

REVIEW ARTICLE

Diachronic pragmatics. By Leslie K. Arnovick. Pp. 191. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: Benjamins. 1999.

BARBARA KRYK-KASTOVSKY
Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań

Historical pragmatics occupies a particular location in the space and time of its practitioners; it is one of which we must remain cognizant. (Arnovick 1999: 7)

The book under review introduces the reader into the intricacies of diachronic pragmatics (henceforth DP), a young discipline, whose official birth was announced only in the mid 90s (cf. Jacobs and Jucker 1995). If we accept Givón's claim (1989: 1) that pragmatics as an area of linguistic investigation was still in its infancy a decade ago, then its younger sister, DP, should be just an unpredictable toddler. Nevertheless, at the beginning of her study Arnovick outlines a set of goals stemming from her strong commitment to the new discipline so adequately summarized in the above-quoted sentence that I have chosen it as the motto of this review. The author could not have expressed better the attitudes of all the enthusiasts of the new area of linguistic investigation, who believe that DP does occupy a special position in linguistic explorations. Arnovick manages to demonstrate this in her study, which is an illuminating collection of various topics in DP rather than just a theoretical monograph trying to define the field.

The book consists of eight chapters. Chapter 1 constitutes an introduction which specifies a set of ambitious goals to be undertaken by the author, viz. constructing pragmatic histories for several speech acts and speech events in English. The focus of the study clearly follows from Stein's statement quoted at the beginning of the chapter, i.e. that diachronic analysis of speech acts is one of the most neglected areas of historical linguistics, cf. Stein (1985). In what follows Arnovick spells out additional reasons for selecting particular English speech acts as case studies in DP. She claims that although each speech act has its own history, the emerging patterns are not unique, so that the histories presented identify processes manifested in English, but they might also be of universal nature. Consequently, Arnovick's main goal is to present historical facts in order to unmask phenomena ignored or misidentified in the past because other changes have obliterated them. She sets her goals rather high and promises the reader to illustrate the insight into linguistic changes "provided by

one of the applications of historical pragmatics, i.e. diachronic pragmatic theory and practice” (Arnovick 1999: 1). It might, however, have been more pertinent to formulate the goals more narrowly, since the book under review does not concern pragmatic theory and practice in general, but, as follows already from the table of contents, is limited to a diachronic account of selected speech acts only. Two strong methodological claims follow, i.e. that the case studies discussed in the book are supposed to exemplify linguistic and cultural interaction and that they therefore constitute pragmatic history through pragmatic processes like, e.g. subjectification or pragmaticalisation. As will be shown below, Arnovick’s analysis successfully substantiates both claims.

The introductory remarks are followed by an outline of the history and methodology of diachronic pragmatics – a welcome move in the case of such a young and still little known area of linguistic investigation. Moreover, a linguist of any theoretical persuasion could hardly question the two crucial characteristics of DP highlighted by Arnovick, i.e. its interdisciplinarity and its role in the history of linguistics. However, some doubts arise in connection with the definition of pragmatics (cf. p. 7). Based on the now classical sources, which advocate a functional approach to language study (Leech 1983, Levinson 1983, Mey 1993, Thomas 1995), the definition unfortunately omits another important and innovative view on pragmatics, viz. as a perspective on language (cf. Verschueren 1999:7ff). Another query concerns the definition of the notion “speech act”, adopted by Arnovick from Crystal (1992), although the original versions due to Austin (1962) or Searle (1969) might have been a more logical choice, even more so since both figure in the References.

Towards the end of the first chapter an important distinction is introduced, following Jacobs and Jucker (1995), i.e. historical vs. diachronic pragmatics. The former investigates language use through time and the latter the linguistic inventory and its communicative use across different historical stages of the same language (p. 11). However, one should keep in mind that this distinction is not absolute. At the end of the chapter the author argues for the significance of her study to DP. Its crucial merit is to be seen in challenging the view that Speech Act Theory (SAT) has no historical application, since the analyst is not in a position to reconstruct the speaker meaning in the past. According to Arnovick, it is socio-historical context that helps in reconstructing past speech acts by approximating and reconstructing the context. This is, however, by no means an original claim, since it was already put forward by Jacobs and Jucker (1995) and followed by others, cf. fn. 1 below.

