Pragmatic variation: the interplay of micro-social and macro-social factors

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Over the past few years, variational pragmatics (VP) has emerged as a new field of linguistic inquiry at the interface of pragmatics and dialectology (cf., e.g., Barron 2005a, 2005b; Schneider 2005; Schneider & Barron, forthcoming b). Conceived of as the study of intra-lingual variation on the pragmatic level of language, VP addresses a research gap previously identified, but not systematically analysed (cf., e.g., Schlieben-Lange & Weydt 1978; Kasper 1995; Wolfram & Schilling-Estes 2006: 93-101). So far, VP has been mainly concerned with macro-social factors, such as region, socio-economic class, ethnicity, gender, and age, and their systematic impact on language use (cf., e.g., Schneider & Barron forthcoming a). However, while macro-social factors shape identities, micro-social factors define relationships and, thus, create and change social reality locally, i.e. on the discrete bottom level. Indeed, early findings in VP have highlighted the possible importance of micro-social variation in the study of intra-lingual pragmatic variation (cf., e.g. Barron 2005b). It would seem, therefore, that this area of research is ripe for investigation, particularly since researchers in the areas of cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics have found micro-social factors, such as power and social distance, to influence inter-lingual variation (cf., e.g., Blum-Kulka et al. 1989; Trosborg 1995).

The present workshop focuses on intra-lingual macro-social and micro-social variation on the pragmatic level of language. It addresses the interplay of individual macro-social and micro-social factors and also patterns of interaction between these macro-social and micro-social factors.

In particular, the following questions will be addressed:

- Which macro-social factors should be distinguished?
- Which micro-social factors should be distinguished?
- Are there factor hierarchies?
- Which pragmatic variables (e.g. speech act strategies, internal modification, external modification, …) are affected by macro-social factors? Which variants exist?
- Which pragmatic variables (e.g. speech act strategies, internal modification, external modification, …) are affected by micro-social factors? Which variants exist?
- Which methodologies are best suited to studying the interaction of macro- and micro-social factors?

In this workshop, research-in-progress papers will be presented which report on on-going empirical, contrastive, corpus-based investigations into social and/or situational variation at the level of pragmatics. All papers deal with some or all of the above questions and will be circulated among contributors prior to the workshop.

Key references

