Larssyn Staley, *Socioeconomic Pragmatic Variation. Speech acts and address forms in context.* Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2018, xiv, 201 pp. (Pragmatics & Beyond New Series, 219) https://doi.org/10.1075/pbns.291

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Larssyn Staley's "Socioeconomic Pragmatic Variation" reports on a study that investigates the ways pragmatic variables are realized in different contexts. The pragmatic variables studied were offers, thanks responses, and address terms; and the contexts were service encounters at U.S. restaurants serving American cuisine at three different price-points – high, mid, and low, representing three authentic, socioeconomically different discourse environments.

The Introduction (Chapters 1 & 2) gives a clear background to the study and prepares readers well for the rest of the book in three main ways.

First, the Introduction explains what pragmatic variables are; it does this by on the one hand, building upon, and making more specific both the definition of linguistic variable (Kiesling 2011) and an earlier version of the notion of pragmatic variable (Félix-Brasdefer 2015), and on the other, stressing the importance of the context, position, and function of the variable (Cheshire 2005; Pichler 2013). The importance of the context has been rightly captured by Mey (2011: 178), "all speech acts are to a certain extent created by their contexts, in that context pre-determines what the speaker is going to say even before the he or she has opened their respective mouths". The context's importance leads naturally to emphasizing the position and function of the pragmatic variables, as both are determined by the linguistic context and cognitive context.

Second, it explains in detail the meaning of variational pragmatics and highlights this branch of pragmatics by comparing it with variationist sociolinguistics and discourse pragmatics. Staley has probably pinpointed the gist of variational pragmatics studies with this sentence, "these differences in language use in regard to social factors are at the centre of research in variational pragmatics" (p.27).

Third, it justifies the choice of data and data collection methods – real service encounter discourse, collected by audio-recording the exchanges between servers and guests during such encounters. The justification is done by explaining the inadequacy or inappropriacy of three main possible alternative data collection methods, namely interview, discourse completion task (DCT), and corpus studies. Conducting interviews, despite being a highly popular method in variationist sociolinguistics studies, is not able to generate a high enough frequency of occurrence of the pragmatic features under investigation. DCT is a convenient tool to obtain a relatively large amount of discourse produced in the same, highly controlled context, thus making possible high comparability and contrastivity. The discourse data it obtains, however, is low in authenticity and cannot reach the "interactional level" (Schneider and Barron 2008) which Staley aspires to achieve in the present study. And finally, while corpus studies, in contrast to DCT, offer high authenticity, their comparability and contrastivity are low, inasmuch as the contexts are not controlled.

The book's Methodology section (Chapters 3 & 4), in my view, deserves the readers' most attention and highest commendation. Here, Staley gives a comprehensive account of the procedures used to collect and analyse the data which form the corpus for the present study – the Los Angeles Restaurant Corpus (LARC). The chapters provide a detailed discussion and illustration of the context of the present study, as well as a clear introduction of the communicative activities and tasks that are central to a variational pragmatics study such as the present work.

Staley presents her two research questions at the very beginning of Chapter 3. She then explains how the questions can be operationalized, and highlights the strengths of her methodology through justifying the choice of research site – socially striated restaurants, and by emphasizing the importance of establishing comparable research contexts. The chapter then undertakes a more thorough critique of the alternative research methods (use of DCT and corpora) before discussing the relevancy and importance of the two groundbreaking, department-store studies by Labov (2006[1996], 1972) to the present study. This critique and discussion allows readers to appreciate the advantages of analyzing authentic discourse recorded at research sites that represent different socioeconomic classes, given that the study analyzes restaurant service encounters using comparable, naturally occurring data that can be compared and contrasted according to specific social factors.

Next, the book's critical review of the literature on service encounters serves not only to highlight the inadequacies of previous sociolinguistic and pragmatic studies, but also to reveal the positive aspects of service encounters, thereby once again providing strong justification for the choice of data and research site.

Staley then presents the details of the Los Angeles Restaurant Corpus (LARC), including:

- the LARC data collection method (in her case, describing how she approached the restaurants and audio-recorded the exchanges during service encounters);
- its stringent and clear selection criteria for the restaurants constituting the three different socioeconomic classes (high, mid, and low) that allow for her contexts to be reasonably controlled for meaningful comparison, while retaining flexibility for exhibition of pragmatic variables; and
- the roles and aims of servers and guests (whose interactions during the service encounters produced the discourse constituting the LARC).