The analysis proper starts in Chapter 2, which is concerned with flyting and sounding. Although the topic is certainly fascinating and underresearched, the author does not justify her choice of these two insult types rather than others (except for claiming that both are instances of agonistic orality), nor does she explain how representative they are of the entire genre. The reader can only infer that Arnovick has selected these two particular types of insults for historically contrastive reasons (the verbal duel of the Anglo-Saxon warrior is juxtaposed with the competitive sounding

of the Afro-American youth, so that the span of time between the two allows for some degree of generalization because there is no detectable mutual influence between them). Be that as it may, the undeniable value of this chapter lies in its main claim, i.e. the significance of orality in reconstructing the pragmatic history of the two traditions historically and culturally. Since similar attempts have already been undertaken by other researchers working under the guise of historical pragmatics, the author thereby commits herself to this tradition.¹

While performing a comparison of flyting and sounding, Arnovick explores aspects of each speech situation in its cultural context in accordance with her underlying assumption that a purely linguistic analysis would be insufficient. Moreover, she rightly emphasizes that in order to compare a written record with a spoken text the researcher must pin down the notions of orality and oral tradition, which is again consonant with the general tenor of her work. In her characterization of both speech events, Arnovick starts with a thorough overview of various approaches to modern sounding and comes up with an insightful hypothesis that the sounding behavior might represent African manifestations of an oral tradition. In the middle of the chapter the author finally admits that her choice of the two insult types is neither random nor entirely novel, since both have often been considered members of the same genre. What follows is a comparison of various types of verbal dueling, which leads to a conclusion concerning the evolution of the genre, i.e. along with the demise of flyting, sounding took its place. Towards the end of the chapter the reader is somewhat disappointed since in a few cases the author supplies a summary of other linguists’ views, rather than offer her own stand on the issue, which might be especially welcome in the discussion of sounding as a range of speech events. However, it finally leads to a novel solution, viz. isolating an agonistic insult event, in which closely related speech acts intersect and form a continuum central to the verbal duel. In accordance with her primary assumptions, the author emphasizes the significance of the socio-cultural context by claiming convincingly that verbal dueling is basic to human society and culture. Summarizing her findings, Arnovick claims that her analysis reveals a single language having been infused with oral traditions from two different cultures at two different points of its development. Thus, the English agonistic insult should be understood as “discontinuous or disjunctive” (p. 38), but no evidence is given to support this claim. Chapter 2 concludes with a challenging postulate to the analysts to search for some underlying form-function correspondences, which might be responsible for vital linguistic changes. In view of an in-

¹ See, e.g. the contributions to the first volume of *Journal of Historical Pragmatics*, which represent topics related to three different aspects of the notion of orality:

- a) a general perspective on orality, cf. Culpeper and Kytö (2000) and Kryk-Kastovsky (2000);
- b) diachronic speech act analysis, cf. Bertucelli-Papi (2000), Culpeper and Semino (2000), Honegger (2000), Jucker and Taavitsainen (2000), Kohonen (2000), Schrott (2000);
- c) discourse markers, cf. Fludernik (2000), Schwenter and Closs Traugott (2000), Onodera (2000).

creasing number of relevant studies on the topic, this postulate is not only plausible, but also certainly worth exploring.

