the research carried out within the field was centered on questions of synchronic relevance; fueled, however, by the upsurge of interest in historical linguistics, and in particular in the notion of grammaticalization, that general linguistics has experienced in the past decade and a half, scholars are now increasingly focusing on how pragmatic markers come into existence, and on how they evolve formally and functionally over time.

The purpose of this special issue is to give the reader a feel for the fascinating diversity of domains, approaches, and methodologies concerned with the evolution of pragmatic markers of various types, and, indeed, for the diversity of the category of pragmatic markers itself.

In what follows, we first propose a definition of the notion of pragmatic marker as such, and discuss some reasons why these items are of interest to historical linguistics. Secondly, we touch briefly on possible approaches to historical pragmatic research in general. Thirdly, we define and discuss a handful of theoretical notions that are usually considered to be of key importance in the study of the evolution of pragmatic markers (a fact which will be seen to be reflected in the papers below), viz. semantic change, grammaticalization, pragmaticalization, subjectivization, and bleaching, and we present the range of scientific domains that interact with historical pragmatics in the papers in the present collection. Fourthly, we present different methodologies that can be employed in the description of the evolution of markers, and show how they may complement one another. Finally, we summarize the contents of the individual papers, linking them to the various theoretical and methodological issues we have explored.

2. The notion of “pragmatic marker”: An attempt at definition

The term “pragmatic marker” is a cover term for a range of seemingly heterogeneous forms. According to Fraser (1996: 168), any signal that has an effect at the communicative, as opposed to the strictly propositional, level can be considered a pragmatic marker. Among these signals, he individuates several subclasses, one of which corresponds to discourse markers. The latter are specialized in giving indications about intra-discursive relations; in other words, they specify how the basic message is related to the foregoing discourse.

The papers collected here examine both types of markers. Three papers are focused on markers indicating various communicative stances on the part of the speaker, such as address forms or phatic signals. Jan Lindström and Camilla Wide are interested in the study of addressee-oriented particles of the *you know*-type, which function primarily at the interactional level. Such particles play a part in the management of turn-taking and the achievement of mutual understanding of the course of conversation. Both Marina Terkourafi and Sandi Michele de Oliveira are concerned with address forms whose function has changed. The former author observes a semantic change that is currently under way in the T/V system of Cypriot Greek, while the latter examines Portuguese speakers’ perception of the social impact conveyed by address forms. In this case, we have a form of historical evolution that could turn into a grammaticalization process if the semantic value of the items were affected.

The other three articles look at discourse markers *stricto sensu*. Among these forms, some have a linking function, indicating textual relations between discourse units, and others have a rhetorical function giving argumentative values to the discourse units in which they occur. Particles such as *par exemple*, *genre*, and *style* analyzed by Diane Vincent signal discourse relations situated within the semantic field of contrast and exemplification. The scalar particles analyzed by Jacqueline Visconti and approximative adverbs of the type analyzed by Salvador Pons Bordería and Scott A. Schwenter convey rhetorical indications assigning an argumentative orientation to the utterances in which they occur.

The grammaticalization processes at work in the creation of new meanings and functions are relevant for each of these different categories of markers. Indeed, they all present some form of semantic change, the origins of which vary noticeably in as much as the changes are due to code switching phenomena, the social perception of politeness, or the pragmatic trajectory of lexicalized items.

3. Historical pragmatics and neighboring fields

As other scholars have noted, there are two basic approaches to historical pragmatics. On the one hand, one may carry out essentially synchronic studies of pragmatic

(including discursive) structures and functions, and their corresponding means of expression in older texts. This is the approach that Jacobs and Jucker (1995: 11) refer to as “pragmaphilology”, while Brinton (2001: 139) calls it “historical discourse analysis proper”. The other approach is truly diachronic in nature and studies language change in a pragmatic perspective, and is referred to as “diachronic pragmatics” (Jacobs and Jucker 1995: 13) or “diachronically oriented discourse analysis/historical linguistics” (Brinton 2001: 140). Pragmatic markers may, in principle, be an object of study of either of these.

