



## **Explorations in regional variation**

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Anne Barron

## Explorations in regional variation: A variational pragmatic perspective

**Abstract:** The present article introduces the Special Issue entitled “A Variational Pragmatic Approach to Regional Variation in Language”, a collection of papers which celebrates the work of Klaus P. Schneider (Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn, Germany) on the occasion of his 60th birthday.

**Keywords:** variational pragmatics, regional variation, pragmatic variation

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The present Special Issue of *Multilingua* celebrates the work of Klaus P. Schneider (*Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn*, Germany) on the occasion of his 60th birthday. The topic of this Special Issue “A variational pragmatic approach to regional variation in language” reflects the contributors’ – and Klaus P. Schneider’s – concern for intralingual pragmatic variation, and in particular for how regional varieties of a single language may differ on the level of language use.

Klaus P. Schneider began his academic career in Marburg, where he completed his doctorate, and later his *Habilitation* (post-doctoral thesis), under Rüdiger Zimmermann. Following his doctorate, he moved from his teaching position in Marburg to take up a postdoctoral position at the University of Hamburg where he then worked together with Willis Edmondson. Positions at the University of Rostock and at University College Dublin followed before he took up his current Chair in Applied English Linguistics at the University of Bonn in 1998. He is currently President of the German Association for the Study of English (*Deutscher Anglistenverband*), series co-editor of the nine volume *Handbooks of Pragmatics* for De Gruyter Mouton (Bublitz et al. 2010–2014) and co-editor of the recently published handbook *Pragmatics of Discourse* (Schneider and Barron 2014). He is also a member of the editorial advisory board of the *Journal of Pragmatics* (Elsevier).

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Of his vast research interests, three major themes have dominated Klaus P. Schneider's research, namely the study of small talk, diminutives and regional pragmatic variation. As one of the pioneers in the study of small talk, his monograph *Small Talk: Analysing Phatic Discourse* (Schneider 1988) remains a key reference in the study of phatic communion. In this study, he puts forward a working model of small talk which includes a discourse level, dealing with topic types, politeness maxims and social function, and an utterance level focusing on deictic references and illocutionary patterns. In more recent years, Schneider has merged his interest in small talk with his work on variational pragmatics, and has produced some fascinating scholarship on small talk as it varies across a range of English-speaking cultures. He interprets the differences uncovered with reference to different underlying cultural scripts or conventionalised patterns stored in long-term memory (Schneider 2008, Schneider 2010a, Schneider 2011, Schneider 2012a, Schneider 2012b). Klaus P. Schneider's second major research area is diminution. His monograph *Diminutives in English* (Schneider 2003), a reworked version of his post-doctoral thesis, proved ground-breaking by going beyond form and meaning and suggesting an alternative approach to the study of diminutives which addresses previously neglected pragmatic aspects of diminution. This he does by developing an integrative formal-functional framework for diminutive analysis which combines the morphological, semantic and pragmatic perspective. In this way, Schneider provides a detailed account of diminutives and diminutive-based forms in present-day English (cf. also Schneider 2013). The third particularly influential focus of Schneider's work is his recent writing in the area of variational pragmatics, the focus of the present Special Issue. This is an area which Klaus P. Schneider has been instrumental in establishing over the last number of years. Variational pragmatics is concerned with systematically and empirically describing synchronic variation in the patterns of human interaction within one language due to such macro-social factors as region, gender, socioeconomic status, ethnic identity and age. Questions include how do speakers of British English, American English, and Irish English respond to thanks?; How do males and females express compliments? The emergence of variational pragmatics has put intralingual pragmatic variation on the research agenda and has as such served to redress a traditional bias in cross-cultural and intercultural pragmatics which viewed languages implicitly as homogeneous wholes with macro-social variation largely abstracted away. It is difficult to say when or where variational pragmatics began but the spark was lit in the mid-1990s during Klaus P. Schneider's time in University College Dublin. There he collected compliment response data from speakers of Irish English and contrasted these with findings by Chen (1993) on American English and Chinese (Schneider 1999; Schneider and Schneider 2000). The co-edited

