

Semanto-pragmatic approaches to historical social meanings

In several publications and in the last two HiSoN conferences and in other sociolinguistic venues, a number of presentations have illustrated the efficacy of using semanto-pragmatic analytic techniques to extract social meanings (attitudes, language regard, enregisterment, etc...) from historical data, particularly data retrieved from interactions in older dramas. The general argument supporting this approach has been twofold: First, such techniques suggest that historical data is not always "bad"; it represents beliefs and attitudes, not the sociolinguistic structure of performance and, as such, allows insight into contemporary ideologies. Second, it fulfills the long-standing requirement that such attitudes and beliefs (the "subjective correlates" of Weinreich, Labov, and Harris 1968) are required facts in the study of variation and change but that they require independent verification — i.e., they cannot be determined by the variable structures of language use itself.

In all these previous presentations and publications, the analytic approaches have been data-driven: Texts have been examined and a variety of semanto-pragmatic analytic approaches have been applied. In this presentation four of these approaches are examined more carefully and illustrated with appropriate data. Two evaluations of these analytic techniques will be offered: How effectively and convincingly can they be applied to the data? Second, how effective are they in exposing the implicit as well as asserted material that represents the folk linguistic beliefs and attitudes embedded in the texts.

This outing considers the semanto-pragmatic approaches to the identification and analysis of four principal areas in which the social-psychologically sought-after implicit rather than asserted material may appear. 1) Semantic presupposition (structurally triggered "Do you STILL smoke"), 2) Semantic implicature (structurally triggered "He's rural BUT intelligent"), 3) Pragmatic presupposition (shared knowledge, "common ground"), and 4) Pragmatic implicature (derived from speech acts and cooperative principles) (e.g., Potts 2014). Examples of each are given from historical English dramatic texts and evaluated.