Staley gives a comprehensive introduction and illustration of the service encounter discourse, not only highlighting the advantages of the bottom-up approach she adopts in the study and delimiting the various LARC contexts – social, cognitive, and linguistic –, but also explaining the benefits of situating this discourse in the respective communicative activities and communicative tasks under investigation.

The robustness of Staley's methodology lies in its ability to address the key question that analysts need to ask (as pointed out by Culpeper and Haugh in their discussion of the interpersonal approach to pragmatic politeness; 2014: 231), namely: "whose understanding of politeness is it that we are analysing" – even if needs to be said that it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, for an analyst to have direct access to the minds of the interlocutors whose discourse is being analyzed. Staley addresses this issue adequately by (1) having herself as a

participant-observer; thus, by being herself one of the guests experiencing the service encounters, it is her (and her companions') understanding that is being analyzed; (2) by achieving higher objectivity through taking into account the responses given by the guests (probably her own and her companions', as in her example 2, pp. 79-80); and (3) by examining the contexts (social, cognitive, and linguistic) to determine if the utterances produced by the servers constitute an instance of the target pragmatic variables.

The Findings and Discussion section (Chapters 5 to 7) describes and explains how the three pragmatic variables vary along the socioeconomic scale respectively represented by the chosen restaurants. Unlike sociolinguistic variables which can be defined prior to the analysis, pragmatic variables need to be defined by taking the context into account. Staley therefore defines the three pragmatic variables on the multiple levels of function, propositional content, and sequencing; delimits the discourse context to the communicative activities involved in serving drinks, appetizers, entrees, and desserts, and in clearing the tables; and delimits the linguistic and cognitive contexts according to the function of each of the variables. Each of these three chapters starts with a concise, but adequate introduction giving the essential background information (in the form of review of relevant literature) and informing the readers of the structure and main components of the section. Staley's systematic analysis, made possible by the clear definition of the pragmatic variables and delimitation of the contexts, convincingly argues that the three pragmatic variables do vary along the socioeconomic cline.

The Conclusion (Chapter 8) presents the principal findings once again, reminds readers of the strengths of the research design, and reiterates what is probably the most significant contribution of the study, namely "to further research in the field of variational pragmatics by investigating how one might circumscribe the variable context in pragmatics using interactional data and to see whether or not there is socioeconomic pragmatic variation" (p. 188).

Some minor criticisms will be presented in the following.

As a reader myself, I would like to see some changes made to the classification of offers, the presentation of numerical results, and the evaluation of the statistical significance of the observed differences between the three socioeconomic classes.

Staley argues that one way the servers perform the speech act of 'offering' is to doubt their own ability to provide the food or drink items specified in the offer, i.e. by questioning "the preparatory condition that the offerer can complete the future action" (p. 93). An example of such an offer is: "Can I get you started with a beverage?". This conventionally indirect utterance, however, could also be interpreted as the server's request for the guests' permission to bring them a beverage. This alternative interpretation becomes more likely whenever the offer is realized using "may" (rather than "can"), as in "um (.) may I offer you something to drink?" (p. 106).

While Staley claims to have adopted Blum-Kulka et al.'s (1989) classification of indirect speech acts (requests in particular), the actual offers (that are realized as formulaic suggestions – a strategy that Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) classify as conventionally indirect), are for some reason regarded as non-conventionally indirect instead. This may need further elaboration.

The presentation of the results is mostly clear and effective, but on a few occasions readers may find it difficult to understand and appreciate the meaning and significance conveyed by the numbers and charts. For example:

- in figure 5.4, a higher frequency is represented by a band which is narrower than the one that represents a lower frequency;
- the use of area charts in presenting sociopragmatic differences (e.g. figure 6.4) may unnecessarily increase readers' burden of interpretation.

Finally, there is the issue of how to present the results of statistical computations. The readership is only aware of two facts: certain statistical tests have been run, and some observed differences are considered significant, as indicated by the p value. However, if the readers are to judge for themselves the validity of the findings, or carry out a replicate study, they also need to know which particular statistical test has been run.

These three minor issues, however, do by no means undermine the value and significance of Staley's work for the study of socioeconomic pragmatic variation. The book is highly recommended reading for individuals interested in linguistic research in general, and (variational) pragmatics in particular. Readers will benefit greatly from the book and in particular from its robust methodology, which shows how naturally occurring data can be collected without unnecessarily interrupting the normal restaurant service, and how contexts – social, linguistic, and cognitive – can be identified, and be of use when observing and interpreting the linguistic realization of pragmatic variables.

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