

Suggestions for further reading

- Nerlich, B. (2005) 'History of pragmatics', in K. Brown (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*, Amsterdam: Elsevier.
- Nerlich, B. and Clarke, D.D. (1996) *Language, Action, and Context: The Early History of Pragmatics in Europe and America, 1780–1930*, Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- (1999) 'Protopragmatic theories of language, 1780–1930', in P. Schmitter (ed.) *Geschichte der Sprachtheorie, Volume 4: Sprachtheorien der Neuzeit II: Der Epistemologische Kontext Neuzzeitlicher Sprach- und Grammatiktheorien*, Tübingen, Germany: Gunter Narr Verlag.

Honorific Language

All human languages contain expressions that are recognized by their speakers as pertaining to matters of respect or deference. Such repertoires are thereby associated with a socio-pragmatic model of conduct: acts of uttering certain expressions are understood as acts of deference, as ways of performing respect to others, while other expressions are contrastively associated with the absence of deference, or with disrespect and rudeness. Given their cross-linguistic ubiquity, such 'honorific' forms have been the subject of extensive comparative study (see Agha 1994 for a review of the literature). Indeed, the range of studies now available has transformed our understanding of how language serves to mark deference relations and, by extension, social relations of many other kinds (Agha 2007).

In the older literature on this topic, the term 'honorific' is used narrowly for *positively-valued, referent-focal, lexemic* signs of *deference* to interlocutory *others*. However, each of these italicized expressions represents a specific value of a distinct typological variable, all of which together define a larger space of cross-cultural and cross-linguistic variation: (1) The presence of *positively-valued* honorifics creates correlative partitions within a language of neutral or negatively-valued repertoires, yielding a punctuated cline of deference level and polarity (at the other end of which lie forms of abuse and profanation, Leach 1966). (2) The person to whom deference is indexed may be the utterance's *referent* or the

incumbent of some other speech-act role, such as addressee, bystander, or overhearer; deference to more than one such indexical focus (Agha 1993) may be implemented concurrently in a single utterance, though languages differ in the subtlety and complexity of such effects. (3) Honorific repertoires often contain non-*lexemic* signs, including sentence-configurational, prosodic, gestural, and other signs, and thus differ in semiotic range (Agha 2007: 179–85). (4) Patterns of *deference* are often linked to cultural models of more specialized types of conduct, e.g. taboo, avoidance, **gender** roles, courtly ritual, class relations, the propitiation of kin, ancestors, or deities, and thereby differ in sociological valence relative to these models. (5) Differences in patterns of deference to *others* are readily linked to matters of self-presentation and demeanour, and thus to effects at distinct orders of indexicality (Silverstein 1996) from which individuals acquire ascribed statuses and identities. Locating the narrow concerns of the early literature within this larger typological frame is essential to the comparative study of honorific language.

The honorific forms of a language never comprise a distinct 'language' (in the sense of a separate and complete grammatical system). They belong to distinct socio-pragmatic registers of conduct in which linguistic and non-linguistic signs are often deployed together. An honorific register is a reflexive model of pragmatic behaviour that treats selected behaviours, including the use of linguistic expressions, as stereotypically indexical of deference (Agha 1998). Although honorific repertoires occur in all languages, they differ cross-linguistically in repertoire size (number of expressions), grammatical range (number of form-classes in which they are found), prosodic qualities, and other features. All known languages possess honorific titles and terms of address (e.g. noun phrase categories such as names, kin terms, occupational or other social role designators, and corresponding nouns and noun classifiers that function as status-differentiating titles), though such expressions differ across languages in repertoire size, grammatical range, deference level, polarity, and the relative ranking of repertoires. Honorific pronouns are cross-linguistically common and, in many languages, pronominal repertoires are extremely large due to the pronoun-like use of person-

denoting common nouns (Agha 2007: 278–300, 308–10). Many languages differentiate honorific forms for common nouns and verbs (e.g. Tibetan, Urdu, Japanese, Persian, Samoan) and dependent categories such as case markers (Korean) and other inflectional forms (Agha 2007: chapter 7). Javanese has more than 800 such lexemes, from which many more complex locutions can be formed, while in Japanese honorifics are differentiated by productive morphological affixes so that the number of expressions is indefinitely large. In many languages, honorific utterances tend to have a characteristic pitch, speech rate, amplitude, or other prosodic quality (Irvine 1990, 1992). In many others, the use of linguistic honorifics is normatively accompanied by characteristic non-linguistic behaviours, such as distinctive patterns of bodily comportment, gesture, eye-gaze, and the like, which comprise more or less elaborate systems of etiquette (Errington 1988; Haviland 1979; Kummer 1992).

