Current Trends in Diachronic Semantics and Pragmatics

Edited by
Maj-Britt Mosegaard Hansen
Jacqueline Visconti
CURRENT TRENDS IN DIACHRONIC SEMANTICS AND PRAGMATICS
STUDIES IN PRAGMATICS

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LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

Silvia Adler, University of Haifa, Haifa, Israel
Maria Asnes, Bar Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Israel
Carla Bazzanella, Università degli Studi, Turin, Italy
Kate Beeching, University of the West of England, Bristol, UK
Ulrich Detges, Institute for Romance Philology, University of Munich, Germany
Gabriele Diewald, Leibniz Universität Hannover, Germany
Regine Eckardt, University of Göttingen, Göttingen, Germany
Maria Estellés, Universidad de Valencia, Spain
Bethwyn Evans, Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, Leipzig, Germany
Elke Gehweiler, Freie Universität Berlin, Germany
Maj-Britt Mosegaard Hansen, The University of Manchester, UK
Eva Skafte Jensen, Roskilde University, Roskilde, Denmark
Marijana Kresic, University of Zadar, Croatia
Johanna Miecznikowski, Università della Svizzera italiana, Lugano, Switzerland
Magdalena Romera, Universidad de las Islas Baleares, Palma de Mallorca, Baleares, Spain
Elena Smirnova, Leibniz Universität Hannover, Germany
Mario Squartini, Università di Torino, Torino, Italy
Katerina Stathi, Freie Universität Berlin, Germany
Jacqueline Visconti, University of Genova, Italy
Richard Waltereit, Newcastle University, UK
1. THE ROLE OF PRAGMATIC INFERENCE IN MEANING CHANGE

Research on semantic change has gained considerable momentum from the idea that pragmatic factors are a driving force in the process. The idea, first suggested by Grice (1989 [1975]: 39), that “it may not be impossible for what starts life, so to speak, as a conversational implicature to become conventionalized”, was systematized in Traugott’s Invited Inferencing Theory of Semantic Change (IITSC) (Traugott, 1999; Traugott and Dasher, 2002). More precisely, semantic change is seen as “arising out of the pragmatic uses to which speakers or writers and addressees or readers put language, and most especially out of the preferred strategies that speakers/writers use in communicating with addressees” (Traugott and Dasher, 2002: xi). The model, which is based on Levinson’s theory of generalized conversational implicature (GCIs) (Levinson, 2000), in particular on the distinction between “coded”, “utterance-type” and “utterance-token” levels of meaning (Levinson, 1995), is represented in Figure 1.1 (from Traugott and Dasher, 2002: 38).

In this model, assuming that the meaning $M_1$ of a lexeme $L$ is linked to the conceptual structure $C_a$ at stage I, innovation may be produced by speakers/writers employing $L$ in a particular, “utterance-token”, use. Should such a use spread to more contexts and become salient in the community, it acquires the status of a “generalized invited inference” and may eventually become semanticized as a new coded meaning $M_2$ for $L$ at stage II.

The IITSC arose in the context of reflection on replicated cross-linguistic regularities in semantic change, which the theory explained by assuming that they are the outcome of similar cognitive and communicative processes across languages. This has a number of consequences,
salient among which is the idea that meanings can be predicted to become increasingly pragmatic, procedural, and metatextual. More specifically, a significant number of observed meaning changes appear to instantiate the following clines, referred to as “semantic–pragmatic tendencies”:

(i) truth-conditional > non-truth-conditional;
(ii) content > content/procedural > procedural;
(iii) scope-within-proposition > scope-over-proposition > scope-over-discourse;
(iv) non-subjective > subjective > intersubjective (Traugott and Dasher, 2002: 40).\(^1\)

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\(^1\) These clines represent a revision of three, by now very well known, tendencies posited in Traugott (1989: 34–35), viz. (I) Meanings based in the external described situation > meanings based in the internal (evaluative/perceptual/cognitive) described situation; (II) Meanings based in the external or internal described situation > meanings based in the textual and metalinguistic situation; (III) Meanings tend to become increasingly based in the speaker’s subjective belief state/attitude toward the proposition.
Most recent discussions in the fields of diachronic semantics and pragmatics revolve, as far as we can tell, around refining this paradigm. In particular, alternative proposals center on four key issues, which we shall elaborate on in the remainder of this introduction, highlighting the contribution made by the present volume.