As the title of the present collection indicates, the six papers that follow all fall within the latter approach. Indeed, none of the authors represented here have chosen to consider historical stages of their object languages in isolation from subsequent ones; all are concerned with developments from past to present-day usage.

Studies in diachronic pragmatics may take their point of departure in a given (set of) linguistic form(s), proposing to chart diachronic changes in the meanings and functions of that (set of) form(s). Alternatively, research in diachronic pragmatics may choose to start from a (set of) pragmatic function(s), in order to investigate how this (set of) function(s) is expressed at different historical stages of the object language (Jacobs and Jucker 1995: 13).

The authors of the first four papers below (Vincent, Lindström and Wide, Visconti, Pons Bordería and Schwenter) have chosen the semasiological, or form-to-function, approach, investigating syntactic, semantic, and functional changes in specific particle-like expressions which fulfil discourse-marking and/or argumentative functions in the contemporary vernaculars. The fifth paper, by Terkourafi, on the other hand, chooses the onomasiological, or function-to-form, approach, showing how modern Cypriot Greek appears to be recruiting a new address pronoun (borrowed from Standard Greek) for the function of expressing respect towards one’s interlocutor. Her paper also has a semasiological component, however, in as much as the newly recruited form is already extant in the language with a different, literal, meaning. The sixth and final paper, by Oliveira, who is also concerned with address terms, is in a sense neutral between the two approaches, in as much as it proposes to describe neither actual uses of address terms, nor how specific functions of address are formally realized, but rather to account for changes in native-speaker perceptions of the parameters governing the correlation between forms and functions of address in modern Portuguese.

4. Key notions in the diachronic study of pragmatic markers

A variety of theoretical notions have been used to describe the diachronic pragmatic trajectory of the type of items under analysis. Among these notions, the one more commonly used is “grammaticalization”. Harris (1997) notes that the term has been used in at least two senses:

In one sense it refers to the process of becoming part of a grammar, of being entered into a grammar, or of changing in grammatical function. Since Meillet's (1912) introduction of the term, "grammaticalization" has been used also in a narrower sense, which has received much attention in the past two decades [...]. Meillet's sense of grammaticalization includes the process by which a word becomes a clitic, a clitic an affix, and an affix a synchronically unanalyzable part of another morpheme; it includes the processes of phonological reduction and semantic bleaching which often accompany the processes named above.

All the papers collected in this volume are concerned with grammaticalization phenomena in the broad sense of the term. Grammaticalization often goes hand in hand with a loss of semantic content that is identified with the notion of "bleaching". Such is the case for the pragmatic particles studied by Lindström and Wide, whose literal meanings have, to a large extent, been lost, and replaced by primarily contextualizing, pragmatic functions.

The notions of "pragmaticalization" and "subjectification" are used to allude to collateral consequences of semantic change. Visconti makes use of the latter term to describe the semantic trajectory of her scalar markers from "objective", "propositional" and "based in the external described situation", to "subjective", "procedural" and "based in the internal (evaluative, perceptual, cognitive) described situation" (cf. Traugott and Dasher 2002: 94–95; Traugott *fc*: 9; 19–20). Vincent bases her analysis of the non-exemplification uses of *par exemple* (those expressing exclamation and opposition) on the pragmaticalization and subjectification processes described by Traugott (1989: 51) in these terms:

The process of coding pragmatic implicatures is used in the speaker's attempt to regulate communication with others. [...] Pragmatic strengthening and relevance as I use the terms largely concern strategic negotiation of speaker-hearer interaction and, in that connection, articulation of speaker attitude.

Terkourafi, too, considers that subjectification processes are linked to the semantic changes that affect the V forms she analyses.

To sum up, all these different notions appear to constitute a sort of network in as much as each of them implies a certain reference to the others.

