

Variational Pragmatics — Meaning, Theory and Development

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Abstract: The number of domestic studies on "variational pragmatics" (Ren Yuxin, Chen Xinren, 2012) is very limited. The research scopes are also relatively limited, which has not yet attracted the attention of more researchers. Therefore, based on this book *The Routledge Handbook of Second Language Acquisition and Pragmatics*, this paper aims to sort out and summarize the development trend of pragmatics from the meaning, goal and theory of variational pragmatics, and then put forward suggestions for future research.

Keywords: Pragmatic Variation; Variation; Pragmatics; Goal; Theory; Development Direction

1. The meaning of pragmatic variation?

"Pragmatic variation", the another word in *The Routledge Handbook of Second Language Acquisition and Pragmatics* is "variational pragmatics". The difference between the two is probably like the relationship between education and pedagogy. The pragmatic variation is a kind of phenomenon, variational pragmatics is a discipline of studying pragmatic variation. This part of the book *The Routledge Handbook of Second Language Acquisition and Pragmatics* about pragmatic variation is all about the key word "regional pragmatic variation". Regional pragmatic variation and pragmatic variation are different, before understanding their differences, there is a need to make clear what is pragmatic variation, variational pragmatics is a new field of pragmatic, it refers to the pragmatic variation problem due to regional and social space changes. Specifically, the research on variational pragmatics mainly focuses on the changes within a language caused by different macro-social factors such as region, gender, age, ethnic identity and social economic class. However, the field of pragmatic variation is more about the pragmatic differences caused by the regional level.

In this book, the definition of regional pragmatic variation is described as follows: Intralingual regional pragmatic variation is defined as pragmatic variation within a single language where variation according to region is seen on a number of levels, including a national level. We have all learned the two words: interlingual error and intralingual error. Interlanguage errors emphasize the errors between two languages, usually the mother language and the target language, while intralingual errors emphasize the errors happening within a language, using the word "intralingual" to define "regional pragmatic variation" is mainly to emphasize that pragmatic variation occurs in the same language. It is different from cross-cultural pragmatics. For example, if people want to compare the pragmatic differences between Chinese and English, then this is called cross-cultural pragmatics, but if people want to study the pragmatic differences between German and Austrian, this will be called variational pragmatics.

2. The theory of variational pragmatics.

It is a new field of pragmatics, because the term "variational" was firstly formally introduced at the 9th International Pragmatics Conference held in Italy in 2005.^[1] In 1999, He Ziran firstly translated the item "pragmatic variation" in one of his papers. Until 2012, the Chinese translation of this term "variational pragmatics" first appeared in our domestic literature.^[2] Domestic research on variational pragmatics is also limited. The reasons may be as follows: Firstly, in the classroom of language learning, the teachers generally use simplified, standardized language rules, and not start to learn some local, difficult expressions; Secondly, the pragmatic researchers ignore that there are differences among native speakers from different regions, although they speak the same language, but their social characteristics are different. Thirdly, pragmatic researches have always been based on the assumption that pragmatic variation caused by macro-social factors is absent. For these reasons, variational pragmatics is an emerging research field of

pragmatics with quite few research results.

But pragmatic variation is also gaining increasing attention from researchers, because some immigrants and foreign language learners will come to live in the target language country, they may travel to or live in different regions. As a result, they will find that the standard pragmatic methods they learn in their own countries does not apply to the areas they are now in. Secondly, language use is very flexible, which is not only influenced by the internal factors "context internal", but also by the external environmental factors "context external". It may be difficult to deal with different real communicating contexts if only learning standard pragmatic methods.^[3]

What does the study of variational pragmatics mainly focus on? It focuses on the pragmatic variation caused by the five macro factors of region, gender, age, ethnic status and social class or economic status. Therefore, examining the similarities and differences within the same language caused by these variables is the core content of variational pragmatics research. Of these five, most of the researches focused on "regional variation" caused by geographical differences, just as discussed above. Of course, there are a small number of studies focusing on other factors, such as gender differences, and some papers are focusing on the differences of Chinese men and women in expressing complaints. Wang Chuanmei from Northeast Normal University in her paper studied on gender differences in language uses.