1.1. What pragmatic entities are involved?

The first issue concerns the nature and likely sequence of the pragmatic entities involved in the model, for example, the role of generalized versus particularized conversational implicatures (PCIs) in language change and their relationship to the issues of propagation and actualization. In fact, reflection on diachronic models for change has led to renewed discussion of the characteristics of key pragmatic notions, such as that of implicature.

Thus, the three-stage model outlined in the IITSC, whereby semantic change would proceed from PCI via GCI to coded meaning, has been criticized, for instance, by Hansen and Waltereit (2006: 248), in whose opinion:

\[
\text{in formulating their model of semantic change, Levinson (1995, 2000) as well as Traugott and Dasher (2002) redefine the notion of GCIs. From being a purely pragmatic phenomenon, GCIs, as understood in connection with the macro-sequence under review, become something more akin to the phenomena of either propagation or actualization of specific linguistic changes.}
\]

The authors present an alternative proposal, grounded in the assumption that PCIs are “prototypically in the communicative foreground of messages, whereas generalized conversational implicatures are prototypically backgrounded” (Hansen and Waltereit, 2006: 235). The sequence PCI → GCI → coded meaning is argued to be rare, most cases of semantic change being either instances of a PCI semanticizing directly (PCI → coded meaning) or of a GCI semanticizing, but only after having being foregrounded as a PCI (GCI → PCI → coded meaning). Indeed, the necessity of an intermediate GCI stage would seem to simply preclude semantic change based on metaphor, for the latter relies, in the Gricean view, on ostensive flouting of the quality maxim, a maxim which according to Levinson (2000: 74) cannot generate GCIs at all. In those cases where a PCI does turn into a GCI, it is, in fact, likely that it will not become fully semanticized (PCI → CGI → *coded meaning). In other words, the role of the different types of implicature in meaning change is a good deal more nuanced than the IITSC model would suggest.

The issue of the nature of the pragmatic entities involved in change is addressed from a different angle by Schwenter and Waltereit (forthcoming). These authors provide an outline of the evolution of the additive particle too and some of its counterparts in Spanish and German, to show how counter-argumentative uses of the particle in novel discourse contexts can override the additive presupposition normally associated with such particles. Accommodating that
presupposition becomes too costly and leads to reanalyzing the *too* element as a new form-function pairing. The initial diachronic examples in bridging contexts are plausibly interpretable as conveying the additive meaning of *too*, but the adversative properties of the dialogal discourse context appear to have led hearers to understand *too* as expressing a new, rhetorically strategic meaning with strong counter-argumentative force.

In a similar vein, Eckardt (this volume) proposes that language change may be triggered, not just by implicatures, but also by unwarranted presuppositions. She shows that, antedating the emergence of the contemporary senses of certain words, one finds uses of those words in which their presuppositions are violated, in the sense that they contradict common world knowledge. Eckardt refers to such instances as “little pragmatic accidents”. Many such “accidents” may best be repaired by a listener who hypothesizes that the problematic item is in fact being used in a new sense. According to this author, such utterances create a pragmatic overload: under a conservative interpretation, they will trigger presuppositions that the listener cannot accommodate because they do not make sense. Thus, the listener can either (a) be uncharitable and refuse to interpret the utterance at all, (b) face the pragmatic overload and attempt to reconceptualize the world such that the presupposition is consistent, or (c) hypothesize a new meaning for parts of the utterance, including the item that gave rise to the problematic presupposition.

Proposals such as these raise the further issue of the role and scope of the Uniformitarian Principle in diachronic semantics and pragmatics. Within the field of linguistics, the Uniformitarian Principle consists in the assumption that the processes underlying instances of language change in the past were essentially the same as those that can be seen to operate today (e.g., Labov, 1994: 21). Among the contributors to the present volume, Eckardt explicitly argues that a virtue of her analysis is its conformity with the Uniformitarian Principle, and many of the remaining contributors tacitly rely on that principle in their analyses.