5. Studying the evolution of pragmatic markers: Coverage, data, and methodologies

There is currently, within historical pragmatics, a comparative lack of studies on languages other than English. Indeed, a brief glance at the table of contents of previous issues of the *Journal of Historical Pragmatics* will attest to that imbalance. The papers in this issue constitute a welcome contribution to the filling of the existing gap, as all of the analyses offered are based on data from six other European lan-

guages, viz. each of the four major Romance languages, Modern Greek, and Swedish (with some references to Icelandic).

Clearly, pragmatics and discourse analysis are fields that do not lend themselves to internal reconstruction the way “core linguistic” levels of description like phonology, morphology and syntax may.¹ As has been pointed out in several places (Jacobs and Jucker 1995, Brinton 2001, Jucker and Taavitsainen 2003), access to authentic diachronic data is therefore crucial to scholarly progress within historical pragmatics. For time depths of more than — at most — one hundred years (i.e. prior to the availability of recording equipment), such access is entirely dependent on the existence of written records of language use. This in turn implies that only relatively few extant languages can be studied from this perspective at all, and it therefore, in our view, becomes all the more important to investigate a variety of those languages that do possess a solid written tradition as thoroughly as possible in order to obtain a nuanced picture of possible descriptive and explanatory issues relevant to historical pragmatics.

The data used by the authors of the papers in the present issue not only illustrate the range of data sources that may be of relevance to the field, but they also reflect a variety of different theoretical approaches to pragmatic markers and to diachrony. Thus, Lindström and Wide, Visconti, and Pons Bordería and Schwenker take the most “classical” diachronically-oriented perspective, in that they investigate the long-range syntactic and semantic trajectories of specific linguistic expressions. Starting with the source expressions, and on the basis of a systematic examination of large diachronic corpora of naturally-occurring usages covering significant time spans, occasionally supported by secondary diachronic sources (dictionaries, older grammars), they propose precise descriptions of the synchronic semantic values of the expressions under study. Visconti, moreover, attempts to formulate general principles governing the changes undergone by the Italian scalar particles she investigates.

For anyone studying the evolution of pragmatic markers in this way, questions of genre and medium necessarily loom large, given that many (indeed, presumably most) markers occur first in the spoken language and only gradually make their way into written texts. At any stage of the evolution of a given marker, its frequency of occurrence and range of uses are thus likely to be greater in the spoken medium. Hence, depending on the nature of the marker(s) under investigation, it becomes more or less essential to use diachronic sources containing the most “speech-like” genres. The “oral” vs. “literary” character of a given text can be measured according to a variety of criteria (e.g. Biber 1988, Koch and Oesterreicher 1990, just to mention two proposals), but there appears to be widespread agreement that, where diachronic data are concerned, drama texts, personal correspondence, novelistic dialogue, and trial documents constitute valid sources for the investigation of more speech-like usage (cf. Jacobs and Jucker 1995: 8; Traugott and Dasher 2002: 47; Jucker and Taavitsainen 2003: 8).

With respect to the present collection of papers, the data problem is most acute for Lindström and Wide, who study markers that are explicitly addressee-oriented, whereas those markers studied by Visconti and by Pons Borderia and Schwenter are less overtly interactional in nature. Accordingly, the former authors restrict their data base, as far as possible, to letters and, especially, drama.

As for the remaining three papers, Vincent's approach is a variationist one, which combines the detailed study of three twentieth-century spoken language corpora, recorded at various intervals over a 25-year period, with evidence about older stages of the language gleaned from secondary diachronic sources. Such an approach is necessitated by the fact that she is concerned with usages that are specific to Quebec French, and that diachronic corpora representing older stages of that dialect, as opposed to European French, are scarce. The main thrust of her paper is to consider with the sociolinguist's eye the way individuals of various social subgroups appropriate forms that are in competition.

