

Variational pragmatics, pragmatic variation and im/politeness

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Verbal behaviour and perceptions of im/politeness vary not only across languages, but also across varieties of the same language. Speakers sharing a language often use it in markedly different ways, and notions of what is considered polite or impolite differ between communities and social groups (Schneider & Placencia 2017). This particular type of intra-lingual pragmatic variation is the focus of variational pragmatics. Variational pragmatics is aimed at establishing empirically and systematically recurrent patterns of language use and their distribution in geographical and social space (Barron 2017). Such patterns are interpreted as reflections of norms and expectations, stored in the long-term memory as cultural models which guide perceptions and productions in interaction (Schneider 2012).

In the present talk, the original framework of variational pragmatics is briefly summarized, in which levels of analysis and social factors effecting variation are specified (Schneider & Barron 2008); later modifications and extensions of the framework are also outlined (e.g. Félix-Brasdefer & Koike 2012, Nilsson et al. 2018). Regarding the relevant social factors, it is important to note that neither an essentialist nor a constructionist approach is adopted. Instead, an emic first-order approach is advocated in which social factors are treated as displayed and perceived identities (Haugh & Schneider 2012). Methodological issues are also discussed, including a number of methodological innovations (Schneider 2010, forthc.).

Responses to thanks in English-speaking communities serve as an example to demonstrate the theoretical and methodological questions addressed, most notably the scope of variation, the relevant pragmatic variables, and salient patterns of language behaviour reflecting notions of appropriateness (cf. Schneider 2005, Rüegg 2014, Bieswanger 2015, Dinkin 2018, Schröder & Schneider in press). Further examples are taken from studies of phatic discourse, specifically in initial encounters, based on data collected by employing various experimental and observational methods (Schneider 2008, Haugh & Carbaugh 2015, Schneider & Schröder forthc.). The overarching aim of variational pragmatics is the development of a theory of pragmatic variation which accounts for intergroup and interpersonal differences in language use and interactional behaviour.