volume, *The Pragmatics of Irish English* (Barron and Schneider 2005) was a further milestone which served to highlight that the English language is not a homogenous whole from a pragmatic point of view. 2008 then saw variational pragmatics coming into its own with the publication of *Variational Pragmatics* (Schneider and Barron 2008). A number of Special Issues devoted to establishing the research area followed (Barron and Schneider 2009; Haugh and Schneider 2012). Below, a brief overview is given of this research area, the focus of the present Special Issue (cf. also Barron 2005; 2014, forthcoming; Schneider and Barron 2008; Barron and Schneider 2009; Schneider 2010b) (cf. also the bibliography on variational pragmatics at the University of Bonn, the bibliography on regional pragmatic variation at the University of London and also Aijmer 2013; Placencia 2011 and Jautz 2013 for recent studies in the area).

Variational pragmatics aims at determining the influence of macro-social factors on language use in interaction. As in modern dialectology, five macro-social factors are distinguished in the first instance, namely region, social class, ethnicity, gender, and age. Additionally, the question arises as to the nature of the interplay of these factors and also as to the nature of the interaction between macro-social and micro-social factors. In general, quantitative studies outnumber qualitative studies to date. As a result, macro-social factors are generally operationalised via geographical, biological and social facts. In other words, the focus is generally on sex rather than on gender as a social category and on geographical domicile rather than on regional identity. Variational pragmatics also distinguishes five levels of analysis: the formal level, the actional level, the interactional level, the topic level and the organisational level, without wanting to exclude alternative levels of analysis (cf. Jucker 2008; Schneider 2010b; Placencia 2011; Jucker and Taavitsainen 2012). Empirical analyses may also combine a number of levels. Analyses on the formal level are form-function/function-form analyses, recognising that a single form may realise different functions across varieties and vice versa that a single function may be realised using different forms across varieties (cf. also Foolen 2011: 221–225). The actional level deals with speech act analyses. Here, the question is posed as to how particular speech acts, e.g. requests, offers, refusals, are realised in different intra-lingual varieties. Analyses centre on pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic questions relating to the strategies and linguistic realisations of strategies realising the individual speech acts and when they are employed. The focus at the interactional level extends beyond the individual speech act to deal with sequential patterns. Questions posed relate to how speech acts combine into larger units of discourse, such as adjacency pairs, interchanges, interactional exchanges or phases. The topic level is concerned with discourse content,

i.e. with the propositions of individual utterances as well as with macro-propositions. It addresses, in particular, issues of topic selection and topic management. A question within topic management might be, for example, how much small talk is necessary in different varieties before getting to the heart of an interaction. Finally, the organisational level combines ethnomethodological analysis and conversation analysis. The focus is on turn-taking and involves comparisons of interrupting behaviour, of overlap, of minimal responses, of back-channels or of inter-turn silence across varieties.

We chose to do justice to the ongoing inspiration of Klaus Schneider's work with the present collection of articles focused on variational pragmatics. Klaus P. Schneider's empirical research in variational pragmatics has focused predominantly on regional variation and within regional variation on the inner circle varieties of American English, British English and Irish English (cf. Schneider 1999; Schneider 2005, Schneider 2007, Schneider 2010a, Schneider 2011, Schneider 2012a, Schneider 2012b). In keeping with this, and also in order to facilitate an in-depth exploration, the present Special Issue deals with regional pragmatic variation across varieties of a single language. Contributors to the volume are long-time colleagues and researchers in variational pragmatics teamed up with young voices, a constellation which promises a rosy future for the "budding field" of variational pragmatics (Aijmer and Andersen 2011: 4). We now turn to a brief overview of the contributions which make up this Special Issue and highlight their specific contribution to variational pragmatic research.

