Letrônica
Revista Digital do
Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras da PUCRS
Porto Alegre, v. 8, n. 1, p. 243-247, janeiro-junho 2015
e-ISSN 1984-4301
http://revistaseletronicas.pucrs.br/ojs/index.php/letronica/
doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.15448/1984-4301.2015.1.21140

An interview with Jonathan Culpeper

Uma entrevista com Jonathan Culpeper

Cristina Becker Lopes-Perna[1], Cristiane Ruzicki Corsetti[2], Claudia Strey[3]

[1] PhD in Linguistics, and professor at PUCRS. cperna@pucrs.br
[2] PhD in Linguistics, and academic consultant for Cultura Inglesa S.A. cris.corsetti@gmail.com
[3] PhD Student of Linguistucs at PUCRS and CNPq fellow. claudiastrey@gmail.com

JONATHAN CULPEPER is Professor of English Language and Linguistics at Lancaster University, UK. He holds a Ph.D in Linguistics and a B.A. Hons. in English Language and Literature, at Lancaster University. Most of his current work belongs to the field of Pragmatics. He has a particular research interest in linguistic politeness, focusing on the social dynamics of interaction. He was co-editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Pragmatics* from 2009 to 2014.[1]

[1] JONATHAN CULPEPER é professor de Língua Inglesa e Linguística na Universidade de Lancaster, Inglaterra. Ele é doutor em Linguística e bacharel com honras em Língua Inglesa e Literatura pela Universidade de Lancaster. A maior parte do seu trabalho atual pertence ao campo da pragmática, e sua pesquisa está relacionada à polidez linguística, focando nas dinâmicas sociais da interação. Ele foi co-editor-chefe do *Journal of Pragmatics* de 2009 até 2014. j.culpeper@lancaster.ac.uk

1. **Cristina Becker Lopes-Perna (CBLP), Cristiane Ruzicki Corsetti (CRC) and Claudia Strey (CS):** In your recently published book, "Pragmatics and the English Language", you argue that "interaction is where pragmatic phenomena happen" (Culpeper and Haugh, 2014, p. 11). You also describe the tension between first-order and second-order perspectives on pragmatics, advocating a middle ground approach. Could you comment on these perspectives highlighting the role of interaction?

➲ **Jonathan Culpeper (JC):** Michael Haugh and I are very much in favour of a middle ground approach. In fact, at one stage we were thinking of using the words "middle ground" as part of the label for the kind of pragmatics that we were advocating (in the event, we decided to call it "integrative pragmatics", a label that suggests an integrated mix). Note that our enthusiasm for the middle is not typical of academia. Scholars frequently advocate positions that involve the rejection – often total rejection – of another position. In the process, unhelpful dichotomies emerge. For example, in the world of politeness studies, second-order approaches, such as that of Brown and Levinson (1987) are rejected by first-order approaches, such as that of Eelen (2001). But what if there is actually a bit of merit in both? To argue for this is more difficult: it is less sexy academically, as indeed are all compromises and mixtures – the stuff of the middle ground. Nevertheless, Michael and I think that there is much to be gained from a middle ground approach in pragmatics. It is, not least of all, the best bet for accommodating what is really going on. Therein lies a characteristic of our approach – it is strongly empirical, closely connected with data.

Where does interaction stand in all this? Interaction is not part of the approach, but the analytical focus of the approach. Other approaches in linguistics can treat language as a relatively abstract, formal entity, but clearly this is far removed from the business of pragmatics. Some older approaches in pragmatics may give the impression that the focus is on acts (or action) (John Searle's work on speech act theory is a case in point). It is in part. But communicative acts do not usually occur on their own, even if the reaction is a non-verbal one (e.g. a verbal request to do something is made, and the target complies non-verbally). So, and in tune with the goal of "accommodating what is really going on", our analytical focus must be on interaction.

Scholars of interaction emphasise the fact that the sequencing of acts has important consequences for meaning (e.g. an answer demonstrates that a participant took the previous act as a question), and also that meaning is not fixed but emerges in the course of interaction (i.e. it is not driven from the start by a completely fixed set of intentions). On the other hand, our understandings of interaction are not starting from scratch each time. The sequencing of acts is often quite predictable, forming what, for example, Shank and Abelson (1977) refer to as scripts. And acts can be conventionally associated with particular meanings. Pre-requests are a case in point. An utterance such as "do you need those?" is so closely associated with actual requests that it can easily do the job of the request itself. In other words, although meanings emerge, we also construct meanings on the basis of known conventions. All this brings us back to issues of first and second order. The thrust of first order approaches has been to tease out emergent meanings, whereas the thrust of second-order approaches has been to describe relatively stable, conventional meanings. We would argue that both approaches are needed.

