

Cognitive Pragmatics and Variational Pragmatics: Possible Interaction?

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In this paper I attempt to look into a possible way in which cognitive pragmatics can help out variational studies in explaining the processes of language change. After broadly setting the scene this article proceeds by giving basic information about variational pragmatics. Then it concentrates on Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory and its possible interaction with social sciences, namely its possible application in sociolinguistics. I next present my own research of Split (urban) dialect/ vernacular change where I concentrate on explanatory side, asking which explanation would be the best one for the changes of some variables in the dialect. The interpretation and discussion of the findings precede the discussion of salience as the explanatory tool for language change as seen from cognitivists and variationists with the hope that such discussions can bring closer cognitivists, i.e. relevantists, to sociolinguists, i.e. variationists.

Keywords: Cognitive pragmatics, relevance theory, variational pragmatics, sociolinguistics, urban dialectology, salience.

1. *Introduction*

Quite early in the history of pragmatics two different ways of doing pragmatics, or, one might say, two schools of thought established themselves. One of these ways/schools can conveniently be described as the Anglo-American tradition of pragmatics, the other as the (Continental) European tradition (Jucker 2012: 501). Levinson had already pointed out the distinction between these two traditions (Levinson 1983: 2, 5–6). Anglo-American pragmatics is concerned with the study of meaning that arises through the use of language. The (Continental) European school of thought takes pragmatics to have a much wider range of tasks, it is a specific perspective for studying language in general. Representing the European pragmatic turn Verschueren provides a typical

definition: “Pragmatics can be defined as *the study of language use*, or, to employ a somewhat more complicated phrasing, *the study of linguistic phenomena from the point of view of their usage properties and processes*” (1999: 1, italics in the original). The difference between these two schools of thought is clearly reflected in the relevant textbooks and handbooks of pragmatics. Horn and Ward (2004), for instance, explicitly exclude the broad, sociologically based European view of pragmatics from their *Handbook of Pragmatics* and focus on the “more narrowly circumscribed, mainly Anglo-American conception of linguistic and philosophical pragmatics and its applications” (2004: xi). The general stand seems to be that the Continental European tradition is too all-inclusive and therefore lacks a clear delimitation and defies an attempt to establish a coherent research agenda (Jucker 2012: 502). On the other hand, the textbooks by Mey (2001) and Verschueren and Ostman (2009a) clearly adopt the wider Continental European approach which means they include questions about the social and cultural contexts in which language is used. Thus Verschueren and Ostman say: “Pragmatics is defined as the cognitive, social, and cultural science of language and communication” (2009b: 1). In this wider approach, pragmatics, very importantly, intersects predominantly with sociolinguistics and, more generally, social sciences, with a focus on interpersonal and social meaning rather than sentential and textual meaning. In Verschueren’s words there is “no strict boundary between pragmatics and some other areas in the field of linguistics, such as discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, or conversational analysis” (1991: 1).

After broadly setting the scene this article proceeds as follows: Part 2 gives more information about variational pragmatics. Part 3 concentrates on Sperber and Wilson’s relevance theory and its possible interaction with social science, namely its possible application in sociolinguistics. Part 4 presents my own research of Split (urban) dialect/vernacular change where I concentrate on explanatory side, asking which explanation would be the best one for the changes of some variables in the dialect. Part 5. is the interpretation and discussion of the findings. Part 6 concludes on the discussion of salience as the explanatory tool for language change as seen from cognitivists and variationists.

2. *Variational pragmatics*

Recently there has been a growing interest in different dimensions of language-internal variations of pragmatics. Schneider and Barron who have given this field of investigation its name, namely Variational pragmatics, define it as follows: “Variational pragmatics can be considered a twin discipline of historical pragmatics, which was established in the mid-1990s (cf. Juncker 1995). Briefly speaking, historical pragmatics investigates pragmatic variation over time, whereas variational pragmatics investigates pragmatic variation (geographical and social) in space. Also, while historical pragmatics is conceptualized as the inter-

