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Editorial

Communicative action and interaction in Africa: Towards a broader picture

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ABSTRACT

This article collection showcases recent empirical research on a range of pragmatic phenomena in different parts of the African continent. It also aims at illustrating the diversity of approaches employed to study these phenomena, bringing together experts on various languages and from different backgrounds.

In particular, the articles in this collection are focused on Nigeria, Cameroon, Namibia, and South Africa, examining language use in Yorùbá, isiXhosa, English, French, and Nigerian Pidgin. The studies stem from different theoretical frameworks, adopt a variety of methodologies, and deal with a range of communicative (inter)actions. Among the approaches adopted are speech act theory, politeness theory, conversation analysis, variational pragmatics, and postcolonial pragmatics, and the data stem from ethnographic field notes, discourse completion tasks, dialogue production tasks, video recordings, large machine-readable corpora, and multimedia recordings. The pragmatic phenomena analysed range from discourse markers, speech acts, and opening turns to the generic structure of traditional wedding ceremonies and multimodality in media interviews.

This collection thus illustrates and advocates a broad understanding of pragmatics, theoretical and methodological pluralism, and the cooperation of experts on autochthonous languages and experts on former colonial languages in order to more adequately study the complexities of communicative (inter)action in Africa.

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1. Linguistic diversity and (inter)action in Africa

Africa is the world's most linguistically diverse continent, with 2171 living languages listed (Eberhard et al., 2023).¹ Multilingualism is hence an important part of all Africans' everyday lives (Heugh, 2019). These languages stem from the four major language phyla, i.e., Niger–Congo, Nilo-Saharan, Afro-Asiatic and Khoisan² (Wolff, 2019), or are exogenous languages. With intra- and intercontinental migration, linguistic diversity is heightened further locally and globally. This also holds true for communication online in the global mediasphere. Thus, diasporic communities in Africa and African diasporic communities abroad are equally diverse and intriguing objects of study (see e.g., Honkanen, 2020 for an interesting study on Nigerian diasporic communities in the US).

This diversity leads to equally diverse linguistic (inter)actions between language users from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The pragmatics of languages in and from Africa has thus received increasing attention with the development of interactional pragmatics (e.g., Haugh, 2012) or third wave sociolinguistics (Eckert, 2012), for example. There is now also a sizeable body of literature on pragmatic phenomena and language use in Africa examining various phenomena of communicative (inter)action, such as the use of proverbs to mitigate face threatening acts (e.g., in Akan, Obeng, 1996; in various West African autochthonous languages as discussed in the recent article collection edited by Csajbok-Twerefou and Adokarley Lomotey, 2022, in this journal) or apology strategies (e.g., in South African Indian English, Bharuthram, 2003, or in Tunisian Arabic student e-mails, Jebahi, 2011), to name but two examples. These investigations are also based on various types of

¹ Some estimates are higher, some are lower, depending on what is considered to be a language and how counts are implemented.

² Note that the notion of a “Khoisan” language family is controversial (see Fehn et al., 2022), but this discussion is beyond the scope of this article.

data and methods, as for instance spontaneous speech (e.g., Sugawara, 2012, who investigates overlaps in turn taking in the |Gui language, or Ellece, 2011, who discusses wedding ceremonies in Botswana), “controlled” interactions such as role plays (e.g., de Kadt, 1998, who discusses the notion of face in isiZulu) or interviews (e.g., Ige, 2010, who studies identity construction among the student body of a South African university), or social media data (e.g., Hampel, 2015, who based her study of advice on Facebook data, or Nassenstein and Hollington, 2016, who investigated youth language practices in various social networks). Research has also considered a range of different languages and varieties (on their own and comparatively), including both autochthonous African languages such as Yorùbá (Oladipo, 2015), Isu, Mɛn and Ngɛmba (Cameroonian Grassfields languages, see Kießling et al., 2011; Mekamgoum, 2022) or Tunisian Arabic (Labben, 2018), as well as former colonial languages such as English (e.g., Anderson, 2009; Mustapha, 2011) and French (e.g., Drescher, 2012; Mulo Farenkia, 2023). Multimodal means of communication, such as gestures (e.g., Brookes, 2005, on quotable gestures in South Africa), alternate sign systems (e.g., Mohr et al., 2019, on hunting gestures in several Kalahari Khoe languages of Botswana and Namibia) or the semiotic landscape (e.g., Beck, 2005, on communicating with kanga cloths in East Africa, or Simungala and Jimaima, 2023, on the linguistic landscape of Zambia) have also been analyzed, just like the absence of verbal and non-verbal communicational signals, i.e., silence (e.g., Oduro-Frimpong, 2011, on the use of silence in couple interaction). These investigations were conducted against the background of different linguistic sub-fields and their academic traditions and practices, including, but not limited to, African studies (e.g., Sommer and Vierke, 2011), English studies (e.g., Schröder and Schneider, 2018) or linguistic anthropology (e.g., Pouchet, 2020). Given the ever-expanding amount of knowledge produced in contemporary academia, it is imperative that these different sub-fields communicate with each other academically in order to avoid the unnecessary replication of research on the one hand and to improve theory building on the other. With our special issue, we aim at contributing to this goal.

