

Call for Papers

Inferences in Interaction and Language Change

Colloquium to be held at the University of Freiburg (Germany)

10.–13. November 2016

1. Introduction

Although the concept of inference is of central relevance to studies on conversation and diachrony, these disciplines tackle the problems inference poses from very different angles using different methodologies. Whereas studies on diachrony focus on the potential of inferences to bring about semantic change, they have only recently begun modeling the role of the relationship between speaker and interlocutor in these processes. In contrast, studies on conversation have long focused on the dialogical emergence of meaning and understanding, but usually give preference to observable actions instead of inferencing in discourse.

We believe that these two lines of research can benefit from each other. In the proposed colloquium we aim to bring together experts from both disciplines. The central aims of the workshop are threefold:

1. To carve out **different domains** in which inferences are relevant for a linguistic analysis for both interaction and language change
2. To discuss the benefits and limitations of **currently available methods** for the analysis of inferences
3. To contribute to the development of a **contextualized model** of the roles of speaker and interlocutor in the synchronic and diachronic emergence of meaning

Thereby we aim at establishing a consensus regarding the relevance of the notion of inference in language use and language change and consequently, greatly help refining current theories of language use and language change and specifically, their interplay.

2. Inferences in diachrony

Inferences are assumed to play a prominent role in semantic change. According to a first strand of research, semantic change frequently results from the conventionalization of conversational implicatures (Dahl 1985: 11, Traugott and König 1991, Traugott 1999, Traugott and Dasher 2002, Hopper and Traugott 2003: 81-84). For instance, due to the metonymic link between obligation and future, speakers of Vulgar Latin may have used the deontic *cantare habeo* 'I have to sing' construction in order to implicate future 'I will sing' (Fleischman 1982, Pinkster 1987). This linguistic behavior has been explained in terms of the need for expressivity or informativity (Detges 2000, Detges 2001, Detges and Waltereit 2002, Detges 2004): the future reading arguably represents a stronger, i.e. more informative, claim than the deontic reading.

According to a second strand of research, semantic change also depends on presupposition accommodation. For instance, the "Avoid Pragmatic Overload" theory (Eckardt 2006, 2009, Schwenter and Waltereit 2010) assumes that semantic change starts with the use of a construction involving a certain presupposition in contexts in which this presupposition does not hold. The hearer of the sentence can either accommodate this presupposition or infer a new meaning for the construction, potentially triggering semantic change. For instance, using the particle *too* in *John had dinner in New York, too* presupposes that someone other than John had dinner in New York. In contexts such as (1) where this presupposition is implausible, the hearer may reanalyze the meaning of *too*, for instance as an adversative marker (Schwenter and Waltereit 2010: 83).

- (1) A: *You didn't do your homework!*
B: *I did **too**!*

A crucial problem for both approaches is that due to the monological character of most historical texts, inferences are usually only modeled from either the speaker's or the hearer's perspective. As a result, the notion of context often remains schematic. However, a full understanding of semantic change requires a context-sensitive model that includes both the speaker and the hearer. Conversation and interaction studies have been working heavily towards such a model, a fact from which diachronic studies could profit.

3. Inferences in conversation and interaction

In the study of conversation and interaction several approaches are concerned with inferences. The main point of those studies is that both speaker and interlocutor(s) are involved in the dialogical management of inferences. Conversation analysis has shown that a large part of the mechanisms whereby participants organize social interaction rests on standard assumptions maintained by the participants (such as, e.g. adjacency pairs) and the inferences they allow for. In turn, any deviation from what is expected will give rise to further inferences, for which the speaker will be accountable (Levinson 1983, Heritage 1984). While this holds at a very general level, cultural factors and situational circumstances also may play a central role. Especially Interactional Sociolinguistics has highlighted that conversational inferencing is based on culture-specific background-knowledge (cf. Gumperz 1982:135-171, 1992, 2000). Grammar is seen here as one among different kinds of contextualization cues that can be seen to 'reflect' cultural knowledge "by virtue of the historically established functioning of particular grammatical constructions in certain activity types" (Gumperz 1993: 207). That situational and institutional factors play a central role in inferencing has been shown, for example, by (Drew and Heritage 1992). Talk in institutions may be highly dependent on specific inferential frameworks, as they call it. Participants may also use those frameworks strategically to invite certain inferences (Drew and Atkinson 1979, Drew 1985, Drew 1992). For example, cross-examinations at Anglo-Saxon court interactions are characterized by the fact that once a witness has finished his/her turn, the next turn is automatically allocated to the counsel. The counsel may now use this pre-allocation of the next turn strategically by producing a 'significant pause' before starting his next turn. Such a pause is intended to lead the overhearing jury to the certain inferences, for example that the answer should be doubted.