All of the papers in the present Special Issue investigate the influence of region on language use in the context of in-depth analyses which follow the three methodological principles of variational pragmatic research: empiricity, comparability, contrastivity (cf. Schneider 2010b; Barron 2014). In other words, the analyses are empirically based and involve contrasts of regional varieties using comparable data. The range of data employed is broad including corpora data (Barron et al.), naturally occurring data (Bieswanger), as well as experimental data in the form of role-plays (Placencia et al.), simulations (Haugh and Carbaugh) and questionnaires (Mulo Farenkia). Intralingual regional variation is investigated in three languages, namely English (Barron et al.; Bieswanger; Haugh and Carbaugh), French (Mulo Farenkia) and Spanish (Placencia et al.). The varieties of English examined include Australian English and American English (Haugh and Carbaugh), Canadian English (Vancouver) and American English (New York City) (Bieswanger) and British English and Irish English (Barron et al.), those of Spanish Ecuadorean Spanish (Quito), Chilean Spanish (Santiago) and Peninsular Spanish (Seville) (Placencia et al.) and those of French Cameroon French (Yaoundé) and Hexagonal French (Toulouse) (Mulo Farenkia). As the researchers themselves are careful to point out, many of the

analyses are necessarily exploratory given limited databases and considerable diversity within national cultures. Finally, the levels of analysis are broad, including the formal level (tag questions (Barron et al.), nominal address forms (Placencia et al.)), the actional level (invitation refusals (Mulo Farenkia), responding to thanks (Bieswanger), advise and complaints (Placencia et al.)), the interactional level (Placencia et al.; Haugh and Carbaugh) and the topic level (Haugh and Carbaugh). Given that much variational pragmatic research to date has focused on the actional level (cf. Schneider 2010b: 258), the broad analytical focus of the present issue furthers the research in the area.

The first paper in the collection is Michael Haugh's and Donal Carbaugh's paper, entitled "Self-disclosure in initial interactions amongst speakers of American and Australian English". It addresses the basic interpersonal activity type of getting to know someone. Data is simulated and focuses on the initial interactions of five Australian-Australian dyads and five-American-American dyads matched with respect to gender-mix and age. The analysis, informed both by corpus-assisted methods in interactional pragmatics and cultural discourse analysis, focuses on practices of self-disclosure during informants' initial interactions as they get acquainted with each other. Specifically, it investigates the frequency of those self-disclosures prompted by presentation-eliciting questions and the frequency of those self-disclosures not prompted by questions. In addition, the use of positive evaluative responses to self-disclosures is investigated. Findings reveal that although both American and Australian participants engage in prompted self-disclosures to a similar degree, American informants use unprompted self-disclosures more often, particularly sequence-medial unprompted self-disclosures. However, at the same time, the authors highlight same-speaker and intra-speaker variation and show both cultures to reveal an orientation to reciprocity in so far as a high level of one particular type of self-disclosing prompts the other participant to self-disclose in the same way more frequently, and vice-versa. American participants are also found to offer more positive evaluations in response to self-disclosures than Australian participants and to do so with a greater intensity via a tendency towards the use of positive assessments clusters. However, similar to the use of unprompted self-disclosures, a high degree of inter-speaker and same-speaker variability is also found in the use of positive assessments in response to self-disclosures, suggesting that the frequency of positive assessments in response to self-disclosures is dependent on the frequency of positive assessments offered by the other participant in similar contexts. Haugh and Carbaugh suggest their overall findings to support previous studies which show US Americans to value open displays of reciprocal approval highly in contrast to Australians whose need for approval by others is lower due to a higher value placed on solidarity and equality. They

also, however, point out that pragmatic variation is not the locus of individual speakers in isolation, but is rather locally shaped by the participants themselves. Haugh and Carbaugh call attention to the fact that in its short history, variational pragmatic studies have assumed variability to be located in individuals in a particular culture rather than emerging through interaction. In order to address this desideratum and arrive at a more complete picture of intralingual macro-social pragmatic variation, further analyses grounded in close, interactional analyses at the level of relational dyads are needed to complement current research.