2. Communicative (inter)action as analyzed in the papers in this article collection

The articles in this collection make important contributions to the aim of a better understanding of communicative (inter)action in Africa and the diaspora, and increased exchange between different sub-fields of linguistics. Honkanen (2022) provides a corpus analysis on the basis of data from the popular Nigerian web forum *Nairaland*, with a special focus on discourse markers and interjections from various Nigerian languages, which are now used across ethnic boundaries in Nigerian Pidgin and Nigerian English interactions online. She discusses the semantic flexibility of these items and how this allows them to perform different functions depending on the context and to indicate emotional involvement. Her theoretical framework and data allow for a more transnational approach to studying language, which is in line with contemporary patterns of communication and requests for studying languages independent of ties to nation states (Blommaert, 2010; Mohr, 2022). Further, the article considers the multimodality of (contemporary computer-mediated) communication by including emojis in the analysis. At the same time, Honkanen concedes that her contribution can only provide a glimpse into the dynamics of communication in translocal, pseudonymous, non-native contexts and this is certainly a desideratum for future research.

While focused on a different context, i.e., South Africa, the type of data analysed in Turner (2023) is similar to the multimodal data in Honkanen (2022), as she analyses the video recording of a radio show of the isiXhosa radio station *Umhlobo Wenene*. Thus, similar to Honkanen (2022), the article contributes to the description of contemporary communicative patterns (online), their multimodality and the fluidity of the language practices used. She provides a multimodal conversation analysis of a highly multilingual mediated environment, focusing on membership categorisation and sequencing, as well as advice-giving and thus knowledge transfer. Her analysis demonstrates that “radio convergence has some enabling as well as restrictive effects for realizing, deepening, and broadening knowledge transfer” (Turner, 2023: 71). It is particularly noteworthy that by considering a physical event (at a radio station) and its remediation on social media, this contribution also accounts for what Blommaert (2019) has called the nexus of contemporary offline and online communication.

In their article, Unuabonah and Kupolati (2023) deal with traditional weddings in Yorùbá culture in south-western Nigeria as they are celebrated today. Adopting an approach developed in systemic functional linguistics concerned with Generic Structure Potential (Ansary and Babaii, 2005), combined with Mey’s pragmatic act theory (2001), the authors analyse traditional wedding ceremonies as communicative events. Their data consists of three weddings from the last ten years, each approximately 2 h long. In each case, a Yorùbá bride was wed to a non-Yorùbá groom, so that both Yorùbá and English were spoken during the ceremony. The weddings had been video recorded, and the speech was transcribed and analysed. The transcriptions were supplemented by participant observation and an interview with the spokesperson of the groom’s family, who plays a crucial role at a traditional wedding. The analysis is qualitative; only examples from one Yorùbá-Igbo wedding are presented. The results exemplify a generic structure which includes nine elements. Pragmatic acts of central importance are praying, instructing, pleading, and counselling. The study is aimed at providing a comprehensive picture of the wedding event in Yorùbá culture by also including psychological and non-verbal acts as well as contextual features, and shared situational and cultural knowledge.

