PRAGREV
Pragmatics.Reviews

Pragmatic approaches to languages in contrast:

Expansion or recycling?

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Karin Ajmer. 2011. *Contrastive Pragmatics*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

1. General overview

In their series *Benjamins Current Topics*, John Benjamins publishers re-edit special issues of John Benjamins published journals. *Contrastive Pragmatics* is such a re-edition of the *Languages in Contrast* special issue 9.1 (2009) and contains contributions originally presented as a panel at the 10th IPrA conference in Gothenburg, Sweden, in 2007. The individual contributions are all quite valuable, although a number of objections can be made regarding the scope of research and the lack of updated information for the book publication that remain problematic (see point 3 below).

2. Individual contributions

The introduction explains the origin of the special issue from a conference panel of 2007, gives an overview over the volume and introduces the individual chapters. The description of the scope of the volume appears a tad overgenerous, the "strong focus […] on regional (especially dialectal) variation ('variational pragmatics' […])" promised in the introduction (1), for example is really nowhere to be seen in the volume, and it turns out that the index entry 'variational pragmatics' only refers to the introduction and that the most important recent book on variational pragmatics (Schneider and Barron 2008) is only referred to once in the volume, again in the list of references to its introduction.

2.1. Modality and ENGAGEMENT in British and German political interviews

Based on Martin and White's systemic linguistics-oriented appraisal framework (Martin and White 2005), Annette Becker studies intersubjective positioning of British and German political journalists in election-night interviews with politicians. The results of her detailed analysis show that in spite of the large diversity of linguistic resources the interviewers use, at least in this specific genre the dimensions of pragmatic differences between British English and German as observed by House (1996), can be detected.

2.2. The intersubjective function of modal adverbs

In her short chapter, Agnès Celle compares French and English evidential or identificative modal adverbs such as *évidemment / obviously* and *apparemment / apparently* in the French and English editions of *Le Monde Diplomatique*. She concludes convincingly that while those adverbs establish a pragmatic relation in both languages, they modify assertion in different

ways in each language. French identificatives imply an (unspecified) viewpoint other than the speaker's and at the same time signal that the speaker distances themselves somewhat from that viewpoint. This latter characteristic is not shared by English identificatives; apart from that, in contrast to French identificatives, they suggest the addressee's viewpoint as a basis. Modal adverbs also function within a language specific macro-organisation of discourse, with tense cooperating in the pragmatic function of modal adverbs in very different ways in both languages.

2.3. Intersubjective positioning in French and English

Bart Defrancq and Bernard De Clerck show in their chapter that English *to depend* as well as French *dépendre*, and in particular the forms *it depends*, respectively *ça dépend,* are undergoing a grammaticalisation toward pragmatic markers of intersubjective positioning. The corpus-based analysis is sound and the arguments are stringent. Unfortunately, the diachronic statement "French 'dépendre' seems to be slightly more advanced on the path to discourse marker status" (p. 68) is not convincingly supported by any diachronic data. Also, though the French corpus the authors use is the specifically Belgian French one collected in the "Valibel" research centre at the University of Louvain, no attempt at discussing possible diatopic variation within French is made.

The chapter closes with a bit of a cliffhanger, the authors stating that further research would be needed, amongst others into equivalent verbs in other languages such as Dutch. It would have been nice if there were a reference to a publication co-authored by one of the chapter authors that does just that (Defrancq and De Sutter 2010). But there isn't one.

2.4. Challenges in contrast

Using a function-to-form approach, Anita Fetzer analyses discursive challenges in British and German political interviews after a discussion of the pragmatic function of challenge and its linguistic forms in British English and German. In both languages, interlocutors within the genre prefer challenging the context of another interlocutor's contribution rather than challenging its force or presuppositions, although the British corpus shows more variation in this respect. The face threatening potential of challenges is mitigated by a high frequency of cognitive verbs and more formulaic language in the British corpus, while the German data show higher frequencies of both indirectly formulated challenges and elliptical structures.