Tag questions across Irish English and British English is the topic of the paper by Barron, Pandarova and Muderack. They provide a corpus analysis of tag questions with interrogative tags (e.g. *isn't it?*, *do they?*) in Irish English and British English from a variational pragmatic perspective. Data is based on the text types private face-to-face conversations and telephone calls from the Irish and British components of the International Corpus of English (ICE-GB and ICE-Ireland). The paper adds to the variational pragmatic research on tag questions given that such analyses have focused almost exclusively on contrasting tag questions in British and American English to date. In addition, the study adds to the research on tag questions in Irish English given that such studies have been primarily restricted to the level of form without any regard to function. The analysis focuses on the overall frequency of use of the tag questions identified, and on formal features, such as polarity type, turn position and mood of the anchor. In addition, a functional categorisation is carried out and form-functional relationships investigated. Quantitative findings reveal many similarities across cultures but also significant differences. Tag questions are found, for instance, to be used to a significantly lower level in Irish English relative to British English. On a formal level, use of positive constant polarity tag questions was significantly higher in the Irish data, as was the use of the interrogative mood. Functionally, a higher use of TQs realising a question function and a lower use of TQs used to make statements is recorded in ICE-Ireland relative to ICE-GB, a situation which is suggested to have historical roots. Finally, two particular strengths of the paper which should be highlighted are the fine-tuned investigation of sub-function which serves to further develop the functional system of categorisation employed and the in-depth analysis of form-function correlations which uncovers many form-functional issues worthy of more in-depth research particularly on the level of the sub-function. The study closes with suggestions for further research.

“Variational pragmatics and *responding to thanks* – revisited” is the title of Bieswanger’s paper on the speech act of responding to thanks. Bieswanger

takes a paper by Schneider (2005) on responses to thanks across the regional varieties of Irish English, English English and American English as its starting point and “revisits” the analysis on a number of levels. Schneider’s (2005) study was the first to examine the frequently offered claim that responses to thanks vary across national cultures using experimental data from discourse completion tasks (DCTs). Bieswanger’s study analyses naturally occurring discourse collected using an innovative covert Labovian-type methodology. Specifically, he examines two data sets of 60 thanking exchanges collected in Vancouver (Canada) and in New York (U.S.A.). Bieswanger first revisits Schneider’s research question, addressing the question again as to whether there are cross-varietal differences in responding to thanks. Following this, he contrasts his New York data with Schneider’s American data. In so doing, he revisits Schneider’s (2005) analysis of thanks minimisers in American English, addressing the question as to whether Schneider’s (2005) findings based on written questionnaire data differ from his own naturally occurring data. On the topic of his first research question concerning the contrast of responses to thanks in Vancouver and New York, Bieswanger reports some striking results. Non-verbal acknowledgements of thanks, for instance, were found to be considerably more common in New York City than in Vancouver while the minimising the favour strategy was more than twice as common in Vancouver due, he explains, to a preference in Vancouver for the realisation type NO PROBLEM. In addition, there was a much greater preference in Vancouver for more than one head, most frequently for the combination YEAH WELCOME. In answer to the second research question concerning the contrast of DCT and naturally-occurring data, Bieswanger finds that mere acknowledgements of thanks (whether verbal or non-verbal) which do not reduce or minimise the imbalance explicitly are employed much more frequently in naturally-occurring data relative to Schneider’s questionnaire data. In contrast, strategy types concerned with noticeably reducing the imbalance between the thanker and the thankee (minimising the favour, expressing pleasure, expressing appreciation) are much more frequent in the DCT data. Bieswanger suggests the questionnaire format employed in the DCT study to force a verbal reaction and to disfavour non-lexicalised acknowledgements. In addition, he concedes that situational variation may also have an effect on the comparison, Schneider’s production questionnaire data eliciting a formal situation in response to an expression of thanks for a lift and an informal situation thanking someone for coffee. Bieswanger’s analysis in contrast focuses on a direction-giving situation among strangers.

The paper by María Elena Placencia, María Palma Fahey and Catalina Fuentes is one of those limited studies to date which examines the effect of the



