Politeness distinctions in personal pronouns – a case study in competing motivations

Johannes Helmbrecht (University of Regensburg)

The great majority of the Indo-European and Non-Indo-European languages of Europe display politeness distinctions in their paradigm of personal pronouns similar to the one between the second person singular address pronouns *tu* (2SG) and *vous* (2SG.HON) in French. With a few exceptions, it is only a single politeness distinction in the second person category that is encoded in the pronominal paradigms. The polite or honorific forms in such oppositions derive historically from second person plural pronouns (as in French), from third person singular (as in Italian), or third person plural pronouns (as in German), from reflexive pronouns (as in Hungarian) and from plain nouns (as in Polish) or complex nominal constructions (as in Spanish). The geographical distribution of politeness distinctions in personal pronouns in European languages is the result of the European-wide spread of this innovation which began presumably already in early medieval times. It is important to note that there is not a single case of borrowing in the narrow sense of *matter replication* (Matras) involved here; all cases fall under the rubric of *pattern replication* (Matras) and its potential subtypes such as contact-induced grammaticalization and polysemy copying (Heine & Kuteva).

The goal of the proposed paper is to present a functional analysis of the emergence and diffusion of politeness distinctions in personal pronouns in terms of a competing motivations approach. First of all, the relevant functional motivations for this historical process will be identified in a criteria bound systematic way. Secondly it will be shown that the rather social or pragmatic functions – politeness (Brown & Levinson) and prestige – are in conflict with the rather cognitive/ psychological principle of paradigmatic economy. It will be argued that the different degrees of grammatical integration (grammaticalization) of the polite pronouns into the pronominal paradigm of the respective languages may be explained by this conflict, not in terms of a winning and a losing factor but in terms of a compromise between the factors involved.

The paper will be concluded with some methodological proposals with regard to the identification of functional motivations and their potential conflicts in a synchronic and diachronic perspective and a plea for not to neglect social motivations in the debate of the concept of competing motivations.

References

Matras, Yaron. 2009. *Language Contact*. Cambridge: CUP.

Heine, Bernd & Tania Kuteva. 2005. *Language Contact and Grammatical Change*. Cambridge: CUP

Brown, Penelope & Stephen Levinson 1987. *Politeness. Some universals in language use*. Cambridge: CUP.