Participants do not only 'rely' on inferences at a low level of manifestness but also have practices at hand to explicate inferences (e.g., Schegloff 1996, Bolden 2010). Likewise, studies in interactional linguistics have identified devices that speakers use to signal that they formulate an inference, such as German *also* and *dann* 'so/then' (cf. Deppermann and Helmer 2013), as well as devices that allow partners to infer a relevant argumentative discourse (Fischer 2006). Some authors also take into account different degrees of manifestness, ranging from the explicit formulation of an assumption to mere inferrability (Deppermann and Blühdorn 2013, Deppermann 2014). Inferences have been shown to play a role in on-line syntax, e.g. in projection (Auer 2005, Auer 2009, Auer 2015) and ellipsis (Imo 2011, Imo 2014). For example Imo (2014) analyzes syntactic breakoffs, by which the speaker leaves the continuation and a possible meaning of a contribution open to be inferred by his/her interlocutors. In the following example (adapted from Imo 2014: 145) speaker A produces a breakoff after *aber*. With

her continuation speaker B signals that she understood the gist of A's contribution, that the dishcloth they are talking about is really old, so old it already looks alive.

A: <ich hab keine LAPpenphobie aber- <lachend>>
<I have no dishcloth phobia but <laughing>>

B: hehehe weil dEr hier so lebEndig AUSSieht.
hehehe because this one looks as if it is alive

As Imo shows, speakers systematically use such syntactic breakoffs as interactive device to induce other participants to draw and explicate certain inferences. In addition to syntactic devices, multimodal resources have also been shown to be instrumental in managing context-derived inferences, for example regarding deixis (Enfield 2009: 25–67).

The central advantage of synchronic studies is that they permit investigation of the actual mechanisms through which inferences are dealt with in the actions of the participants. However, scholars in the study of conversation and interaction also face several problems that have been worked on extensively in historical linguistics. Just to mention three of these problems: The inferences under investigation are located on different but interdependent levels (action, syntax, semantics,...), with no coherent model yet available. Variation in the data concerning the interactional function of linguistic structures may be due to layering and diachronic processes. Longer, more monological contributions to discourse, but also 'deviant cases' in which actual conversational moves of a pattern are 'missing', are notoriously difficult to handle, although they may rely on the same inferential processes. Interactional linguistics can also profit from historical linguistics in that diachronic changes may offer evidence for interactional processes not easily observable in synchrony.

4. Aims of the workshop

By adopting an interdisciplinary perspective at the crossroads of interactional and diachronic linguistics, we aim at establishing a consensus about the role of inferences in language use and language change.

- At first aim of the workshop is to give a broad perspective of **different domains** and phenomena that can be explained in an inference-based paradigm, such as pragmatic markers, syntactic constructions and personal and temporal/aspectual morphology. Furthermore, we want to clarify the notion(s) of inference and assess their relevance to the analysis of interaction and language change. In particular, the workshop aims at exploring the implications of contextual properties of inferences, ranging from the micro-context of a phenomenon until the cultural and institutional contexts.
- Since the data available in synchronic and diachronic linguistics differ (regarding spoken-written modality, available genres, temporal extension of datasets etc.) different analytical methods have been developed in both fields. A second central aim of the workshop is to provide the participants with an **overview of those methods** and discuss their benefits and limitations. The papers in the workshop work with state-of-the art quantitative diachronic methods and microanalytic synchronic methods, or combine both methods.
- The third, probably most important, aim of the workshop is to discuss central components of a **context-sensitive speaker-hearer-based model of inferences**. Such a model is indispensable for the correct interpretation of inferences also in the sense that it allows to take into account the degree to which

an inference operates on a conscious level. An explicit model of inferences in language use allows for testable predictions of pragmatic mechanisms of language change, as well as explanations of interactional processes and phenomena. It also needs to be integrated into current theories of language use and language change such as construction grammar, constructional change, and grammaticalization theory.

In summary, we believe that our workshop and its subsequent publication will constitute an important step towards establishing a consensus regarding the relevance of the notion of inference in interaction and language change. The results from our workshop will greatly help refining current theories of interaction and language change and specifically, their interplay.

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