In addition to examining pragmatic variation based on the above five macro factors, pragmatic variation can also be analyzed from the following five specific levels: Language form level: mainly examining vocabulary, phrases, syntactic forms, etc., such as discourse markers, fuzzy restrictions, additional questions, etc. This is also the main level to be discussed later. Speech behavior level: mainly investigate the implementation of speech behavior. Interactive level: mainly focusing on the discourse sequence, such as adjacent pairs, verbal behavior sequence, session start sequence and session end sequence. Topic level: It mainly involves the discourse content and social topics, such as the choice of topics, topic introduction, expansion and termination. Discourse organization level: mainly investigating the transformation of speech rounds, such as possession of the right, distribution of speech etc.^[4] From the perspective of regional language variation, the region can be divided into the following five levels: the "supranational level", like the differences between the English-speaking countries in Northern Europe and the English-speaking countries in North America; the "national level" countries, like the UK and Ireland; "subnational level", the different states of a country; the "local level", such as Beijing and Shanghai; the "sublocal level", for example, Chenggong district and Guandu districts in Kunming, China.

3. Some examples about pragmatic variation.

Now, let's analyze the example of regional pragmatic variation given in the book *The Routledge Handbook of Second Language Acquisition and Pragmatics*, Irish English. Ireland is a country next to the UK, and the official language is English, which corresponds to the definition of pragmatic variation. Before that, we need to understand two important words: "variety-specific variation" and "variety-preferential variation". "variety specific variation" means that only one language has this pragmatic feature, while "variety-preferential variation" refers to this pragmatic variation existing in both languages, but it's more frequently used in one of them. After understanding these two items, we can better understand the following examples. The word "no" has two special functions in Irish English: "hedging now" and "presentative now", which are not used in British English, which belongs to "variety specific variation". "hedging now" refers to the use of "no" to reduce the threat of discourse, can make the tone more moderate, it's used when challenging others' ideas, commanding others, such as these examples: "That's not fair now." "You can't say that now." "Hold on a minute now." And "presentative now" means "no" has the function of reference. There is a case: *Speaker 1: How much is that? Speaker 2: One fifty. Now. Thanks.* In this case, "now" is used to refer to the item.

And there is another example about "like", and Irish English uses "like" more frequently than in other regions, which is the "variety preferential variation". "Like" can be placed at the beginning of a sentence or at the middle and at the end, "clause-medial like" means "like" in the middle of the sentence, and "clause-final like" means "like" at the end of the sentence. In standard English, "like" is generally placed in sentences, which is also known as "globalized clause-medial like", but in Irish English, not only will it use "like" in the middle of the sentence, but also the special use of "like" at the end of the sentence, which is not a habit in other areas, so this is at the "variety specific variation" level. Some scholars have found that the Irish capital, Dublin, uses the standard "like" usage, which means putting "like" in the middle more frequently than the rest places of a sentence, and people in southern Dublin put "like"

in the middle more often than the rest of Dublin. Such pragmatic differences show not only the impact of the region, but also the impact of the socio-economic class. Because Dublin is the capital, its general economic situation is certainly better than other regions, it will be more international, and the southern part of Dublin is richer than the rest of Dublin, because there are more upper people in the south and more workers in the north. So in addition to geographical factors, socioeconomic status will also affect pragmatic uses.

4. The Development of variational pragmatics.

Current pragmatics has a clear research scope, rich research contents and diversified research methods, but many aspects need to be further strengthened. We can develop variational pragmatics from the following aspects:

4.1 Strengthen the theoretical discussion, and further clarify its discipline identity and value

First, further systematic studies on gender, age, ethnic identity, social class / economic status, etc. The distinction and connection of variables in variational pragmatics need to further clarify the subject identity. Secondly, it is necessary to strengthen a deeper explanation of the reasons behind the pragmatic variation caused by the above five macro factors. For example, a certain type of verbal behavior caused by regional differences show differences due to regional or deeper reasons, this point is rarely systematically expounded in the existing studies of variational pragmatics.^[5]

4.2 Expand the research content and topics

As mentioned above, the existing research examines the five macro factors, in addition to further expanding the regional factors, more consideration should be given to gender, age, ethnic identity, social class / economic status, and urban-rural differences, educational background differences, occupational differences and so on. It is necessary to strengthen the research on the interaction level, topic level and discourse organization level. In addition, we need to expand the focus on other speech behaviors and multicenter languages. For domestic researchers, more attention can be paid to the pragmatic variation of the Chinese language.^[6]

In conclusion, this paper introduces the meaning, theory and development course of it, sorts out the main contents and topics, and makes a brief analysis of the current research status, clarifies some aspects to be strengthened in the future. It is hoped that in the future, more researchers will focus on the research of variational pragmatics to deepen people's understanding of language use from a new perspective.

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