



ESSE-8: LONDON 2006

29 August – 2 September 2006

S50. Speech Act History of English

Friday 1 September: 2.30-4.30pm & 5.00-7.00pm

Convenor: Andreas Jucker (University of Zürich)

Email: ahjucker@es.unizh.ch

Co-convenor: Irma Taavitsainen (University of Helsinki)

Email: taavitsa@mappi.helsinki.fi

The aim of this seminar is to sketch a speech act history of the English language. It will provide accounts of specific speech acts and groups of speech acts at particular stages in the development of English. It will trace the diachronic development of specific speech acts and it will discuss the theoretical problems of such projects, e.g. the availability of suitable data, the identification of specific speech acts in a corpus-based investigation, the relationship of speech act verbs to the speech acts they name, and the functional equivalence of speech acts across time.

Session 1

Directive Speech Acts in Old English: Beyond Politeness

Thomas Kohnen (University of Cologne)

This contribution will focus on typical manifestations of directive speech acts in Old English. Prior studies raise some interesting problems here, for example, the high frequency of performatives, which need not necessarily be seen as “impolite” behavior, or the large proportion of “common-ground” strategies, which need not be seen as “face-saving” acts. It may be that, in Anglo-Saxon England, directives followed different rules, which do not correspond to our modern concept of politeness. In this study the distribution and function of typical manifestations of Old English directives will be analyzed in a wide range of text types. The data will be taken from the Helsinki Corpus and the Dictionary of Old English Corpus.

The Middle English Speech Act of Promising

Mari Pakkala-Weckström (University of Helsinki)

My paper will explore the speech act of promising in Middle English, mainly the different kinds of promises in their varying contexts in Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales. First, I will discuss the concept of a binding promise in the medieval context; then I will look at different ways of performing the speech act of a binding promise; i.e. what kind of performatives are used, and whether the choice of words is essential in making a promise binding. Finally, I will argue that there are serious problems in applying Searle’s conditions, and particularly the essential condition to Middle English promises; simply

not having 'the intention of undertaking the obligation' does not excuse the 'promiser,' if certain words have been uttered to the 'promisee.'

Directness and Early Modern Requests: Pragmatic Variation in Trial Proceedings and Play-texts, 1640-1760

Dawn Archer (University of Central Lancashire) & Jonathan Culpeper (Lancaster University)

In the field of synchronic cross-cultural pragmatics, requests are typically related to a scale of directness, and different degrees of directness are correlated with various situations and "cultures". We apply this approach - with sensitivity to its limitations - to diachronic variation. We develop a scale of directness for "Early Modern English" requests, consider variation across a range of social parameters, and compare our results with research on present-day English.

Towards an Inventory of Directive Speech Acts in Shakespeare's *King Lear*

Ulrich Busse (Martin Luther University, Halle-Wittenberg)

Directives embrace a number of functionally related speech acts such as: *commanding, ordering, requesting, permitting/prohibiting, (dis-)allowing, begging, pleading, supplicating, inviting, recommending*, etc. In formal terms, they can be realised by imperatives and subjunctives. Furthermore, indirect requests can be expressed by interrogatives and declaratives. Thus, the underlying idea of the present paper is twofold:

- 1) By following the approach of a form-to-function mapping the objective is to arrive at an inventory of linguistic forms which were available to Shakespeare and his contemporaries to carry out directive speech acts.
- 2) This (preliminary) inventory of linguistic forms will then be analysed in terms of their communicative function and with regard to the degree of politeness that is expressed.

Two polite speech acts from a diachronic perspective: Aspects of the realisation of requesting and undertaking commitments in the nineteenth-century commercial community

Gabriella del Lungo (University of Florence)

The paper will apply Searle's notion of indirectness and Sbisà's notion of degrees of illocutionary strength to the analysis of two speech acts, requests and commitments, frequently performed by nineteenth century commercial letter writers in order to investigate which methodological approach is best suited to describe them. The working hypothesis is that the preference for either strategy, indirectness vs modulation, in the performance of such speech acts may be linked to contemporary notions of polite intercourse and ways of doing business. It is hoped that the study will also contribute to map the area of directives and commissives in the nineteenth century.