On the face of it, Chapter 3 looks like an odd-man-out, since it does not deal with speech acts, but with the modal verbs *shall* and *will*, a choice which becomes clear as the analysis unravels. Already at the outset Arnovick comes up with a hypothesis worth checking by both synchronic and diachronic pragmaticists. She claims that “in a broader perspective, the advent of the rules for *shall* and *will* might be understood as a reaction to a diachronically derived, synchronic act” (p. 41f). The statement is followed by the historical background of the rules governing the use of the two modals since as far back as 1653. The account gives the reader a rich picture of both the prescriptions and proscriptions illustrated by explanatory excerpts from contemporary grammars and it is interesting to notice that for Arnovick even a traditional prescriptive grammar was pragmatic at its core. What follows is a subtle transition of the discussion from the modals *shall/will* to promises, i.e. speech acts where both modals can also be used. At this point Arnovick turns our attention to a delicate balance between norm vs. use, and with her next statement she puts the analysis into a Speech Act Theory perspective: “The standard variety reveals the eighteenth-century awareness that English writers and speakers *do* things with words, even while it rejects the language’s actual if less “rational” means of pragmatic expression” (p. 55). The reanalysis suggested by Arnovick makes us realize that the norms put forth by 18th century grammarians actually advocate a differentiation between deontic and epistemic utterances and between promissory and predicative illocutionary force, which is vital for her further argumentation.

The idea of the evolution from the future modals *shall/will* to promises is exemplified and further developed in Chapter 4, which starts with a claim that most promises in Modern English can be explained through a diachronic function-to-form mapping. Thus, the historical development of *shall/will* is discussed in order to trace the semantic shift from promissory intention to futurity, i.e. the deontic decrease and the epistemic increase. However, Arnovick warns the reader that the history of modals seems to be cyclical, so that deontic and epistemic modalities alternate in the semantic development of *shall/will*. Thus, when a semantic shift occurs, these two, like other modals, exhibit an increase in epistemic meanings, a tendency which is in keeping with Traugott’s (1982) claim concerning the semantic change from propositional to textual to expressive meanings. The discussion of promises takes an interesting slant with the shift to evidence from psychology and child language acquisition. Not only does Arnovick corroborate her earlier claim that the modalities discussed should be subject to interdisciplinary analysis, but she also manages to achieve a reconciliation between two different traditions in approaching promises: the philosophical and the psychological one. This is where the author makes an insightful observation about pragmatic expansion (when the promissory speech act exceeds a single sentence), and rightly observes that it is an instance of a process currently going on in the English language, i.e. the use of analytic rather than synthetic

forms. In summary, the aim of the chapter is to relate semantic change in the modals *shall/will* with later illocutionary structures in order to explain the appearance of pragmatically-expanded promises, which, as Arnovick rightly points out, are examples of multidimensional changes (pragmatic causes working alongside morphological, syntactic, and semantic factors).

Chapter 5 is devoted to cursing, seen, in contradistinction to previous analyses, as a speech act rather than as a purely lexical and semantic phenomenon. Having characterized various types of swearing as speech acts, the author systematizes them as members on a continuum which vary or overlap according to the nature of their force, i.e. representative, commissive, declarative, etc. The undeniable advantage of reanalyzing English curse forms within the framework of diachronic pragmatics is that they can be placed within the pragmatic-semantic process of a movement towards greater subjectivity, already observed by Traugott (1997) in connection with semantic-pragmatic change in general. Arnovick claims, in accordance with her general assumptions, that in order to understand the duality of the cursing behavior (i.e. intentional cursing vs. expressive swearing), it should be viewed as an extra-linguistic institution, where the processes of secularization and subjectification play a crucial role. Having adopted the useful distinction between swearing as a generic act of which cursing is a species (cf., e.g., Montagu 1967), Arnovick divides the relevant acts into “execratory cursing” (covering declarative acts) and “common cursing” (signifying expressive acts). Another merit of the chapter is its focus on the development of cursing from Old English through Middle English to Modern English, which gives the reader an unprecedented overview of the process. After a comprehensive description of the functions of English curses throughout all these periods, Arnovick describes them within a speech act framework and specifies appropriate sincerity conditions for them.