Terkourafi, who is studying a currently on-going change, uses only synchronic data in combination with native-speaker evaluations of these. In order to identify the changes in the semantics and function of the T/V system in Cypriot Greek, she takes a conversation-analytic perspective, which allows her to show that the current T/V usage is, in fact, realized in two distinct ways, sometimes as a switch to Standard Modern Greek and sometimes as an integral part of the Cypriot code. In other words, her paper highlights a semantic change due to borrowing and code switching.

In the context of historical pragmatics, Oliveira's data are the most unusual, in as much as her study of on-going changes in the use of address terms in European Portuguese is based entirely on native-speaker introspections, as expressed in their answers to two questionnaires distributed at a twenty-year interval. Her approach demonstrates a very different way of doing historical pragmatics, which allows her to make assumptions about the social-psychological aspects that determine the choices the speakers make when appropriating a given code.

Studies such as the latter two are not only of interest for the light they shed on the on-going changes themselves, but are also highly valuable because they allow us to identify parameters of change that are likely to be of general relevance, but which, in historical data *stricto sensu*, are either no longer recoverable, or only sparsely so, by inference from secondary sources such as older grammars and dictionaries.

These various approaches reflect different strategies of doing historical pragmatics that do not necessarily tend towards the same purpose. Lindström and Wide, Visconti, and Pons Borderia and Schwenter are looking to understand how the stratification of time modifies a word in its uses and semantics, whereas the other three aim to understand how speakers exploit a semantic change (Terkourafi), what sort of introspective eye they have on it (Oliveira) and how their usage of particular forms evolves to include non-standard uses (Vincent).

6. Presentation of the individual papers

A variety of criteria have been employed in determining the order of appearance of the six papers collected here. For one thing, we have chosen to place the four papers that take a semasiological approach to their objects of study before the two that either take an onomasiological or a form-function neutral approach. Further, the two groups of papers cohere internally along another dimension as well: the four semasiological papers all deal with particles or particle-like expressions, whereas the last two papers are both concerned with terms of address. Secondly, the six papers taken together form a curve, such that the issue starts and ends with two broad-brush studies (Vincent and Oliveira, respectively) considering larger and more heterogeneous groups of markers, while the two papers in the middle are where we find the most fine-grained semantic descriptions of individual markers (Visconti and Pons Bordería and Schwenter, respectively). Taken together, the six papers will also be seen to be concerned with decreasing time depths, the last two studies (Terkourafi and Oliveira) charting very recent, and thus far incomplete, changes.

The first three papers below are all concerned with groups or pairs of pragmatic markers as forming (part of) notional/functional fields of varying size.

In her article, “The journey of non-standard discourse markers in Québec French: networks based on exemplification”, Vincent analyzes the evolution of a set of discourse markers characteristic of spoken Quebec French, but which belong to non-standard registers, namely *par exemple*, *mettons*, *disons*, *comme*, *genre* and *style*. In her approach, Vincent combines grammaticalization theory with variationist methodology, arguing that discourse markers are ideal for observing variation and change, as they originate in different grammatical categories, often compete with many other forms, and are sensitive to trends and fads of usage. She shows how different markers, despite having completed different diachronic trajectories, can nevertheless end up constituting a single functional (or, as she calls it, “discursive”) field, and moreover that such fields may overlap with one another.

The article by Lindström and Wide, “Tracing the origins of a set of discourse particles. Swedish particles of the type ‘you know’” investigates the evolution of a group of addressee-oriented discourse markers, namely those formed by collocation of a verb of perception or understanding and a second-person pronoun, from Old to Modern Swedish. These collocations bear clear evidence of being grammaticalized in Swedish, which moreover provides an interesting case because the present-day markers are formally ambiguous with respect to sentence type and mood, and may, in principle, have either declarative or interrogative, and in one case also imperative, origins. The authors show that, as a matter of fact, despite their surface homogeneity, the group of markers as such is likely to have mixed syntactic sources. Their analysis suggests that researchers in historical pragmatics should be cautious when making assumptions about the origins of contemporary forms, even when these appear fairly transparent.