2.5. Interruption in advanced learner French

In what the author herself refers to as an "exploratory study" in the abstract (p. 97), Marie-Noëlle Guillot attempts a quantitative study of interruptions in English and French by L1 and

advanced L2 speakers of both languages. Guillot bases her qualitative categories of interruptions on Julia Goldberg's (1990) type of schemes for interruptions. Of course, Goldberg, as well as most of the theoretical literature the author builds her study on, developed her model with Anglo-Saxon culture and English language as the default. Guillot's references to English-French contrastive studies are restricted to two authors, neither of whom is Bert Peeters, whose seminal study of 2000 would have been an important point of reference for theory, and one of whom is only referred to with a 1993 article instead of her recent book (Béal 2010) which would have been very close to the topic. Consequently, the study lacks a convincing theoretical foundation and while the conclusions are interesting, the data, particularly in conjunction with the somewhat Anglocentric scheme used to categorise interruptions do not, in my opinion, fully support the interpretation given in the conclusions, that there is a

> tendency for L2 French subjects to orient to non-affiliative interruptive acts as acts of competition and conflict, as is stereotypically associated with native French, whereas L1 French subjects tend to orient to them as acts of cooperation in the build-up of argument (p. 117).

2.6. Closeness and distance

The first of two diachronic studies concluding the volume is Martin Luginbühl's chapter on the development of the TV news genre on Swiss German public TV as compared with the US news program *CBS Evening News* from 1968 to 2005. It sits a bit uneasily within the scope of the other chapters, its methodology and background being closer to media studies than to linguistic pragmatics. The study is interesting in its demonstration of how the Swiss program changed its format over time to become more similar to the American news program format, without ever entirely giving up its "Swiss" character. The chapter could have been quite relevant for contrastive pragmatics (even for cross-varietal pragmatics across the German speaking area, if German and Austrian TV news programs had been included). Unfortunately, the basic concepts of *closeness* and *distance* taken from media theory (p. 126) do not become linguistic concepts just by referring to linguistic texts that use the same terms (p. 137), since of course there is a whole different terminological history of those terms in linguistics. Another unfortunate use of terminology is the insistence on using the rather literal translation "text type" for what has become known as *Textsorte/Texttyp* in the German tradition of text linguistics, but what in the English tradition is much better known under the term of 'genre'. Thus, the index points to *genre* and *text type* under two separate entries, which somewhat defeats its purpose of linking similar topics in different chapters.

2.7. The nominative and infinitive in English and Dutch

The last chapter is a thorough and convincing diachronic study of a structure that many European languages took over from Latin, the "nominative and infinitive" (NCI, *nominativus cum infinitivo*). Thinking outside the box of the traditional discussion of the NCI as a mere passive alternative, Dirk Noël and Timothy Colleman distinguish three types of the NCI (a passive, a descriptive and an evidential NCI) and discuss the development of those types in both English and Dutch from the 17th to the 20th century. In both languages, NCI patterns appear to have reached the peak of their relative frequency in the 18th century. However, while Dutch NCI constructions show a sharp decline after that peak period, a similar decline of English NCI constructions after the 18th century only occurred in fictional literature, while such structures properly came into their own as evidential NCIs in English academic and journalistic texts from then on. I probably enjoyed reading this very well researched and argued chapter with its comparative as well as diachronic dimensions most of all chapters in the book. The enjoyment could only have been any greater if the authors had not apparently neglected to update the reference list from their 2007 conference paper, as shown by a journal article published in 2007 which is still marked "to appear" in their list of references (p. 177).

3. Conclusion and points of criticism

The individual contributions in this volume are intellectually stimulating and interesting. However, in spite of the rather general volume title *Contrastive Pragmatics,* they represent a quite narrow choice of only four Western European languages, contrasted in pairs in each chapter (and of whom furthermore Dutch is only studied in one of the chapters), a restricted field of pragmatics (e.g., ignoring important and cross-linguistically varied micro-pragmatic phenomena such as *address*), and, what is most disturbing for a 2011 publication, the state of research in contrastive pragmatics of ca. 2007, only here and there updated for the 2009 publication of the *Languages in Contrast* special issue. For the 2011 volume, all that appears to have been further updated are the individual authors' post-2009 publications in the references sections of their respective chapters. Even references to such publications in the text or in endnotes have been left without a matching update (e.g. on pp. 35, 60 and 135). The authors also neglected to correct obvious errors such as mistyped titles in reference lists (e.g. p. 95), mix-ups in references to examples (e.g. p. 42) and some idiosyncratic non-native English (such as the often rather German commas and hyphenation in Fetzer's chapter and the similarly quite German syntax in Luginbühl's).

While it is easy to see the benefit of recycling a hardly updated version of the 2009 special issue of *Languages in Contrast* for the publisher, the editor and the contributors, I am not

entirely sure that the benefit of this particular form of recycling for the reading public is immediately apparent. After all, the special issue mentioned continues to be available both in print and electronic forms.

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His research interests include: pragmatics, terms of address