The fact that honorific registers are reflexive models of conduct has several implications for the study of honorific language. First, honorific expressions cannot be identified by linguists without appeal to metapragmatic judgements of register value by native speakers. Although some honorific expressions are marked by grammatical affixes in many languages, other expressions in any language carry no overt morphemic mark identifying them as such (see Agha 1998 for examples and discussion). Thus, the only general method of identification available to linguists relies on the ability of native speakers to differentiate honorific expressions (including criterial affixes) from the rest of the language and to typify their values-in-use. The range of metapragmatic activities relevant to the study of honorifics is much wider than traditional elicitation. It includes naturally occurring metapragmatic commentaries on types of speech, speakers, social settings and scenarios of use, as well as purely implicit evaluations (including non-descriptive cues in response behaviours) that discriminate the appropriateness or lack thereof of naturally occurring speech forms in **context** (Agha 2007).

Second, all speakers of a language do not acquire or adhere to perfectly identical models of its honorific registers, and such variation is

itself socially consequential. For complex systems (e.g. Javanese, Japanese, Tibetan) not all speakers are able to identify all honorific forms. Some speakers routinely treat specific social categories of persons (e.g. upper-class or aristocratic speakers) as better able to describe the purest forms of positively valued honorific speech, treating other social categories of speakers as less proficient, less able to grasp the nuances of the system. Hence, stereotypes about the indexical values of expressions are internally linked to metasemiotic judgements about exemplary and non-exemplary speakers, to judgements about their mental, and characterological qualities, and dependent conceptions of their group-relative social entitlements. Such frameworks for evaluating social identity typically function **culture-internally** as multi-level and internally motivated semiotic diagrams for inferring the characteristics of co-present interlocutors in social interaction (Agha 1998).

Third, the continuous historical existence of a register depends upon mechanisms for the replication of its forms and values over changing populations (e.g. from generation to generation). The group of users of any register continuously renews itself through demographic changes of various kinds (births, deaths, migration, etc.). Hence, the differentiable existence of that register – an awareness of its forms, values, and appropriate use – must be communicable to new members of the group in order for the register to persist in some relatively constant way over time. Socialization within the family plays a role in the early acquisition of many registers. However, processes of register socialization continue through adult life as well. Although explicit prescriptions play a role in one or more of the institutions through which registers are replicated across populations, more implicit metapragmatic activity, such as jocular accounts of defective speech (Agha 1998), the implicit modelling of speech for bystanders (Errington 1998), mass media representations of defective speech, metadiscursive practices of schooling, and many others, also play a role (Agha 2003).

Finally, register models are ideologically inflected frameworks for reckoning social conduct. To say that models of register value exist in a society is merely to say that socially regular patterns of metapragmatic evaluation can be

observed and documented as data. However, several models often compete with each other society-internally and, insofar as they co-exist within a single society, appear to be mutually distorting ideological alternatives in one or more sense. For instance, speakers may differ in the elaborateness of the repertoires they command (Errington 1988: 168), often due to differences of socialization, or in the values they assign to specific forms within larger repertoires. Some forms of any honorific register are subject to competing valorizations that serve the positional interests of specific social groups and institutions (Hill 1992; Agha 2003). Any given speaker's judgements about honorific usage invariably reflect a socially positioned perspective on the register. If the individual is socialized to its institutionally dominant form, the model evidenced in his or her judgements, while socially positioned, may also have a very wide social domain (i.e. may also be evidenced in the metapragmatic judgements of many individuals) and may reflect an institutionally legitimated or 'official position' on the register.

Honorific register systems are thus social indexical sign systems of considerable interest. They infuse grammatical organization with socio-pragmatic values through the work of ideologies and institutions. Such value-frameworks differentiate and rank specific forms of conduct (and actors who engage in such conduct) in ways that semiotically motivate distinctive patterns of exemplary behaviour, social interaction, positional entitlement, classifications of persons into entitlement-bearing groups, and other features of social organization. The continuance of such value-mediated frameworks depends on the continued vitality of the ideologies and institutions that replicate register models in social life. Needless to say, any such register model is subject to dialectical tensions of the kinds discussed above, and is thus subject to periods of emergence, growth, or decline in the face of competing models (Agha 2007: 206–32, 268–77).

Our current understanding of these systems derives from, but moves considerably beyond, the results of early work on this topic (see Agha 1994: 278–86 for a review of the early literature). Brown and Gilman's (1960) study of polite pronouns gave the field its early impetus by