However, while the principle can probably be uncontroversially applied in the study of phonological change, for instance, given that the physiological properties of speech have not changed, it becomes more problematic in the analysis of meaning change; for, as a number of scholars have argued, speech acts and events, norms of politeness, principles of text structure, and conversational routines are by no means directly comparable neither across contemporary cultures nor across different historical stages of a given culture or society (e.g., Wierzbicka, 1991, 2006; Jacobs and Jucker, 1995; Arnovick, 1999; Scollon and Scollon, 2001). To the extent that this is true, how can we be justified in assuming that patterns of inference, and hence the fundamental pragmatic entities underlying them, such as presuppositions and implicatures, were similar to those that we take to be operative in contemporary Western discourse? In those cases where the nature of both an older “source” meaning and a newer “target” meaning of a given linguistic item or construction is well established, it seems legitimate to suppose that the motivations for and mechanisms of extension/change which would most plausibly get us from source to target according to contemporary patterns of inference are likely to have been likewise instrumental in
bringing about the change in the past. As soon as reconstruction is involved to a more significant extent, we are on shakier ground, however.

For this reason, as current theorizing about diachronic semantics and pragmatics, as exemplified by the contributions to this volume, develops and is refined, there can be little doubt that the field would benefit from being informed to a greater extent by insights from “pragmaphilology” (Jacobs and Jucker, 1995) or “historical discourse analysis proper” (Brinton, 2001), that is, the synchronic study of discourse–pragmatic structures and functions and their corresponding means of expression in older texts. At present, however, there appears to be relatively little overlap among practitioners of the two disciplines.

1.2. What are the respective roles of the speaker and the hearer?

A second major issue in diachronic semantics and pragmatics concerns the redefinition of the respective roles of speakers/writers and addressees/readers in the process of innovation. In particular, a set of proposals criticizes the speaker-based nature of the IITSC approach. As noted by Traugott (1999: 95):

Although it recognizes the importance of guiding addresses to an interpretation […] nevertheless the assumption of IITSC is that the speaker/writer does most of the work of innovation, not the hearer/reader. The idea is that the speaker/writer tries out a new use exploiting available implicatures. If the innovative use succeeds, the hearer/reader will interpret the intention correctly, and possibly experiment in similar ways in producing speech/writing. But rarely does the act of interpretation itself lead directly to innovation.

Although this is to some extent a classic chicken-and-egg problem, Traugott’s assumption has been challenged by several scholars, among whom the authors of the two parallel studies already mentioned above, both proposing a model of semantic change based on the diachronically less used notion of presupposition.

In the view of both Schwenter and Waltereit (forthcoming) and Eckardt (this volume), hearers who are unable or unwilling to accommodate presuppositions assume a novel interpretation of a former presupposition trigger and eventually pass this new interpretation on to other people, thereby changing the language. According to Schwenter and Waltereit, a hearer who is confronted with an utterance and assigns an interpretation to it that deviates from that utterance’s literal meaning has, in principle, two options: (i) assume that regular pragmatic operations, such as

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2 Even this cannot be taken for granted, however: when scholars rely on their semantic–pragmatic intuitions, competing mechanisms may sometimes be invoked with equal probability to account for one and the same instance of change.
conversational inference and the accommodation of presuppositions, mediate between the literal meaning and the chosen nonliteral interpretation; (ii) assume a novel conventional meaning for some element of that utterance. In that case, fewer pragmatic computations, and/or less costly ones, may be required, since there is no need anymore for them to mediate between the chosen interpretation and the traditional (previous) conventional meaning. If a hearer chooses (ii) and uses the novel form-meaning pairing in his/her own discourse, the language will have changed.

Assuming that interpretive efforts by the listener are at the heart of “Avoid-Pragmatic-Overload”-induced changes, Eckardt (this volume) moreover suggests a hearer-driven conception of the trend toward subjectification. Earlier approaches, she argues, leave open the question whether the subjective element is pressed into an utterance as a kind of Sprachnot phenomenon by the speaker or enters the meaning of words by an interpretive effort of the listener. Eckardt suggests that, in at least some cases, the subjective element enters the language via the interpretive efforts of the listener, not because

listeners are constantly searching to see the speaker’s soul through his utterances, but because in the case of a truly senseless utterance the charitable listener will try to make at least some sense of that utterance. It is much more implausible to perceive subjectification as a speaker-driven process. Uttering incoherent sentences and hoping that the listener will grab your message does not seem a rational communicative strategy (Eckardt, this volume).