interplay of macro-social factors on language use (Schneider 2010b: 260–261) and also one of the few papers that contrast more than one variety (Schneider 2010b: 257). Specifically, the paper looks at the macro-social factors of region and sex and the interplay of both – also with micro-social variation – on the use of nominal address forms by university students in Ecuador, Chile and Spain. Focus is on the types and distribution of nominal address forms employed (first names, terms of friendship, endearments, family terms, and descriptive terms), and on how such nominal forms are employed in rapport management among friends in openings, closings and in the realisation of the speech acts of advising and complaining. The corpus is comprised of roleplay data from 10 males and 10 females from each of the cities Quito (Ecuador), Santiago (Chile) and Seville (Spain) (total: 60 informants) interacting with a particular fixed participant in three open roleplay situations. Two of the roleplay situations are designed to elicit advice-givings on a personal matter, in the third informants realise a direct complaint. All interactions are envisaged as exchanges between friends without power distance. The analysis reveals many similarities and differences between the corpora on the level of region, sex and the interplay of both. It is shown, for instance, that the highest frequency of nominal address forms was used in Santiago, the lowest in Seville. As regards the range of forms in use, descriptive terms were the most frequently employed across all three locations but there were many differences with regard to the choice of substrategy within this category. Differences were also found in the realisations of the categories identified, with more forms alluding to physical appearance and character/behaviour in the Quito and Santiago data in contrast to the Seville data which rather concentrated on more impersonal forms relating to age. Placencia et al. suggest these findings to possibly point to lower levels of involvement and a lower importance of displays of affect in Seville relative to the other cities. The analysis of sex also yielded interesting findings, with males using nominal address forms particularly frequently relative to females in Quito in particular, but also in Seville. Placencia et al. see these findings as contrasting with previous research highlighting a more affiliative or supportive use of language for women than men. Finally, in the analysis of address forms by speech act and discourse function, the authors find that overall nominal address forms were used more in openings than in closings due they suggest to the fact that these forms are particularly important in the initial states of an interaction where interpersonal attention is particularly important. In addition, such forms serve to support interaction by enhancing positive-rapport oriented actions, or reinforcing face-threats as appropriate. Several cross-varietal and cross-gender differences are also detailed on this level.

The final paper in the Special Issue by Bernard Mulo Farenkia adds to the rather limited variational pragmatic research on the varieties of French. Mulo Farenkia's focus is on refusals to invitations in Cameroon French (Yaoundé) and Hexagonal French (Toulouse). The data analysed are DCTs containing three refusal situations completed by 19 and 20 university students respectively in Yaoundé and Toulouse. The DCT items varied on the level of social distance (friend vs. classmate) and social dominance (status-equals vs. superior). The analysis focuses on the direct and indirect refusal strategies and adjuncts to refusals used and on the linguistic realisations of the particular strategies employed over the three situations. In addition, informants' use of mitigating and intensifying devices is investigated. The findings reveal both groups to use a common range of strategies overall with noteworthy differences in the distribution of strategies and in the linguistic realisations employed. The Cameroon informants were found, for instance, to use more linguistic refusal strategies over all than their French counterparts. Particularly interesting, also in particular with reference to the paper by Placencia et al., is Mulo Farenkia's finding that the speakers of French French only employed pronominal terms over all situations investigated whereas the Cameroonian participants used both pronominal and nominal forms of address. Mulo Farenkia describes the use of nominal address in the Cameroon refusal data as communicating closeness and solidarity in interaction with intimates (close friend) and respect where social distance was greater (classmate).

It is fitting that the present Special Issue is published in *Multilingua* not only because of *Multilingua's* focus on communication across cultures, but also because it closes the circle, Klaus P. Schneider's first two peer-reviewed journal articles back in 1987 (cf. Zimmermann and Schneider 1987; Schneider 1987) having been published in this very journal. As a guest editor, I am very grateful to Ingrid Piller for welcoming this collection of articles in *Multilingua* with great enthusiasm and for her support with the general organisation and in particular with the timing of the whole process. The papers in this Special Issue provide new insights into the study of pragmatic variation within pluricentric languages and continue the work which Klaus P. Schneider started. Thank you to the contributors for making this possible. Finally, in the name of all the contributors to this Special Issue and in the name of all those colleagues who would have liked to have contributed to this *Festschrift*, but whose research interests did not fit the tight focus, thank you Klaus for helping to extend the study of varieties to include pragmatic and discourse analysis. On a personal note, thanks for all the years of supervision, co-editorship, co-authorship and friendship or better still in the spirit of variational pragmatics, an Irish English "Thanks a million".

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