section of pragmatics with historical and diachronic linguistics, variational linguistics is conceptualized as the interface of pragmatics with variational linguistics, i. e. with modern dialectology, as a branch of contemporary sociolinguistics” (2008b: 1). Schneider and Barron (2008) develop a framework for variational pragmatics in which they envisage five types of language variation as possible dimensions of investigation: regional, socio-economic, ethnic, gender, and age variation. For my discussion the most important aspect is their stress on the intersection of variational pragmatics and dialectology. Thus looking at a broader scheme (and in order to help the reader) that the field of pragmatics encompasses I offer the following divisions as presented in Figure 1. Pragmatics studies 1. cognitive, 2. intercultural, 3. historical and 4. variational aspects of language. Furthermore variational pragmatics interfaces with variational linguistics, i.e. with its most prominent sub-fields, (urban) dialectology and sociolinguistics.

PRAGMATICS			
cognitive	intercultural	historical	variational
			variational linguistics
			i.e. sociolinguistics & dialectology

3. *Relevance theory*

Relevance theory is known primarily as “a cognitive psychological theory” as Sperber and Wilson stress once again in their most recent book *Meaning and relevance* (2013: 281) so one can rightly ask how it can have any relevance to variational pragmatics as defined above? However, Sperber and Wilson have written an article under the title “Relevance theory and the social sciences” where the authors say: “Some commentators have described the relevance-theoretic approach to communication as psychological rather than sociological. Often, this is intended as a criticism. We would like to respond by reflecting in very general terms about possible interaction between relevance theory and research programmes in the social sciences....among other things we would like to help bring about a redefinition of disciplinary boundaries, including those between the cognitive and social sciences, and we see our work as contributing to both domains” (1997: 145). They think that putting stress on inferential communication (in contrast to code model of communication) is in fact pointing to the intrinsically social aspect of communication, not just because it is a form of interaction, but also,

less trivially, because it exploits and enlarges the scope of basic forms of social cognition. Furthermore ostensive or non-ostensive uses of the act of communication itself convey claims and attitudes about the social relationship between the interlocutors. They conclude: “*Right or wrong, this is a strong sociological claim*” (1997: 146, italics mine). They also stress that sociolinguists have been particularly concerned with these aspects of verbal behavior, and have studied them with sophistication and insight but that they themselves (in their book *Relevance*), *largely ignored them* (italics mine). They did not mean by this to deny their importance, or to express a lack of interest in the issues or the work done; they merely felt that, at that stage, they could best contribute to the study of human communication by taking it at its most elementary level, and abstracting away from these more complex (social) aspects. They conclude: “So far, the contribution of relevance theory to the study of human communication has been at a fairly abstract level. However, it seems to us to have potential implications at a more concrete sociolinguistic level” (1997: 146).

It is evident from the above that Sperber and Wilson are much aware of possible and fruitful interaction of cognitive and social since they also conclude their Postface to the second edition of *Relevance* with the words: “Two important and related domains have hardly been explored at all from a relevance-theoretic perspective: the theory has been developed from the point of view of the audience of communicative acts, and *without taking into account the complex sociological factors richly studied by sociolinguistics.*” (1995: 259, italics mine).

The only attempt (that I know of) of bringing cognitive and social together within the relevance framework is the study by Gisle Andersen presented in her book *Pragmatic markers and sociolinguistic variation - a relevance theoretic approach to the language of adolescents*.¹ Andersen says that her study is an attempt to combine sociolinguistics and relevance theory. That such a combinatory approach can be fruitful is implied by the abovementioned comment in which Sperber and Wilson claim that social character and context of communication are *essential* to the wider picture.

4. *Sociolinguistic research*

My own work falls under variational sociolinguistics. I have done much research into urban dialectology and what I want to do in the rest of the paper is present just a small part of my findings and try to show that there is a possible meeting place of cognitive and variational studies that can help us to at least clear up the grounds of some explanatory problems in, maybe, both fields.

¹ For more encompassing cognitive pragmatic aspects of communication see Bara (2010) and Schmid (2012).