Mulo Farenkia examines refusals to requests as they are used in French-speaking Cameroon. He is particularly interested in the influence of micro-social variables on refusal behaviour. His data was collected by a production questionnaire including discourse completion tasks (DCTs), designed to elicit a range of different speech acts. The analysis concentrates on two of the DCTs. These two DCTs differ regarding the situation in which a request is refused in terms of power and social distance. In one situation, the requester is a friend, in the other situation it is a professor. The analytic approach is essentially drawn from the *Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP, Blum-Kulka et al., 1989)*, which is commonly used in empirical speech act-based studies. Accordingly, a distinction is made between realisation strategies and modificational devices, and

additionally between refusals proper (“head acts” in CCSARP terminology) and supportive acts. The analysis results in the distinction of four direct and nine indirect refusal strategies. Furthermore, three types of supportive acts are distinguished, and also softeners and intensifiers, which can be used as internal modification in refusals or supportive acts. Finally, address terms are included in the analysis, both pronominal and nominal. The findings suggest socio-cultural norms which are specific to the type of situation.

In their article on “Small talk across Englishes: A focus on Namibia”, [Schneider and Schröder \(2023\)](#) contribute to further answering the question as to whether or not English as it is used in Namibia, where it was introduced as the only official language after independence in 1990, already is a second-language variety of English in its own right, displaying characteristic features. Specifically, the authors focus on a particular type of social discourse, namely party small talk between strangers. Their analysis is based on data collected by employing a dialogue production task (DPT). The framework adopted for this analysis is variational pragmatics, i.e., the study of pragmatic variation across varieties of the same language ([Schneider, 2021](#)). In this framework, similarities and differences are established by contrasting varieties. Hence the authors compare their Namibian data to L1 data from England, Ireland, the USA and Canada, and also to data from German learners of English as a foreign language. All data sets are immediately comparable, since all sets were elicited by using the same DPT, involving the same type of participants, i.e., adolescents. The analysis concentrates on four parameters. These are greetings, wellbeing questions, introductions, and references to the party situation. The results suggest that the choices which are made are predominantly variety-preferential, by and large resembling the choices made in the North American rather than the European varieties. Yet some variety-specific, if not variety-exclusive, features could also be identified.

3. Towards a broader picture of communicative (inter)action in Africa and beyond

With this special issue, we would like to advocate an integrative approach to communicative (inter)action in Africa and beyond, based on the established broad understanding of pragmatics that goes well beyond speech acts and is characterised by theoretical and methodological pluralism, with a potential to connect researchers from various disciplinary backgrounds. This has been previously discussed and is maintained with regard to both theory and methodology (e.g., [Bublitz and Norrick, 2011](#); [Schneider, 2018](#)).

The contributions in this special issue deal with language use in various regions of Africa, i.e., in the West (Cameroon, [Mulo Farenkia \(2023\)](#); Nigeria, [Honkanen, 2022](#); [Unuabonah and Kupolati, 2023](#)) and South (Namibia, [Schneider and Schröder, 2023](#); South Africa, [Turner, 2023](#)) of the continent. Both autochthonous languages isiXhosa (Bantu, Niger–Congo), Yorùbá (Benue–Congo, Niger–Congo) and former colonial languages (English, French) are examined, besides contact languages like Nigerian Pidgin English. While some papers focus on only one language, others analyse an autochthonous and a former colonial language as they co-occur in the same situation or speech event, thus illustrating aspects of translanguaging and the superdiversity typical of most, if not all, African societies. Yet other papers compare African to non-African language varieties in order to establish variety-preferential and variety-exclusive features of language use. Obviously, studies are, not only in this article collection but generally, carried out by experts from the relevant sub-fields, e.g., English Studies or African Studies. Yet, regrettably, there does not seem to be much communication between sub-fields. For instance, scholars in the World Englishes community, investigating mostly national second-language varieties around the globe including, not least, African varieties, are not necessarily familiar with autochthonous languages spoken in the respective countries. Furthermore, it would be desirable that experts from e.g., English, French and Portuguese Studies cooperate to establish commonalities in the use of different former colonial languages. Both these desiderata would benefit the further development of postcolonial pragmatics ([Anchimbe and Janney, 2011](#)). Additionally, it would be interesting to see to what extent behavioural patterns and cultural norms vary in and across language families in Africa. In general, caution is required when claims are made that particular features are specific to a particular language or variety, or that particular behaviours are exclusively African, where no comparison is being made.