2. **CBLP, CRC and CS:** Each chapter of your book includes reflection boxes which describe pragmatic variation in English. Could you describe one pragmatic phenomenon that is shared across a number of Englishes and one that is British English specific?

➲ **JC:** Pragmatic phenomena on the grammar interface, phenomena such as referring expressions and presuppositional triggers, tend to be shared across a number of Englishes. Even here, however, one must be careful not to assume *all* Englishes. For example, the deictic referring expression *you* seems to be shared by many Englishes. However, whilst most Englishes use it for both singular and plural addressees, Irish English and Liverpool English have the plural form *yous*, and some dialects in the US have forms such as *yinz* ("you ones").

One might reasonably expect pragmatic phenomena that are more closely built on social and/or cultural practices to be more variable across Englishes. Thus, the pragmatic act of apology is a highly sensitive socio-cultural interpersonal act, whereas the use of a definite article to achieve an existential presupposition is generally not. So, what might be British English specific? The problem with this question is that the target, British English, includes a rather large number of people of varying cultures and practices. Recently, I have been investigating the idea that the British are relatively indirect when they make polite requests. Certainly, this accords with the stereotype. Moreover, there is empirical evidence too (e.g. Blum-Kulka et al. 1989). However, for somebody living in the north of England, as I do, all this does not quite ring true. My sense is that northern English requestive interactions are more likely to be characterised by terms of endearment (e.g. *love*, *pet*), relatively direct pragmatic acts, and also banter, than are southern. But the research to establish the truth of this is lacking. (Nevertheless, I will make a relevant point under the next heading).

3. **CBLP, CRC and CS:** What is the main contribution of Corpus Pragmatics to pragmatic theory?

➲ **JC:** Corpus pragmatics, I think, is a hot area. On the face of it, the alliance between corpus linguistics and pragmatics does not seem that promising. A corpus contains de-contextualised language, and corpus linguistics seems exclusively focused on quantitative matters. But actually a corpus contains much that can be gleaned from the co-text, and it can be also annotated with at least some contextual variables. And the idea of a focus on quantitative matters is only partially true; most corpus-related papers perform both qualitative and quantitative analyses.

How can corpus pragmatics make a contribution to pragmatic theory, or indeed pragmatics generally? I would say that there are three avenues:

(1) Corpus work can reveal what is routine, what is conventional. Much of the business of interaction is routine. It is words and expressions used to get things done, to apologise when things go wrong, to meet someone or to say goodbye, to connect ideas up or draw attention to them, and so on. We do not invent something new to say each time, but draw on conventionalised expressions. In so doing, of course, we also demonstrate the fact that we know the local community norms about using particular expressions in particular contexts. Corpus approaches are efficient and precise in assessing what is conventional and by how much, and they can track regularities.

(2) Corpus work can reveal the meanings of pragmatics metalanguage, including expressions such as *implied*, *innuendo*, *irony*, *request*, *apology*, *polite*, *rude*, etc. I am not suggesting that the findings of this work necessarily result in theoretical changes. Theories have broader scope and different goals from the meanings of such expressions. Nevertheless, they can provide insight. For example, some work I have done on the word *polite*, using half a billion words of British English in the 2 billion word Oxford English Corpus, suggest that that word is associated with friendliness and warmth. This is not at all the distancing characteristic of indirectness, the supposed characteristic of British politeness. This result suggests that a corrective may be necessary for the classic politeness theories of Brown and Levinson (1987) and Leech (1983), which have indirectness at their centres.

(3) It is perfectly possible to study contextually oriented aspects of pragmatics by deploying annotation. When people talk of corpus annotation, they are usually talking and thinking about codes for grammatical parts of speech which are added to the corpus data. There is no reason why such codes could not be added for pragmatic phenomena. I developed a scheme with Dawn Archer for adding annotation to corpora in order to track the social characteristics of both speakers and the particular addressees they were talking to (cf. Archer and Culpeper 2003). In one particular study, we added another layer of annotation to pick out speech acts of request, and then we were in a position to correlate a particular speech act with particular social characteristics (cf. Culpeper and Archer 2008).

4. **CBLP, CRC and CS:** What are the recent developments within "Politeness"?