What follows is a fascinating historical part of the chapter, where Anglo-Saxon curses are linked to the Judeo-Christian tradition. This very informative section is also in keeping with the overall assumption of the reviewed work concerning the cyclical semantic-pragmatic changes undergone by the individual speech acts. It turns out that the volitional Anglo-Saxon curse was still preserved in the religious desiderative curses in the Middle Ages, when it gradually underwent semantic-pragmatic changes (e.g. the secularization of the vocabulary and the change of speech acts). The conclusion of the chapter is again consonant with the overall line of argumentation pursued by Arnovick, who elegantly summarizes the shift from religious to secular cursing as “a movement from the primary intention to harm with action to a secondary intention to harm with words themselves” (p. 92).

Chapter 6 brings the reader from the face-threatening act of swearing to an innocent speech event of leave-taking. However, it is only an illusory departure from religious to secular grounds. Arnovick starts the chapter with a claim that the structure of the terminal *good bye* correlates with the changes in its underlying pragmatics. Although she realizes that the derivation of *good bye* from the religious greeting

God be with you has been well documented, she decides to take up the topic since in her opinion historical linguists have failed to present the realignment of the pragmatic functions of the form under discussion. The chapter has a twofold goal presented in a reader-friendly fashion in a (chrono)logical order, i.e. the discussion of the separation of the blessing from the parting is followed by an account of the secularization of the blessing. The latter process reflects an increase in politeness, which relates to a special type of pragmaticalization, called by Arnovick "discursization". The chapter is unique since, unlike the others, it is a corpus-based study. It uses the English Drama collection of the Chadwyck-Healey (1996) electronic database complemented by data from the *OED*, which considerably enriches the analysis. The discussion starts with an analysis of blessing and greeting as illocutionary acts, whereupon blessing is compared with cursing, the two acts having much in common. The two informative tables on the distribution of *God be with you* and *good bye* during the overlapping periods of 1400-1700 and 1651-1750, respectively, reflect the usefulness and relevance of the corpus for the analysis, although the quantitative data are somewhat inconclusive, as is unfortunately often the case.² The corpus data also allow the author to make an insightful observation that in Early Modern English the form *God be with you* counted as a blessing and as a courteous closing, whereas in its contracted form it was used mostly as a greeting. The modern use of the phrase is entirely secular, all the religious connotations being lost. Arnovick relates this fact to a few socio-historical processes, mainly secularization. Despite a very pertinent discussion of blessing as a cultural institution, the author is unfortunately guilty of having based this section of her study on one source only (i.e. Westermann 1978), which makes it a bit too cursory. In a slightly meandering fashion, Arnovick returns to the leitmotif of the chapter, i.e. the connection between the blessing and the greeting, which gives her an opportunity to show that the relation is not coincidental and goes back to the Old Testament. This is documented by excellent illustrations from the Bible.

The differences between the notions of a (religious) blessing and a (secular) wish are reflected in their different felicity conditions, so that the latter is often an instance of conventionalized politeness. The process of the secularization of *God be with you* leads Arnovick to some vital questions. It certainly goes to her scholarly credit that with due caution and modesty she avoids jumping onto the bandwagon of the now fashionable type of language change, i.e. grammaticalization, but rather carefully weighs the question whether the process responsible for the shift from the religious blessing to the secular greeting could be a case of semantic bleaching. In the end, she decides in favor of realignment as cause of the change in question. What follows are pertinent remarks on politeness in 17th century England, where

Arnovick quotes Ehlich (1992). It is worth noting at this point that an additional valuable contribution to the topic is Watts' analysis of the historical roots of the English politeness system, cf. Watts (1999). In conclusion, the author links her remarks on *good bye* to the other forms analyzed in the book and points out that, analogously to promises and common curses, the closing salutation displays pragmatic strengthening in its historical development.