suggesting that cultural ideologies of hierarchy and egalitarianism (or 'power' and 'solidarity') can be linked directly to patterns of language use. Yet, many of their limiting assumptions – that polite expressions 'semantically' encode pre-existing relationships, that pronouns are polite expressions of pre-eminent interest, that cultural norms and ideologies are uniformly shared within societies – have been superseded by later research. Attempts to reconstruct honorific norms as abstract rules in various neo-Gricean frameworks (Lakoff 1973; Leech 1983; Brown and Levinson 1987) fail to account for the cross-cultural diversity of norms attested in the comparative record (Gu 1990; Hymes 1986; Matsumoto 1988, 1989). A more poignant difficulty with such approaches is their inability to theorize society-internal variation. It is now well known that speakers differ in patterns of honorific usage within every known language community (Hill 1992; Irvine 1992; Errington 1988), and that such differences themselves constitute society-internal emblems of speaker distinction from which persons draw entitlement to deference by others (Agha 1998). Once we recognize that patterns of honorific usage within register systems link respectfulness (to others) to respectability (of self), the study of such systems requires a shift from rule-based explanations (of other-directed norms) to a reflexive account of the capacity of sign systems concurrently to index several types of role and relationship under specifiable conditions (Agha 2007: chapters 6 and 7).

Differences of indexical focus (i.e. of the contextual target of deference) are also linked to differences of repertoire type. Some honorific repertoires (e.g. Australian affinal vocabularies) mark deference to co-present others, such as addressees and bystanders. Others (e.g. Tibetan *sÈeÜsa*) mark deference to any referent that can be denoted by a linguistic expression, whether or not such referent is co-present, alive, as yet born, or directly perceivable (deities, etc.). In addressee and bystander systems, any semiotic display that is perceivable by a co-present person – linguistic expressions, **prosody**, gestures, modes of bodily comportment, clothing, etc. – can become culturally enregistered as indexical of deference to that person (Haviland 1979; Errington 1988; Kummer 1992). However, referent-focal reper-

toires tend to consist only of linguistic expressions since, in such cases, the default focus of deference is identified not through interlocutory co-presence but through linguistic denotation (Agha 2007: 317ff.). Many languages contain repertoires of several kinds, varying in degrees of elaboration.

Any honorific register mediates social relations of a range and variety larger than what is ideologically grasped in native stereotypes of indexicality. This is due to a simple fact: honorific expressions are rarely encountered in isolation from other co-occurring signs. Hence, the framing of honorific expressions by accompanying signs can co-textually yield various kinds of interactional tropes, such as tropes of secondary focus (deferring to one person in order to defer to another), transposed origo (deferring to someone from another's point of view), veiled aggression (using honorific forms in acts that are otherwise hostile or coercive), hyperpoliteness (as in cases of **irony** or **sarcasm**), and many others (for examples and discussion see Agha 2007: 322–32). The analytic distinction between *stereotypic indexical effects* (effects stereotypically associated with honorific forms; Agha 1998) and *text-level indexical effects* (emergent effects, mediated by text-configurations in which 'honorific' forms co-occur with other signs; Agha 2007: 24–27) thus enables the systematic study of a much wider range of social relations during acts of honorific use than is straightforwardly described by users in everyday accounts of what 'honorific language' is, and what its uses are.

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See also: Discourse; historical pragmatics; indexicals; metapragmatics; performativity; politeness; semiotics; sociolinguistics

Suggestions for further reading

- Agha, A. (1994) 'Honorification', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 23: 277–302.
 —(1998) 'Stereotypes and registers of honorific language', *Language in Society*, 27: 151–93.
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Humour

The term 'humour' is usually used as a technical expression that encompasses all further pre-theoretical notions in the field, such as 'comical', 'laughable', and 'ridiculous'. While the forms and genres of humour may differ widely, humour is assumed to be universal. There have been claims that some **cultures** do not have **irony** or humorous puns. However, these claims are difficult to assess, especially in light of recent studies that attest to the universal nature of punning phenomena across samples of language families (Guidi to appear).

It is also generally assumed that humour derives from the perception of two opposed concepts (scripts/frames) that co-occur (overlap) in the text. The most common theories associated with this position are Raskin's (1985) Semantic Script Theory of Humour (SSTH) and Attardo and Raskin's General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH). Attardo (1997) claims that these theories fall under the cognitive and/or psychological incongruity-resolution family of humour theories (see Martin 2007). Other approaches utilizing the same incongruity mechanism but more or less different terminology have been proposed within different areas of linguistics.

Both the SSTH and the GTVH assume no boundary between **semantics** and **pragmatics**. Furthermore, they claim that humorous texts violate the **cooperative principle**, for example, by withholding relevant information in order to produce a surprising punch line, as in the joke in which Holmes wakes Watson and asks what he can observe. Watson notes the position of the stars, the clouds in the night sky, and similar details. Holmes replies 'No, Watson, someone stole our tent.'

There has been some discussion of this claim by scholars seeking to deny the violation of the cooperative principle. The problem that these attempts run into is that humorous texts are often obviously untruthful, irrelevant, deliberately obscure, etc. Conversely, accounts that incorporate violations of the cooperative principle need to explain the affiliative and prosocial effects of some kinds of humour. For example, one can tell the above Watson/Holmes joke without incurring the kind of social sanctions