➲ **JC:** This is not a particularly easy question to answer. There have been two clear waves in politeness research. The first involved the classic models, such as Brown and Levinson (1987) and Leech (1983). These eventually stimulated a reaction which formed the second wave. This second wave includes discursive approaches, or at least approaches that were not anchored in classic pragmatic theories (e.g. speech act theory and Conversational Implicature) and generally focused on what the layperson was making of it all, typically arguing that interpretations of politeness are in no way fixed but are open to dispute. But what about now? I do not think that there is any one approach that has clearly emerged as in some sense triumphant. Perhaps one can detect something of a middle ground emerging! Marina Terkourafi's work on the frame-based approach to politeness is a case in point, first appearing in 2001 and gaining ground since.

I should also mention developments not exactly "within" politeness but alongside it, namely, developments with regard to impoliteness. These really seem to have taken off since about 2008. Here, as well, middle ground approaches seem to be gaining strength. This point is explicitly made by Locher and Bousfield (2008). I would see my own work on impoliteness (e.g. 2011) as an example of this middle ground. Interestingly, many studies these days are not focusing exclusively on either politeness or impoliteness, but treating the whole range of phenomena. A symptom of this is the increasingly frequent use of the label "(im)politeness".

Finally, it is worth drawing attention to an obviously hot area – the study of (im)politeness in the context of the new media, blogs, vlogs, Twitter, texts, etc.

5. **CBLP, CRC and CS:** As the Co-Editor-in-Chief of the Journal of Pragmatics, what advice would you give to researchers submitting their articles?

➲ **JC:** Just to correct a presupposition in the question, after five years at the helm, I have stepped down from the Journal of Pragmatics. But, having handled at least 1,500 papers during that period, I can give some advice. The most frequent reason for rejection is that the paper did not fit the scope of the journal. So, before submitting it do make sure you are familiar with the kind of topics that the journal publishes. Look at papers published over the last five years or so, as those papers best reflect current policy. Whilst you are there, note how papers are structured and the style in which they are written. The next most frequent reason for rejection is probably that a whole chunk or section of the paper that would normally be there is not. For example, there is no literature review, or the analysis is miniscule. A symptom of such papers is that they are abnormally short. Note that most papers are around 8,000 words. There is no merit in producing something much longer. In fact, if you submit something that is unnecessarily long, it will also be rejected. Thereafter, the usual characteristics of good, scientific work become an issue. For example, I quite often rejected papers that did not use enough informants in their experiments, or had a dataset that was too small. Sometimes I rejected (or requested revisions to) papers that were missing recent research; and sometimes I rejected (or requested revisions to) papers where the analysis was not sufficiently rigorous. One way of making sure all these things are at the right level is to ask colleagues if they can give you some feedback on your work, or give a presentation on your topic at your institution.

References

ARCHER, Dawn; CULPEPER, J. Sociopragmatic annotation: New directions and possibilities in historical corpus linguistics. In: WILSON, A., RAYSON, P.; MCENERY, T. (Ed.). *Corpus Linguistics by the Lune:* A Festschrift for Geoffrey Leech. Frankfurt/Main: Peter Lang, 2003. p. 37-58.

BLUM-KULKA, Shoshana; HOUSE, Jill. Cross-cultural and situational variation in requesting behavior. In: BLUM-KULKA, Shoshana; HOUSE, Jill; KASPER, Gabriele (Ed.). *Cross-Cultural Pragmatics:* Requests and Apologies. Norwood NJ: Ablex. 1989. Vol. XXXI: Advances in Discourse Processes. p. 123-154,

BROWN, Penelope; LEVINSON, Stephen C. *Politeness:* Some Universals in Language Usage. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

CULPEPER, Jonathan. *Impoliteness:* Using Language to Cause Offence. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511975752

CULPEPER, Jonathan; ARCHER, Dawn. Requests and directness in Early Modern English trial proceedings and play-texts, 1640-1760. In: JUCKER, Andreas H.; TAAVITSAINEN, Irma (Ed.). *Speech Acts in the History of English*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2008. p. 45-84.

CULPEPER, Jonathan; HAUGH, Michael. *Pragmatics and the English Language*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014.

EELEN, Gino. *A Critique of Politeness Theories*. Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing, 2001.

LEECH, Geoffrey N. *Principles of Pragmatics*. London: Longman, 1983.

LOCHER, Miriam A.; BOUSFIELD, Derek. Introduction: Impoliteness and power in language. In: BOUSFIELD, Derek; LOCHER, Miriam A. (Ed.). *Impoliteness in Language: Studies on its Interplay with Power in Theory and Practice*. Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2008. p. 1-13.

SCHANK, Roger C.; ABELSON, Robert P. *Scripts, Plans, Goals, and Understanding:* An Inquiry into Human Knowledge Structures. New Jersey and London: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1977.

TERKOURAFI, MARINA. *Politeness in Cypriot Greek:* A frame-based approach. Unpublished PhD dissertation. Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 2001.