Hansen (2008: 76) likewise argues that the reanalyses performed by hearers may be unintended by speakers, and that they may even, on some occasions, result from clear misunderstandings on the hearer’s part. In particular, theories that attribute a central role to the metonymical processes cannot afford to ignore this possibility, in so far as literal and metonymical meanings will often be mutually compatible. To take a simple example, if the change from Latin TESTIMONIUM (testimony) > French témoïn (witness) came about as suggested by Koch (2004: 16f), namely via the (necessary) metonymical link between the existence of testimony and that of a witness, in contexts where utterances such as (1) would be produced, then it is unlikely that it would have been speaker driven:

(1) [Judge:] *Audiamus testimonium proximum!*
   ‘Let’s hear the next piece of testimony!’

Even more obviously, while the change responsible for the two currently competing meanings of the Danish noun bjørnetjeneste (literally ‘bear favor’), ‘a favor that has unintended negative results’ > ‘a really big favor’, can be attributed to the non-transparency of that noun, and hence its potential ambiguity in contexts such as (2), it is highly implausible that speakers familiar with the original, negatively loaded, meaning could be held responsible for the rise of the innovative, positively loaded, interpretation. In this case, there can be little doubt that the process must have
been driven by hearers who were unfamiliar with the intended meaning and who were therefore forced to make conjectures:

(2) Peter overtalte chefen til at give mig opgaven. Det var sørme en bjornetjeneste!

Literally: ‘Peter persuaded the boss to give me the task. That was really a bear-favor!’

1.3. In what types of context does semantic–pragmatic change take place?

The third rapidly evolving area of discussion concerns the characterization of the contexts in which inferencing takes place. Invited inferencing and context-induced reinterpretation both assume pragmatic polysemy and ambiguity. In this respect a set of proposals have been advanced in the literature about such ambiguous contexts. Heine (2002: 86), for instance, proposes a series of four stages in semasiological change, and sees the pivotal stage as constituted by what he refers to as “bridging contexts”, that is, contexts where the use of a given expression allows, in addition to its conventional meaning, an inference to an innovative meaning (see also Evans and Wilkins, 2000: 549; Enfield, 2005: 318).3 Putting more emphasis on structural constraints, Diewald (2002, 2006) proposes that ambiguity and structural factors accumulate in one context, which she calls a “critical context”.

An innovative element in the reflection on this topic has been the increasing awareness of the importance of taking interactional factors into account when defining the contexts for change, for instance, dialogic and contesting contexts evoking multiple viewpoints, turn-taking, and other interactional moves.

The refinement of context characterization is a main thread throughout the papers in this volume. Such a refinement is operated at multiple levels: from linguistic features (co-text) to cognitive and/or interactional properties (context) to features of specific genres influencing semantic change (discourse tradition). At the linguistic level, Evans’, Jensen’s, and Romera’s papers offer fine-grained analyses of the formal and functional co-textual variables to which changes can be attributed. Thus, a detailed reconstruction of the change from aspect/mood marker to discourse particle in Morovo is related by Evans to the morphosyntactic and semantic characteristics of the construction. In Jensen’s paper, the semantics of predicates is shown to interact with properties of specific slots in a topological model of Danish sentences, thereby affecting the development of the affirmative markers godt and vel; while in Romera’s contribution, a set of formal and functional variables are shown to contribute to the evolution of Spanish es que.

3 Whereas Heine (2002) assumes that the innovative (target) meaning is the intended one, Hansen (2008: 63) proposes that it is still backgrounded at this stage, and only foregrounded when the subsequent “switch-context” stage is reached.
The second level, that of cognition and interaction, which is not always given prominence in diachronic semantics and pragmatics studies, is central to many papers in the present volume: Hansen draws attention to what she calls “Janus-faced contexts”, that is, contexts in which the cognitive contents of a negated clause are oriented simultaneously to previous and to upcoming discourse, and proposes that such contexts are crucial to the grammaticalization of bipartite sentence negation in French. Paradigmatic associations (also treated by Diewald et al. and Jensen) are argued to have predictive value by Estellès, who shows how paradigmatic pressures can lead to change. Bazzanella and Miecznikowski analyze how Italian allora has evolved from expressing referential (temporal) meaning to fulfilling a range of inferential functions, and argue that the driving forces in these changes should be sought among properties of spoken language in interaction (e.g., planning, recipient designed, discourse structuring) as well as among properties of co-constructed argumentational discourse (e.g., recurrent schemas of reasoning; the need to attribute conclusions and premises to participants and to monitor the degree of sharedness/expectedness of standpoints at any moment of their negotiation; the direct relevance of dialogical reasoning to decisions about future actions). Similarly, Detges and Waltereit argue that discourse markers arise as the result of argumentational procedures in the negotiation in discourse, marking, for example, a change of activity or disagreement, while the polyphonic component in modal particles arises as the conventionalization of disputing the validity of a given proposition in dialogic exchanges. Finally, Beeching highlights the crucial role of concessive contexts in pragmatization processes such as the evolution of hedging and boosting particles in a variety of languages.