Häl, Hail, Hello, Hi: Conversational Starters in English Language History

Joachim Grzega (Catholic University Eichstätt)

The paper gives a chronological overview of greeting terms in English language history. It gives a qualitative account with some indications of saliences. There is a relatively small richness in greeting terms in Old English, compared to the amount of conversational starters in more recent periods. There are several motivations behind the forms. Expressive phrases are especially prominent. Other motivations are: wish for a good time, for peace, for health. There are a few loans, too. Phrases with unclear origin will also be explained. Also of note, many phrases become phonetically reduced and/or semantically “void”. Changes are connected with social factors, flattery, and prestige.

Session 2

Talking about Speech Acts: Speech Act Verbs as Ethnographic Evidence of Communicative Patterns

Irma Taavitsainen (University of Helsinki) & Andreas Jucker (University of Zürich)

Recent research has shown a development from a largely positive politeness culture in Early Modern English to a largely negative politeness culture in Present Day English. We approach this topic through an investigation of relevant speech act verbs to achieve an ethnographic view: if a speech act is important in a society, this society will lexicalize it into a speech act verb, and the contexts reveal the society’s estimation of the associated speech acts. We shall use data from two different periods of the Chadwyck Healy English Literature Database to investigate Early Modern and Late Modern speech acts.

Oath Taking and Oath Breaking: Toward a History of the Perjured Pledge

Leslie Arnovick (University of British Columbia)

A survey of penitential handbooks shows how perjury becomes limited to purgatory swearing through its common association with ecclesiastical and civil compurgatory oaths. The combined processes of institutionalization and subjectification then re-shape the notion of the speech event. In place of the Anglo-Saxon commissive we find a truth-functional, PDE act that is both commissive and assertive. The organization of the swearing discourse subsequently changes: a question and answer routine arises to compensate for a loss of informativeness in swearing. The case history of legal oath swearing finally reveals the inter-relatedness of pragmatic processes in promoting historical change.

Commenting on Works of Visual Art between the Eighteenth Century and the Present

Paul Tucker (University of Firenze)

This paper examines the development of a group of speech acts – pre-eminently describing and evaluating – employed to comment on works of visual art. Using a small corpus of texts discussing art (1685-2006) it considers the ways these acts combine in discourse and diachronically vary in role and prominence within the group. In particular it shows how, as a result of shifting conceptions of aesthetic experience and the development of distinct discourses on art, evaluation has come to manifest less an

attitude towards, than intelligence of, the work, and, by finding increasingly indirect and figurative expression, to fuse with description.

Speech Act Verbs for Speech, Writing and Thought-presentation in a Corpus of Nineteenth-century British English Texts

Beatrix Busse (Westfälische Wilhelms-University, Münster)

This paper will investigate reporting verbs for speech, writing and thought presentation in a corpus of nineteenth-century British-English narrative fiction, autobiography and newspapers. The presentation offers possible classifications of reporting verbs and determines quantitatively the range of (prototypical) verbs that act as reporting verbs. The analysis will qualitatively touch on the illocutionary and perlocutionary forces of reporting verbs, the indication of perspectives as, for example, used by the narrator or reporter and the speaker and on questions of how paralinguistic features function in co-occurrence with reporting verbs. An extended goal of this paper is an investigation of how the functions and meanings of reporting verbs in 19th century English texts contribute to what Trudgill and Watts (2002: 3) have labeled as “alternative histories of English.”

Speech Acts and Subjectless/Verbless Sentences in (Contemporary) Spoken English

Catherine Chauvin (University of Nancy 2)

We propose to discuss the nature, and applicability, of the notion of speech acts by confronting it to the data found in a corpus of written and spoken English (main focus on spoken data). If we make a list of all the subjectless and/or verbless utterances to be found in it, we become aware that many of them actually fall, or may fall (there are difficult cases) outside of the assertive category – offers, orders, evaluative sentences, expressives, etc. What we would like to discuss is 1) what the relevant speech acts are – those we need to describe our data, and b) are there speech-act-oriented constraints, or preferences, at work in the distribution of these utterances that are not (or not overtly) of the subject-predicate form?

Indirect Speech Acts in the Modern English

Ana E. Martínez-Insua (University of Vigo)

As part of a larger project on the variation experienced by the English language in its recent history, this paper aims to investigate how indirect speech acts were carried out by speakers, and understood (or not) by addressees, in the spoken code of the Early Modern English period, analyzing to what extent such indirect speech acts and their interpretations vary in form and conditions under different social contexts. The conclusions provide an interesting insight into the possibility of characterizing a particular group of speech acts. The study suggests the possibility of tracing the evolution of the uses and values of indirect speech acts in the history of English.