Chapter 7 tackles the case of the polite formula *Bless you!*. Arnovick argues that the diachronic changes observed in the sneeze "blessing" may be understood as a redistribution of a pragmatic function which results in pragmatic strengthening. The change involved here is discursization and the case is analogous to the one observed in the development of *Good-bye*. Thus, Arnovick suggests a continuum of the functions of *Bless you!* which ranges from religious blessing, through superstitious blessing and a wish to a polite formula. As convincing as this scale is, the author's speculations about the possible contexts of use of the formula are unfortunately too impressionistic. Although the beginning of the chapter may strike the reader as partly long-winded (e.g. in the case of *Bless you* as polite conversational routine (p. 124ff)), the next section on folk practice is a highly original account of the supernatural protection of the sneeze blessing, be it via magic or via divine power. One must admit that the detailed description of the historical and cultural background of the discussed phenomenon certainly makes for a fascinating reading and, above all, provides further support for Arnovick's claim that language change should be explained by recontextualizing particular linguistic phenomena historically and culturally. However, the reader is somewhat relieved when s/he is finally provided with some purely linguistic observations about the change involving the phrase *Bless you!*. Thus, the author posits two schemata for pragmatic change, whereby the original blessing develops in two directions: it becomes a polite formula through discursization and a wish through subjectification. The latter pragmatic change is consistent with Traugott's concept of subjectification mentioned above in connection with the discussion of Chapter 5 devoted to cursing (cf. also Traugott 1989; 1997). Another crucial factor in the evolution of *Bless you!* is the process of de-institutionalization of the blessing which results in a superstitious blessing, a wish or a polite formula. The processes of a linguistic change from a religious blessing to more secular forms necessarily involve the concept of religion, which Arnovick tries to define and delimit for her purposes of comparing phenomena which she labels "religious" vs. "superstitious". Towards the end of the chapter Arnovick admits that the problem of *Bless you!* remains open and its future developments are hard to predict. She also adds modestly that one of the contributions of her study might be "its exploration of diachronic linguistic parameters for research" (p. 138). At this point most readers will certainly consider this modest confession an understatement, since Arnovick's analysis offers much more, viz. a wide socio-historical panorama of factors which had a great impact on the linguistic development of formulas deeply rooted in our social consciousness, but which had hardly ever been

² For the discussion of various methodological problems related to corpus-based quantitative analysis in historical sociolinguistics, see the individual studies in Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg (1996).

analyzed with the profound systematicity offered by the author of the book under review.

Chapter 8 rounds up the discussion and tackles a more global issue which underlines Arnovick's findings on the individual speech acts, i.e. extra-linguistic contexts for illocutionary change. The reader cannot but agree that the author has successfully shown, as she claims at the beginning of the last chapter of her book, "that diachronic pragmatics [...] can be used to trace pragmatic developments within language" (p. 139). Moreover, although different, seemingly disparate speech acts are tackled, some revealing connections between them are drawn, and one must admit that Arnovick is right when she claims that "these "illocutionary biographies" manifest the workings of several important pragmatic processes" (ibid.). Towards the end of the chapter, Arnovick provides a summary of her findings and enumerates the most important factors motivating pragmatic change. She is also aware of future tasks awaiting a diachronic pragmaticist and once again her aim is to show that the illocutionary development is a collective result of many collateral functions, both linguistic (pragmatic, semantic, syntactic) and extra-linguistic (cultural). Arnovick concludes the analysis with a brief discussion of three factors which played a crucial role in her argument: (socio-historical) context, secularization and literacy.

To summarize, Arnovick's book on diachronic pragmatics is an excellent collection of studies on speech acts and speech events looked at from a wide socio-cultural perspective. Although each chapter is a self-contained analysis of a separate topic, they form a homogeneous whole, not only in terms of the historical pragmatic questions asked, but also in terms of the theory of diachronic speech acts which has evolved from them. Moreover, the study is unique in so far as many of the speech acts discussed have been described only cursorily in the relevant literature, since due to their low frequency of occurrence they have usually been considered marginal. In view of the above, Arnovick's book can be recommended as enlightening reading material not only to insiders in pragmatics, diachronic studies or the combination thereof, i.e. diachronic pragmatics. The work would certainly also be of interest to linguists of any persuasion, and probably to many humanists outside linguistics, who are interested in answering questions concerning omnipresent language change.

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