

What does syntax mean?: Understanding the social life of syntax

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As this workshop evidences, the social and the linguistic are being reconciled across all branches of language study but, perhaps most surprisingly, in the field of syntax. In 2005, Cornips and Corrigan (2005: 2–3) predicted that the continuing development of socio-syntax would rely on attention to the following three factors: (1) the use of data from a range of different sources, (2) a more robust view of meaning and how variability is learnt, and (3) the interface between syntax and other domains of language.

In this paper, I show how attention to these three factors has not just allowed the field of socio-syntax to flourish, it has also refined our understanding of types of ‘meaning’. Whilst all types of linguists attend to semantic and pragmatic meaning, historically, only sociolinguists have concerned themselves with social meaning (meaning that is enacted performatively to create social reference). However, I argue that social meaning is not a separate kind of meaning that should be left to sociolinguists, but – drawing on Eckert (2019) – that semantic, pragmatic and social meaning are interdependent and range along a continuum.

To illustrate this, I provide a case study of the use of right dislocation amongst high school students in a north-west English town (Moore 2023). Right dislocation (RD) refers to a clause followed by a noun phrase or pronoun tag which is co-referential with the preceding subject or object pronoun (for instance, *He’s weird, my dad*). My study examines how 347 instances of RD are used by 27 participants across approximately 50 hours of interactions audio-recorded in the early 2000s. Importantly, my analysis is supported by an extensive ethnography of the high school community (including 196,400 words of field notes). I draw heavily on recent work in sociopragmatics (Davis & Potts 2010; Acton 2021) to show that both pragmatic meaning and social meaning rely upon an analysis of potential alternative utterances – such that the meaning of a syntactic construction is contingent on its relative markedness (Horn 1984). Furthermore, whilst many continue to think of social meaning as separate from linguistic meaning, I demonstrate that the social meaning of syntax can actually be derived from a construction’s underlying semantics and information structure, and that, in turn, social meaning can determine which particular syntactic constructions specific speakers use.

References

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