

## *A bit of a challenge: Researching understatement in the history of English*

Historical pragmatics has meanwhile become a thriving field, but interestingly a major early impetus for pragmatics, viz. the Gricean concern with non-natural meaning and implicatures, is hardly visible there. There is no trace of figurative language in the only extant textbook (Jucker & Taavitsainen 2013), while the *Handbook of Historical Pragmatics* (Jucker & Taavitsainen 2010) contains only one relevant chapter (Nerlich's 'Metaphor and metonymy'). Apart from the obvious semantic interest, uses like understatement are also of interest for polite behaviour.

References to understatement (as well as litotes/meiosis) in historical research thus seem to be rare. Wierzbicka (2006) points out that not only is understatement a striking characteristic of British speakers from the outsider's point of view, but also that BrE has a wide range of forms at least for downtoning if not for outright understatement. Furthermore, she places the origin of this British predilection in the time from the seventeenth century onwards – which is interestingly in line with the shift towards a negative politeness culture (Jucker 2012). Somewhat in contrast to this, Harris (1988) claimed, with regard to epic poetry like *Beowulf*, that already the Anglo-Saxons preferred understatement to overstatement.

This paper is intended as an exploratory study of (i) understated uses in the history of English and (ii) possible methods of investigating them. Regarding (i), both pragmatic understatement in the service of mitigating illocutionary force and semantic understatement, i.e. saying less to mean more, will be considered here. As to methods, three avenues of research will be pursued here:

- The metalinguistic approach: What did people in the past think about understatement? The investigation here is based first on running keywords like *understatement*, *litotes* and *meiosis* through corpora and databases. Secondly, works on rhetoric, literature, style, and polite behaviour will be searched for treatments of the topic.
- The context or genre approach: Contexts which are potentially hospitable to understatement, either in its literary, humoristic, politeness or potentially other functions will be investigated by qualitative reading.
- The form-based approach: Selected features with a known tendency towards use with understatement functions will be investigated in corpora spanning the whole history of English. These may include various downtoners, constructions like *not un*-Adjective (e.g. Neuhaus 2018), or scalar word fields (e.g. *mishap*, *blunder*) (cf. Bolinger 1972).

### *References*

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