The investigation into an urban vernacular aims to answer the question: Why did some dialectal variables disappear and why are some in the state of variation and others are still firmly used in, this case Split, urban vernacular? In order to provide a plausible explanation, the chosen variables were analyzed within the sociolinguistic framework using the **principle of salience** as a theoretical explanatory tool. If we say for a linguistic feature that it is salient, then we consider that feature to be perceptually and/or cognitively, or socially marked. In my investigation this principle was formulated in the following way: *Those dialectal characteristics/features that the speaker of standard language feels as socially salient and thus unacceptable, or as some kind of 'mistake' disappear from the dialect first. Stigmatized or salient characteristics go out faster from the dialect than less stigmatized or non-salient characteristics.*

On this occasion I present only the research into syntactic variables and see how the principle of salience can be applied there, i.e., how can we explain dialect change with this theoretical tool? But first some very basic information on Split dialect and methodology used.² Split is a city on the Adriatic coast in Croatia. Once a small town (18,500 inhabitants in 1900), it has grown rapidly since World War II so that today it numbers about 200,000 inhabitants. The presented sociolinguistic analysis of Split urban dialect/vernacular is the analysis of the dialect as we find it today. In order to follow the linguistic changes of the Split dialect under the influence of the standard language, it is necessary to know that there are three main dialect groups in Croatia: Štokavian, Čakavian and Kajkavian, named after the interrogative-relative words for “what” in each dialect which is *što*, *ča* and *kaj* respectively. According to their reflexes of proto-Slavic /e/ (called *jat*), these dialects are traditionally also subdivided into *ijekavian*, *ekavian*, and *ikavian* varieties. For example, the word for “milk” is *mlijeko/mleko/mliko*, the first word being part of the standard language and the last two of the nonstandard varieties, *ekavian* and *ikavian*. But this is, of course, an idealized division, since there are many areas where the mixed varieties occur. Štokavian in its *ijekavian* form is the official standard language in Croatia. Apart from these most basic and widespread differences that are others as indicated in the presentation of the syntactic variables for this occasion. As far as methodology is concerned, in order to trace the changes speakers of the dialect are divided into 3 age groups which is one of the customary ways in sociolinguistic analyses. The older generation (in the graphs: Smoje and Ante), the middle generation (Ćićo and Oliver) and the third, young/ younger generation (Robert&Arijana; Petra&Marijana). The statistical analysis is obligatory in sociolinguistic studies of this kind if we are to establish with still relative certainty the percentage of features used. For this occasion I am presenting only

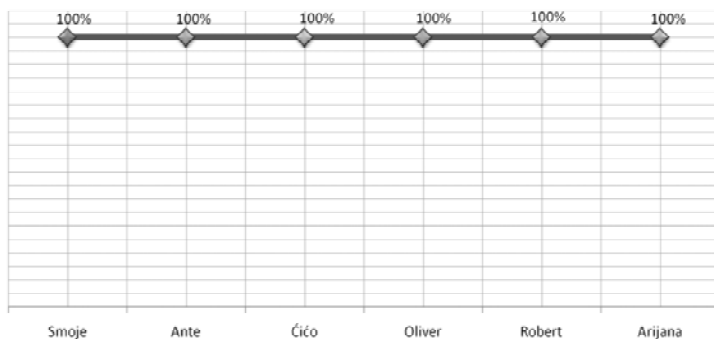
² For detailed study of dialect change in Split see Jutronić (2010). Summary in English pp. 441–465.

four syntactic variable under change in Split vernacular: 1. The use of the construction from/of+ genitive; 2. The use of the accusative/locative distinction; 3. The use of contracted form *mi je > me*; 4. The use of the interrogative/relative pronoun *ča*.

The results are presented in the graphs.

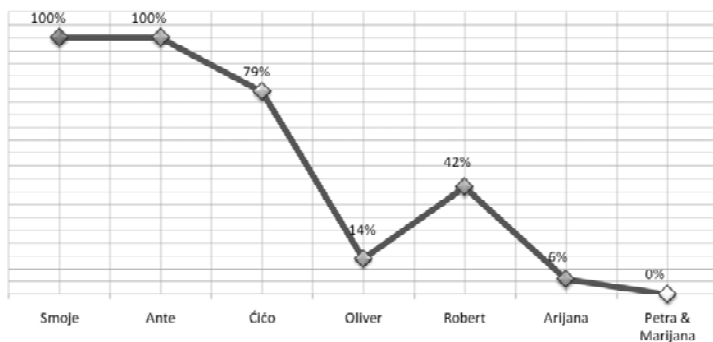
Graph 1. The Use of the Construction from/of + Genitive

