

An Ethnographically Grounded Approach to Pragmatic Variation: Establishing a Pragmatic Profile of Namibian English

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As noted in the CfP to this workshop, there is a general dearth of pragmatic analysis within the study of World Englishes (WE); more recently, however, pragmatic variation has been investigated in a number of New Englishes (NE), with different methodologies and from various theoretical perspectives. Efforts to theorise pragmatic variation in (new) varieties of English have primarily been made in the area of Variational Pragmatics (VP) (see Barron & Schneider 2005; Schneider & Barron 2008; Barron & Schneider 2009) and Postcolonial Pragmatics (PP) (see Janney 2009; Anchimbe & Janney 2017; Anchimbe 2018).

The central goal of VP is to describe languages as pluricentric entities by empirically investigating the influence of macro- and micro-social differences between speakers on language use, adhering to the three principles of empiricity, contrastivity, and comparability (see Schneider 2021 for details). PP, however, points to “the specificity of postcolonial societies” and rightfully criticises “the inadequacy of existing (Western) pragmatics frameworks to investigate them” (Anchimbe 2018: 39), because of their presumed bias toward individualistic cultures with only one dominant language and culture. Furthermore, PP generally avoids comparing or contrasting the pragmatic behaviours of different speech communities (Anchimbe 2018: 39). Thus far for the investigation of speech acts, VP has primarily worked with data elicited via standardised Discourse Completion Task (DCTs) questionnaires, only sometimes complemented by role-plays, interviews or both; the data analysis is often based on the CCSARP coding scheme (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989). Hence, VP takes a rather etic perspective on the varieties and phenomena investigated. Proponents of PP, however, remind us that “neither the contexts nor the functions of speech act realisations [...] can be assumed to remain constant across Western and non-Western cultures” (Anchimbe & Janney 2017: 110). Therefore, they encourage the development of “emic approaches” and the investigation of pragmatic usages in postcolonial contexts “without the distorting imposition of European templates” (2017: 117–118).

In this presentation, we will illustrate how criticism voiced in PP can be addressed within a VP framework, hopefully to the benefit of both approaches. Taking the pragmatics of Namibian English (NamE) as our primary research object, we will present an ethnographically grounded and data-driven approach to the investigation of speech acts and related concepts, following principles laid down in Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz 2006, 2014; Charmaz and Thornberg 2020). We will detail the path of research tool development and a new research template specifically designed for the Namibian research context. We will explicate how a DCT questionnaire was collaboratively developed in close cooperation with Namibian partners and the Community of Practice (CoP) under investigation, avoiding ethno-centrist bias in and guaranteeing ecological validity of our methodology. This centrally includes a systematic and synergistic combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods, allowing us to adhere to the principles of contrastivity and comparability central to VP while properly taking into account the emic perspective and socio-cultural and linguistic complexities of the post-colonial language community in question.

We believe that this framework establishes a reliable starting point for further inquiry into the pragmatics of NamE, e.g. through natural language data or corpus methodology. Furthermore, it could function as a proposed blueprint for systematically introducing pragmatic inquiry into WE research and into the pragmatics of other NE.

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