All contributions in this special issue are based on empirical work, making use of a wide range of data collection methods, including ethnographic field notes, discourse completion tasks, dialogue production tasks, video recordings, large machine-readable corpora, and computer-mediated communication from, e.g., a web forum or YouTube. This diversity reflects our methodological stance (see [Schneider, 2018](#)). We believe that a best method does not exist, i.e., in other words, that no method is, as such, superior to other methods, as all methods have both advantages and disadvantages, and no one method can be used for all purposes. Therefore, choice of method depends on the research questions to be answered (and, realistically, also on feasibility and the qualifications of the researchers). A method suitable for answering particular questions may not be suitable for answering other questions. Each method thus provides specific insights into particular aspects of the overall picture, while no method alone permits a view of the entire picture. Thus, methodological pluralism should be encouraged and also triangulation, i.e., a comparison of data from different sources.

Research questions emerge in the context of various theoretical frameworks. The frameworks adopted in the present collection include speech act theory, politeness theory, conversation analysis, variational pragmatics, postcolonial pragmatics, and several more specific approaches, each highlighting different aspects of the complexities of communicative action and interaction. In this light, some criticism of particular frameworks appears to be unfair. It should be obvious, for example, that speech act theory cannot be used to analyse adjacency pairs, the generic structure of entire speech events, or gestures. Other frameworks are much better suited to investigate these phenomena. Also, speech act theory, politeness theory (specifically [Brown and Levinson's, 1987](#)) and conversation analysis have been accused of a Western bias and of ethnocentrism, “mistaking Anglo-Saxon conversational conventions for ‘human behaviour’ in general” ([Wierzbicka, 1985: 146](#)). While conventions of

language use are indeed language- and culture-specific, the fact remains that the existence of speech acts in communication as well as face concerns or turn-taking phenomena are pragmatic universals. The overarching aim in analysing communicative (inter)action in Africa as well as elsewhere, therefore, is to identify and describe the respective conventions and how they differ across languages, varieties and cultures.

The phenomena studied in the present articles are situated on different levels of analysis (see Schneider, 2021: 665–669). Honkanen (2022) considers several discourse markers. Mulo Farenkia (2023) focuses on a reactive speech act, i.e., request refusals, which he examines with a functional approach in specific microsocioal constellations. Schneider and Schröder (2023) study the speech acts occurring in the opening turns of small talk between strangers, and Unuabonah and Kupolati (2023) identify the pragmatic acts typically occurring in the generic structure of traditional wedding ceremonies. Turner (2023), by contrast, is interested in the specificities of a concrete communicative event at a radio station, including aspects of multimodality. While a wide range of phenomena is thus covered in these studies, and in a range of different contexts, many more phenomena need to be examined in many more contexts and situations to arrive at a more complete picture. In short, what we are advocating regarding frameworks is a broad notion of pragmatics and a multifaceted analysis on many levels, pieced together from work in different traditions, employing different approaches, all generating and contributing input for putting together a more comprehensive picture of communicative (inter)action which transcends the limitations of each individual approach or framework.

4. Whither hence?

Even if it sounds a trifle moralistic, we would like to see more realism, more modesty, and more tolerance – more realism, acknowledging that reality is complex, and this also includes, needless to say, the tremendous complexities of communicative action and interaction in general and especially in Africa. We would also like to see more modesty, acknowledging that the complexities of communicative action and interaction cannot be adequately examined in only one approach, not even for one speech act or one discourse marker, let alone adequately dealt with in just one study or paper. And because of this, we would like to see more tolerance, acknowledging that there is no best approach or method, that they all have their strengths and weaknesses and can be used for specific purposes and thus provide valuable insights which can be used to combine more and more fragments into a comprehensive picture.

We would therefore like to advocate a pluralism of frameworks and methods, and encourage empirical and comparative work on all analytical levels as well as communication and collaboration between researchers from different disciplines and traditions.

5. Contributions to the article collection

Honkanen, Mirka 2022. “This word no get concrete meaning oo”: Pragmatic markers in Nigerian online communication. *Journal of Pragmatics* 202, 93–104. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2022.10.015>.

Mulo Farenkia, 2023. Socio-pragmatic variation in request refusals in Cameroon French. *Journal of Pragmatics* 205, 174–184. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2023.01.007>.

Schneider, Klaus P., Schröder, Anne 2023. Small talk across Englishes: A focus on Namibia. *Journal of Pragmatics* 213, 96–106. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2023.05.012>.

Turner, Irina 2023. Dynamics of media convergence in translingual expert interviews – An example from isiXhosa radio in South Africa. *Journal of Pragmatics* 210, 71–84. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2023.03.014>.

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Declaration of competing interest

None.

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