The article by Visconti, “On the origins of scalar particles in Italian”, provides a fine-grained analysis of two scalar particles in Italian, showing that the semantics of source constructions poses significant constraints on the direction of their subsequent development, and may even have predictive power. She also investigates the correlations between subjectification and syntactic change, arguing that the degree of relational syntactic capacity of an expression may be used as a direct method of quantifying the extent to which that expression has undergone subjectification. Finally, she explores the relationship between subjectification and grammaticalization, concluding that they are not distinct types of change, but that the former is rather a subtype of the latter, which has certain specific, and predictable, properties.

The fourth paper in the collection, “Polar meaning and ‘expletive’ negation in approximative adverbs: Spanish *por poco* (*no*)”, by Pons Bordería and Schwenter, limits itself to a detailed investigation of the synchronic semantics and diachronic trajectory of a single pragmatic marker, namely the Spanish approximative adverb *por poco*, with particular emphasis on its interaction with the negative particle *no*. The interest lies in the fact that while *por poco* alone has only negatively polar, proximal meaning in Modern Spanish, its negative variant *por poco no* has both a compositional, and hence positively polar, and a non-compositional, negatively polar, reading, such that, in the latter, there is no semantic difference between *por poco* and *por poco no*. It might therefore be tempting to analyze the negation as being expletive in this case. However, the diachronic analysis suggests that *no* is, in fact, polarity-reversing in all cases, and that it is rather the approximative itself which has become polysemous due to interaction with changes in the Spanish system of negative concord. As the authors point out, this result raises interesting questions about the reality of so-called expletive negation in other languages.

The last two papers are concerned with relatively recent changes in the use of pronominal address forms in Modern Cypriot Greek and Modern Portuguese, respectively. Indeed, in both papers, changes are being charted that are still in progress in those languages.

In her article, “Identity and meaning change: Aspects of T/V usage in Cyprus”, Terkourafi is concerned with the introduction into Cypriot Greek of second-person plural forms of address to convey honorification towards singular addressees. This is traditionally a feature of mainland standard Greek, the function of expressing politeness towards one’s interlocutor having instead been fulfilled in Cypriot Greek by first-person plural forms. While the use of the second-person plural with reference to a single addressee appears originally to have been an instance of code switching, the author presents phonological, morphosyntactic, and pragmatic evidence from attested interactions that this use is currently in the process of becoming an integral part of the Cypriot dialect, as a potential replacement for polite first-person plural forms. More generally, Terkourafi’s paper poses a three-way distinction between conventional, conventionalized, and standardized uses of linguistic forms, and argues that the need to operate with both of the latter two

suggests that semantic change in grammaticalization cannot be abrupt, as Nicolle (1998) suggests, but must rather be gradual.

Whereas the preceding papers all deal with empirically attested language use, the last article in this issue, “A retrospective on address in Portugal (1982–2002): Rethinking power and solidarity”, by Oliveira, addresses speakers’ perceptions of the norms governing the use of address terms in Portuguese. The system of address terms in that language is highly complex, and the choice of the forms that are felt to be appropriate in specific contexts appears to be governed by several interacting parameters. Over a period of twenty years, the author has repeatedly carried out questionnaire surveys to determine how the relative ranking of these parameters with respect to one another was perceived by two different groups of native speakers delimited by external sociological criteria. Her results suggest that the affective relationship between the interlocutors has gained in importance, in comparison to perceptions of “objective” social standing. The author argues, however, that this should not be interpreted simplistically as reflecting the diminishing relevance of the so-called “power axis” in favor of the “solidarity axis” (cf. Brown and Gilman 1972), but that a dynamic model of address term use is needed, which has room for varying degrees of both power and solidarity, and which can accommodate speakers’ continuous negotiation of context-specific roles and norms.

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Note

1. See, however, Traugott (1986) on the feasibility of doing internal semantic/pragmatic reconstruction.

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