Expressivity and situational variation towards a linking hypothesis

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This talk outlines a linking hypothesis for modelling variation and change of expressive phenomena. Who is licensed to use expressive phenomena and under which (situational) circumstances? I propose a formulation of a linking hypothesis that is applicable to many types of expressive phenomena and can be tested in conjunction with experimental or corpus data using game-theoretic models (Ahern and Clark, 2017).

Expressive phenomena involving emphasis or intensification prototypically originate as ad-hoc rhetorical strategies for conveying specific meanings (more constrained relative to an alternative), which subsequently undergo a degree of conventionalisation (Detges and Waltereit, 2002). I take it that what motivates such a rhetorical technique is the speaker's intention to be overly informative in order to counter contextual expectations pointing towards ¬p (Israel, 2001). I understand this process as part of a systematic bias of speakers treating propositions as being more immediately relevant to the extra-linguistic context than would objectively be called for (Ahern and Clark, 2017, Schaden, 2012).

The crux of my proposal is that speakers are differentially and systematically constrained by situational parameters of language use (i.e. register, cf. Lüdeling et al., 2022). Situational contexts differ in the amount of bias they (conventionally) permit; language of immediacy (Koch and Oesterreicher, 1985) is predicted to be the least constrained in this respect. In the talk, I will give an example of the applicability of this constraint-based linking hypothesis in a concrete instance, with a case study of socially-stratified (by gender and class) change involving an emerging perfect construction in 19th century Icelandic personal letters. In doing so, I demonstrate how complex social facts can be incorporated into a diachronically-informed model of expressive phenomena.

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