Example: *Prsten o' znata instead of znatni prsten* (=ring made of gold *instead of* golden ring)



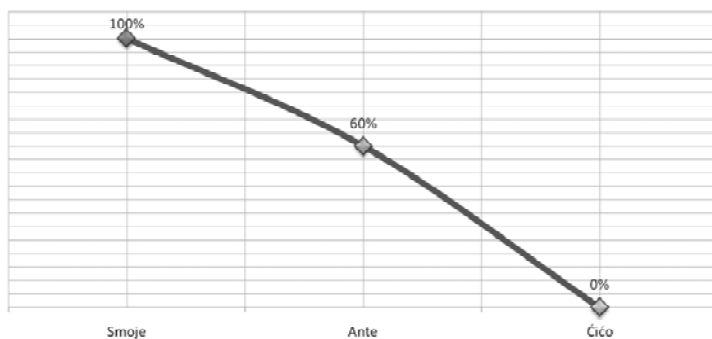
Graph 2. The Use of Accusative/Locative Distinction

Example: *Bija san u Split instead of Bio sam u Splitu* (I was in Split)



Graph 3. Th Use of Contracted Form: *mi je > me*

Example: *Draga mi je Ravena > Draga me Ravena* (I like Ravena)



Graph 4. The Use of the Interrogative-Relative Pronoun *ča*

Example: *Ča si radija?* (What did you do?); *Reci ča očeš* (Say what do you want)

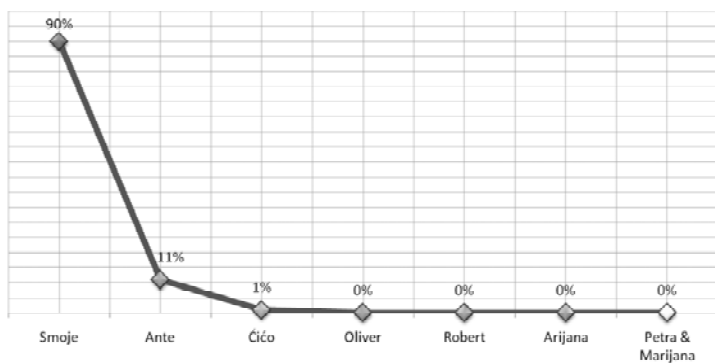


Table 1. Scale of salience -- syntactic variables

salient	variable		nonsalient
(changed)	(varying)	disappearing	(unchanged)
ča	A/L	---	of + G
<i>mi je > me</i>			

5. Interpretation and discussion

A **non-salient feature** is the construction of + genitive (*prsten od zlata* ‘a ring of gold’) instead of an adjectival attribute as in *zlatni prsten* (‘golden ring’) is, according to the Croatian linguist Finka, a “quite widespread” feature in Čakavian (1971: 62). This construction appears with all generations in 100% of the cases as evident from the graph. The use of this construction is not specific to Čakavian. It is heard often in other dialects and in the standard language too, in its conversational style. This must be one of the reasons why it is used so much with the young generation. It is nonsalient and thus it is not sanctioned and it firmly remains in the Split vernacular.

A **salient** syntactic characteristic in the Split vernacular are the contraction of *mi je > me* (*mi je* literally meaning ‘to me is’) and the interrogative-relative pronoun *ča* (‘what’). The former construction is found only with the older generation. Here are a couple of extra examples: *ruku me deboto izija* (‘he almost ate my hand’), *kad me skočija na posteju* (‘when he jumped on my bed’), *puno me drago* (‘I like it a lot’). This contraction is obviously stigmatized and we do not find it in use with the middle generation. The young generation does not even know about this feature. When you use the phrase they are rather surprised and often they do not understand what you mean.