At a more general level, Stathi’s study of the development of the German verb gehören (literally ‘belong to’) shows how discourse traditions (in this case, administrative and judicial texts) may influence change, an aspect previously discussed by Pons Bordería (2006).

1.4. What is the precise nature of and relationship among the observed tendencies of semantic–pragmatic change?

The fourth issue revolves around both refining the clines (i) to (iv) identified above and understanding the relationship between such tendencies: for instance, the relationship between grammaticalization, scope, and subjectification (Company Company, 2006a,b; Traugott, forthcoming), or the issue of whether to define the evolution of pragmatic markers as an instance of grammaticalization (Brinton and Traugott, 2005; Diewald et al., this volume) or of pragmatization (Erman and Kotsinas, 1993; Dostie, 2004; Hansen, 2008: Chapter 3).

With respect to the latter, those who argue that pragmatic markers are grammaticalized focus on the fact that the evolution of pragmatic markers will typically feature the decategorialization of the source item, some degree of phonological reduction of that source item, as well as subjectification and increased “procedurality” of its content.
Those scholars who prefer to describe pragmatic markers as “pragmaticalized”, on the other hand, do so on the basis of Lehmann’s (1985) six classic parameters of grammaticalization, viz. phonological and/or semantic attrition, paradigmatization, obligatorification, scope reduction, syntagmatic coalescence, and syntagmatic fixation. According to Lehmann’s model, grammaticalized items will exhibit a high degree of several of these characteristics. As noted by Waltereit (2002: 1005), Eckardt (2003: 42), and Hansen (2008: 57f), pragmatic markers as a class tend not to fulfill Lehmann’s criteria to any great extent. Rather, they typically exhibit scope increase, greater syntactic freedom, optionality, and strengthening of their pragmatic import.

The former problem has to do with whether subjectification is necessarily part of, and unique to, the grammaticalization process, which, if true, raises questions about the scope of grammaticalized items. According to Traugott (1995) and Brinton and Traugott (2005), subjectification is at the very least a strong tendency in grammaticalization, particularly in its early stages (Traugott, 1995: 47), but it is nevertheless an independent process (Brinton and Traugott, 2005: 109; Traugott, forthcoming). Company (2006a) argues that subjectification is not just a semantic–pragmatic phenomenon, but actually constitutes a specific type of syntactic change as well, namely one that is characterized by scope increase and syntactic isolation, and she conceives of subjectification as a subtype of grammaticalization. It seems to us that what this author calls subjectification would largely be equivalent to what others describe as pragmatization, were it not for the fact that she deems the syntactic changes mentioned criterial, as opposed to just typical, of subjectification. However, the existence of items like the so-called modal particles that are a salient feature of the Continental Germanic languages appears to provide a strong argument against such a view, for while modal particles are indubitably subjectified as compared to their source items and also exhibit scope increase, they are nevertheless syntactically highly constrained.

This debate raises the issue of the exact understanding of what is implied by notions such as grammaticalization and pragmatization: are these labels for specific processes of change, in which case they have independent theoretical status, or are they largely just convenient shorthands for the cumulative results of sets of frequently converging, but essentially independent, changes that linguistic items and constructions can undergo? If the former, we would expect there to be a rather strict separation between grammaticalized and pragmatized items. If the latter, we should not be surprised to find cases where either or both label(s) might seem appropriate. This would appear to be the case, for instance, with the Germanic modal particles mentioned above, which are characterized by scope increase, optionality, and pragmatic strengthening, but also – unlike discourse markers, for instance – by paradigmatization and syntagmatic fixation.

The issues surrounding grammaticalization, pragmatization, and processes, such as subjectification which may be prominently associated with either, are highlighted in many of the papers in the present volume, which analyze the evolution of procedural meanings of various kinds. Thus, several papers feature different types of pragmatic markers as their object of study.