

Abstracts

Workshop: Historical Pragmatics and Letter-writing Practices

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Applying Variational Pragmatics Approaches to Historical Correspondence Data

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Variational pragmatics is a sub-discipline of pragmatics situated at the intersection between pragmatics and variationist sociolinguistics. Specifically, it investigates the influence of macro-social factors such as region, gender, age and socio-economic status on language use in action and interaction (Schneider and Barron 2008: 1). Since its inception in the mid-2000s, variational pragmatics has turned into a burgeoning field of research, with most studies focussing on regional pragmatic variation mostly using elicited data but increasingly also corpus data. Whereas the variational pragmatics paradigm has been applied to historical English data (e.g., Elswailer 2022; 2024; 2025), historical variational pragmatics is still in its infancy.

In this talk, I am going to outline how variational pragmatics approaches can be applied to historical correspondence data. In the first part of the talk, I will introduce the principles of present-day variational pragmatics. In a next step, I will demonstrate how these principles can be adapted to the analysis of historical letters by means of a brief case study of request sequences in 18th-century Scottish and English correspondence. The final part of my talk will address the challenges of implementing variational pragmatics approaches developed for present-day varieties to historical correspondence data. One of these challenges pertains to the comparability of the correspondence data. While historical letters typically offer rich metadata and are thus well suited to variational pragmatics analyses, letters contained in currently existing correspondence corpora, even when matching at the macro-structural level, are often not as comparable as they should ideally be, as they represent different sociopragmatic letter types (Bergs 2004).

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„Um baldige Antwort.“ – Analysing request strategies in 19th-century German personal correspondence

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Requests are a central feature of (historical) personal correspondence, serving both to maintain social ties and to address the practical needs of writers. In letters bridging the geographical distance between correspondents, they range from asking for replies or updates about events at home, to requesting photographs, material goods such as food or clothing, or even money. In formulating requests, especially those involving a high degree of imposition, writers had to mitigate potential face-threats towards their addressees (e.g., Brown & Levinson 1987; Ruytenbeek 2021), for instance through the use of conventionally indirect strategies or internal modification (Ackermann 2023).

Drawing on a corpus of over 2,000 19th- and early 20th-century German letters, this talk explores pragmatic variation in requests, bringing together – for the first time – large parts of three key corpora of German correspondence from this period: letters by emigrants to the United States (e.g., Elspaß 2005), soldiers (Neumann 2019), and psychiatric patients (CoPaDocs, Schiegg 2022). These letters represent non-official correspondence between family members, friends, and partners, and provide access to a socially and regionally diverse group of writers.

Alongside a diachronic perspective, the talk examines whether factors such as writers' writing experience, gender, and micro-social variables like social distance influenced direct and indirect request strategies and internal modification. To this end, I attempt to adopt a “micro-analytic bottom-up approach” (Kohnen 2008). Accordingly, particular attention is paid to the methodological challenges that inevitably arise when investigating pragmatic variation in historical letter corpora, including the identification of speech acts and the interpretation of indirect or ambiguous forms.

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Power, historical pragmatics and the business of letter-writing from the 18thc to the 20thc.

Susan Fitzmaurice (The University of Sheffield)

‘Every historical period defines a characteristic relationship to its letter-writing environment and practices; a rigorous historicization, in fact, constitutes the soundest base on which ...research within the field of epistolary studies should be built’ (Schneider, 2008: 287). Although Gary Schneider is talking about the culture of epistolarity in early modern England, I’d suggest that it is an apt observation on the critical role of historical factors in permitting us to conduct historical pragmatic analysis of letter-writing, whatever the period.

The use of the letter to get things done is of particular interest for this workshop: to petition or apply to authorities, to conduct diplomacy, to seek patronage or preferment, to administer systems and manage others, and to do business deals. The common factor in these letter-writing genres is the asymmetrical power structures that prevail, regardless of historical milieu. We’ll examine the sociopragmatic realisation of this asymmetry in different sociohistorical contexts and domains and the consequences for the historical pragmatic analysis of letters.

Taking particular cases from my own research over the past several decades as illustration, I consider how history accommodates particular pragmatic approaches to letter-writing. On the way, we’ll interrogate how such frameworks might be shaped and adapted to better accommodate the complex and contingent contexts in which such letter writing practices operated in the past.

References:

Schneider, Gary. 2008. *The Culture of Epistolarity: Vernacular letters and letter-writing in Early Modern England, 1500-1700*. Delaware: University of Delaware Press.

The pragmatics of polite requests in Scottish pauper letters, 1750-1910

Hester Groot and Mo Gordon (Leiden University)

Pauper letters, written by poor individuals to request poor relief, have been gaining increasing attention in recent years as a promising source of language from below (see e.g. Sokoll 2001; Auer & Fairman 2013). From a pragmatic perspective, these letters are particularly interesting since they were typically produced in contexts of heightened social hierarchy and stratification. The power imbalance inherent to these letters as a genre, which needed to be addressed and upheld as mandated by contemporaneous sociocultural beliefs, makes politeness work in pauper letters a complex and nuanced practice that can yield rich pragmatic analysis. However, these very sociohistorical conditions are difficult to properly capture through present-day pragmatic frameworks. Factors such as social stratification and hierarchy, genre conventions, and the formulaicity of this quasi-familiar epistolary genre were influential in shaping the politeness practices found within pauper letters, but capturing them on a quantifiable scale is complex.

In this talk, we will use a case study on request strategies to delve into the pragmatic nuances of the Corpus of Scottish Pauper Petitions (ScotPP), with a focus on the challenges and opportunities presented by sociohistorical conditions, genre conventions and the communicative intent behind pauper letters. We will present a number of characteristics of the politeness work carried out within these pauper letters, illustrating how approaches to politeness within this subgenre of letters develop over time, and how those approaches differ from the contemporary frameworks of politeness of e.g. Brown & Levinson (1987) around which modern pragmatic schools of thought are built. In doing so, we will highlight the limitations and possibilities of contemporary pragmatic frameworks in this contextually specific historical setting.

References:

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