Another **salient** feature is the interrogative-relative pronoun *ča* (‘what’). The Čakavian dialect and its various local manifestations got its name from the interrogative-relative pronoun *ča*. Finka says: “Wherever we find a trace of the pronoun *ča* there we find other very vital and essential Čakavian characteristics” (1979: 15).³ The pronoun *ča* is not a matter of prestige in the Split vernacular any more. The Štakavian pronoun *šta* or Štokavian form *što* (what) has replaced *ča* in all contexts. It is not consistently used even with the older generation. However, *ča* is used in 100% of the cases in the songs sung by the popular Dalmatian singer Oliver Dragojević and other singers from Dalmatia, and it is used in a kind of nostalgic way in order to strengthen the Dalmatian timbre and spirit of those songs. Speaking about the use of some archaic dialectal forms Croatian sociolinguist Kalogjera remarks: “... using from time to time this (archaic) variety the speaker is aiming at the ‘authentic’ old, local speech. As if he had some covert feeling of ‘historicity’ of his local vernacular which ‘today it is not as it used to be’” (1992: 129). Within the framework of the principle of salience this pronoun is felt as being overly Čakavian and thus it is being avoided or not used at all.

The Čakavian characteristic of mixing locative and accusative in the example sentence: *Bija san u Split* instead of *Bija san u Splitu* (‘I was in Split’) shows that the latter sentence has the correct locative ending of *-u* (*Splitu*). This is a feature that **varies** but still persists

³ Note that this was stated in 1979.

today. The question arises as how to explain this variation? It is not that easy or straightforward to apply the principle of salience in this case as it was in the previous cases. Why? This is a syntactic feature that should be salient since the speakers use the wrong case endings which one definitely hears as a ‘mistake’ and consequently it should be avoided and/or stigmatized. It is interesting that Finka speaks about it as “*the most serious disorder* in the Čakavian forms which was probably the result of the influence of a language called Dalmata” (1971: 46, italics mine). Thus this feature should be dying out of the Split vernacular today – but it is not. It is obviously not felt as a ‘disorder’ but it rather seems that this feature has a covert (social) prestige for Split vernacular speakers. Here we have to go back to the question of salience and its explanatory potential.

6. *More on salience*

British sociolinguist Peter Trudgill (1988) offers a very careful elaboration of salience and its most explicit application to language change. In my research I primarily relied on his discussion and further criticism of P. Kerswill and A. Williams presented in their 2002 paper entitled “Salience as an explanatory factor in language change.”⁴

In language change factors that play explanatory role are: 1. Language internal factors (linguistic factors) and 2. Extralinguistic factors. Extralinguistic factors are usually subdivided into: a. perceptual-attitudinal factors and b. social (socio-linguistic) factors.

If we suspect that a feature is salient for speakers because of its particular patterning, we start by checking first for language-internal factors. The received view among variationists is that language internal factors are, in most cases, not sufficient for the explanation of language change. We must immediately look for extra-linguistic factors that might be, in this case, linked to salience. These factors might be extremely varied and sometimes complex. But discussing salience in a way that divorces it from extra-linguistic factors leads to a failure to gain insights into the social patterning of linguistic features.

What are then some questions and the problems? If we say for a linguistic feature that it is salient, then we consider that feature to be perceptually and/or cognitively or socially marked. Consequently salience is defined both perceptually/cognitively and socially. The question is: Which of the extra linguistic factors are primary? Cognitive/perceptual or sociolinguistic? Kerwill and Williams seem to hold the view the sociolinguistic factors are primary. They talk about sociolinguistic sensitivity, social relations, time scheme and intensity of contact. I myself also put the stress on the social factors in my discussion about the

⁴ There are a number of newer books on salience but not that useful for the linguistic explanation. See Giora (2003) and Chiarcos, Claus, Grabski (2011). The most recent book that is more relevant and that summarizes the sociolinguistic discussion on salience is Racs (2013).

persistence of A/L mixture in Split dialect. Thus I concluded: “Although it (A/L mixing) should be socially stigmatized in the wider context of the standard language, it seems to be taken as an acceptable sign of localism, as something that every speaker of standard Croatian knows it is a “mistake” but takes it as a characteristic feature (a little quirk so to speak) of speakers from Dalmatia” (2010: 458). And everything Dalmatian is in most cases taken as positive since it is connected to the sea, the characteristic lazy Dalmatian attitude and happy-go-lucky behavior. Kalogjera says: “Thus in Zagreb the Dalmatian dialect is connected to a vigorous temperament, fickleness in love, garrulousness, pleasant laziness and at times with an unscrupulous brazenness in social life” (1965: 29).

