Research project

Emergent modals of obligation and necessity in Scottish English from a cognitive-sociolinguistic perspective (working title)

Within the study of language in general, and of English more specifically, modality is one of the “golden oldies” (Nuyts 2005: 5). The more surprising it is that deontic modality, as one of its sub-categories, has not received as much scholarly attention as one would have expected. Only in the past decade, when drastic changes in the English modal system have become apparent (and can be observed best for deontic modality with the central modal must declining dramatically, and emergent modal have to catching up in terms of frequency), research in this domain has picked up. So far, however, the primary aim has been the description of frequency changes and trends and usage distribution of individual modals as well as the group of deontic modals as a whole. The already mentioned frequency changes have caused a restructuring of the category of deontic modality. Even though items have not (yet) left the category, some have had to swap positions in terms of centrality: must has been moving towards the periphery, have to has taken over the central spot. In between, we find a number of emergent modal items (e.g. want to/wanna, be going to/gonna, had better/better) that have not traditionally been included in the deontic category, but social changes require a range of variants for expressing obligation and necessity more democratically – while at the same time, these new conditions make the field a promising area of research.

What is more, the fact that the expression of obligation and necessity is a fundamental constituent of everyday interaction and communication, which, as such, is subject to be strongly conditioned by local norms and conventions and determined by social structures opens up a vast array of central aspects of enquiry going beyond the descriptive level of phonological, morphosyntactic, semantic and pragmatic variation. This project will argue that variation in the expression of obligation and necessity by means of deontic modal items can, in part, be explained by underlying cultural models. Cultural models can be understood as “culture-specific norms of verbal behaviour [which] are stored in the long-term memory and can be considered part of the pragmatic competence of interactants” (Schneider 2014: 127), or, in other words, they are “action plans for how to behave in some given situation or how to interpret the behaviour of others” (Kronenfeld 2009: 69). While more traditional sociolinguistic approaches do not provide an extensive enough basis to encompass all of these issues, the adoption of a cognitive-sociolinguistic approach does. As Pütz, Robinson and Reif (2014: 6) explain, “Cognitive Sociolinguistics looks into the way in which cultural and
community norms surface in individual usage events and considers the extent to which social, cultural and cognitive factors are intertwined” as causes of variation.

Scholarship on (deontic) modality has predominately focused on the description of deontic modality in the ‘major’ varieties of English, that is British English, American English, but also Australian and New Zealand English. In addition to that, the heyday of the field of varieties of English of the past 30-40 years has produced a number of studies exploring trends in second language/ postcolonial varieties of English around the globe. While, for example, Irish English has been assigned at least a minor role in this endeavour, Scottish English has been mostly left out. Apart from one paper by Tagliamonte and Smith (2006), which covers different dialects of English, research on the Scottish English modal system is scarce and not very recent. Handbook chapters on Scottish English morphology and syntax by Beal (1997) and Miller (2003; 2004) mention characteristics in the modal system, but cannot provide large-scale examinations.

This PhD project therefore aims at exploring the use of (emergent) deontic modals in Scottish English from a new angle. By investigating deontic modality from a cognitive-sociolinguistic point of view, I expect to be able to not only account for social and regional variation in the expression of obligation and necessity, but also their discourse-pragmatic functions, where we have to keep in mind that “variation occurs not only across languages, but also across varieties of the same language” (Schneider 2014: 108) due to entrenchment of cultural models and shared cultural cognitive systems.

These systems and models emerge in interaction, but interaction is also where they become apparent. At the same time, this is the reason why we can explore them with empirical methods, as required by the usage-based commitment brought along by the cognitive part of cognitive-sociolinguistics. Complying with this requirement, this project will be corpus-based, making use of the SCOTS and the CMSW – covering both the synchronic and the diachronic perspective of deontic modality in Scottish English, and providing the opportunity to extend the cognitive-sociolinguistic paradigm to the investigation of historical data. Additional spoken as well as written language data from WhatsApp-chats will complement this database.
Select bibliography


Schneider, Klaus P. “Pragmatic variation and cultural models”. In Pütz, Martin, Justyna A. Robinson and Monika Reif (eds.). Cognitive Sociolinguistics. Social and cultural variation in cognition and language use. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 107-132.


