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Introduction

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The special issue is the second of two special issues on the theme of *Corpus, Context and Pragmatics*, bringing together a collection of papers from ongoing work within the Inter-Varietal Applied Corpus Studies (IVACS) research network. This collection of papers showcases the span of research across areas of pragmatics that is made possible by the use of corpora in an effort to examine naturally-occurring language use in context. In curating this volume, we have brought together quite an eclectic span of contexts of language use. In doing so, this underscores the growing reach and impact of corpus pragmatics. The papers in this volume span across modes: spoken and written (newspapers, emails, letters); languages, language varieties and vernaculars: Catalan, (British and Irish) English and French. The contexts of language use range across public and private spheres: from politicians’ and public representatives’ emails and newspaper articles to paupers’ letters addressed to public figures, as well as everyday conversations between family and friends.

The richness of context in this volume relates also to points in time, both politically to historically. In the work of two of the papers in this volume, De Felice and Garretson and Timmis, we see communication in two very different times, modes and mediums. De Felice and Garretson look at email communication to and from Hillary Clinton while she was United States Secretary of State (using a sub-set of 500 emails from the recently released 33,000 emails). Armed with the metadata relating to who emailed whom, this study sets the context for an investigation into status, power and gender and exposes linguistic difference across variables of perceived influence due to hierarchy, familiarity or gender inherent in the data. The findings indicate the main difference is in content and function of the emails sent, with politeness being more evident in function rather than linguistic difference. The richness of the metadata available for this corpus bodes well for its potential as a rich source of pragmatic research into the future. It also reminds us of the importance of recording as much metadata as possible when building a corpus which is fit for optimum corpus pragmatics research.

Juxtaposing De Felice and Garretson's study of contemporary electronic communication of the 'powerful', we have Timmis' paper on letters of the poor, distressed and disempowered from late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Britain, applying for charitable relief. Interestingly, on one hand, Timmis illustrates the letter writers' orientation of these letters towards the emerging Standard English as a pragmatic device in aiding their plea while on the other hand showing that there was digression from the standard forms when correspondents were writing about deeply personal and emotive issues. This paper is an interesting example of historical corpus pragmatics whereby Timmis has to make his case for what was in the vernacular at the time of the paupers' letters by drawing on another historical dataset, The Mayhew Corpus of interviews with the destitute of London from the 1850s (see Timmis 2018). Using this as a baseline for the vernacular, he is able to show that some aspects of the vernacular at the time are clearly missing from the letters.

In her paper, Milà-Garcia not only showcases her study on agreements and disagreements in spoken Catalan conversations, she also engages the reader in important methodological considerations. If we are to adequately retrieve speech acts from corpora, we need a means of moving from function-to-form. Milà-Garcia argues that the time spent in manually applying a complex multi-layered annotation system was more than balanced out by the opportunities it then offered in terms of pragmatics analysis potential. It does also bring to light the myriad of challenges inherent in creating a pragmatically-annotated resource for the analysis of speech acts. It highlights the need for careful corpus design and piloting so as to arrive at a robust application of an annotation system. She goes on to illustrate the retrieval opportunities offered by the pragmatic annotation by detailing some analysis examples from her corpus.

Ní Mhurchú, in her paper, also looks at spoken language, using the Limerick Corpus of Irish English (LCIE, see Farr, Murphy and O'Keeffe 2004) as her dataset. Ní Mhurchú adds to the growing body of corpus-based research on Irish English through an examination of non-standard progressive structures. What is important about this paper is that it looks at this form and its uses within a pragmatic framework to examine language variation. Her study identifies a number of progressive structures which appear more frequently in LCIE than in either of the comparative corpora. Other approaches to these progressive structures would have shown how the forms differed in terms of syntax and use from a standard variety but Ní Mhurchú illustrates the usefulness of a pragmatic lens in explaining why these differences might pertain in a language variety.

In her paper, Steffens explores the sense relationship of antonymy, specifically co-present antonyms, in her study of French newspapers. While a framework already exists for co-present antonyms in the context of English (Jones 2002; Jones et al. 2012), Steffens uses French data to put this to the test and in doing so, she shows us that universals are not always universal and that though antonym is a semantic concept, its use has a pragmatic effect. She describes the discourse functions of antonymy that emerge from the French journalistic data and shows how the semantic and syntactic roles of co-present antonyms determine the semantico-referential functions they perform. Getting deeper into the two major groups of functions, she illustrates how the use of such opposites so as to highlight paradoxical categories within a sentence could be used with the intention of manipulating the reader within public discourse.

In summary, this volume brings together a range of papers showing the breadth and depth of potential for corpus pragmatics as a means of understanding language in context. Regardless of the genesis of the language or language variety, from the powerful to the powerless, from the historic to the contemporary, from eighteenth century paper and ink to digital media, we can explore and scope out a limitless range of pragmatically-driven research questions. It is also heartening to see that we can do so even with relatively modest amounts of data, whereby contextually-rich eclectic (sometimes) mini-corpora can be thoroughly mined pragmatically. What we hope is striking about this volume is how language from public and private spheres, from the past and the present and from spoken and written sources can sit side by side in an eclectic collect. We hope that this collection is a testimony to the democratising potential of our gaze as corpus pragmatics researchers.

References

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