On the other hand we have voices that favor the perceptual/cognitive factors as more explanatorily important. For example, Willem Holmann and Anna Siewierska (2006: 27) argue that cognitive perceptual factors are primary, not the social ones. Their reasoning is that linguistic items will normally be more or less free from social values when *they first arise*. They claim that it is only after they have emerged that social forces can start working on them. In other words, they suggest that ultimately it is the cognitive-perceptual constraints that make a form more or less liable to becoming subject to social evaluation and patterning. Here we turn back to Sperber and Wilson’s relevance theory for some possible insight.

7. *How can relevance theory help?*

Sperber and Wilson ask: “How does verbal communication convey social claims and attitudes, and play a role in the ‘negotiation’ of mutual relationships? The cognitive processes at work in the communicator, and the social character and context of communication are, of course, essential to the wider picture, to the study of which we hope relevance theory can contribute, and from which it stands greatly to benefit” (1995: 279). They have two proposals: Proposal A: The most basic claim of relevance theory (the First, or *Cognitive Principle of Relevance*) is that the pursuit of relevance is a constant factor in human mental life. Proposal B: *Communicative Principle of Relevance* is that ostensive communication creates uniquely precise expectations of relevance in others. Ostensive communication is the most important means by which the psychological tendency to maximise relevance is socially exploited.

With these two proposals or principles in mind we can pose our question again: Why are some non-standard realizations, although salient, so resistant to change? Taking Sperber and Wilson Proposal A the suggestion is that it is possible that the subjective relevance that speakers and listeners attach to salient phenomena is a result of processes of appraisal and possibly speech accommodation. Thus salience might primarily be seen as *unreflective intuitions of relevance* together with procedural inferential process. In other words we can say that

Cognitive principle of relevance suggests *that ultimately it is the cognitive/perceptual constraints that make a feature more or less liable to becoming subject to social evaluation and patterning*. This would give support to Hollmann and Siewierska (2006) who argue that cognitive perceptual factors are primary, not the social ones. On the other hand Kerswill and Williams (and myself) might retort that (unreflective) perceptual/cognitive factors have to be completed with reflective social evaluation. Otherwise they would not surface at all! There surely are different (unreflective) cognitive/perceptual factors that contribute to a variant's sociolinguistic salience but again if they are not completed with reflective social evaluations we would not know about them at all.

8. Conclusion

There has recently been a plea for sociolinguistics to integrate both theoretical and methodological developments from cognitive linguistics. Gries says: "I believe it is necessary to recognize that something can by definition only be sociolinguistically relevant if, as some point of time, it has passed through the filter of human mind (2013: 7). On the other hand cognitivists apologize that their approach to communication is primarily psychological rather than sociological, too. At the same time cognitive linguists claim that cognition is embedded in interaction. Social aspects of language must be taken into account. Some like Sperber and Wilson (2012) try to stress the possible interaction between their cognitivist relevance theory with research programs in the social sciences *and they see their work as contributing to both domains*. In our discussion of language/dialect change where salience was used as a possible explanatory tool it hopefully became evident that a worked out explanatory role of salience in explaining language change can profit from cognitivists as well as sociolinguists.

In sum to restate: Pragmatic research in the first decade of the 21st century has been characterized by an unprecedented diversification of subfields of pragmatics. My discussion here can be taken as an attempt to look into a more coherent way in which cognitive pragmatics can help out variational studies in explaining the processes of language change and the hope is that such discussions can bring closer cognitivists, in this particular discussion relevantists, to variationalists. In other words there is room for relevantists and variationalists to find a fruitful meeting ground.⁵

⁵ A short version of this paper was presented at Sperber symposium held March 18th 2013 in Rijeka and was organized by the Philosophy Department in Rijeka together with the Croatian Society for Analytic Philosophy. I thank the participants, particularly Dan Sperber, for many comments.

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