**Epilogue: the future of discourse-pragmatic variation and change research**

*Jenny Cheshire*

**1. Introduction**

Discourse-pragmatic features are essential to social interaction. They allow us to signal the structure of our discourse as we speak, for example by marking the end of reported speech. They also help organise turn-taking, showing that we accept the turn or that we have finished our turn and, sometimes, how we want our utterance to be understood. They mark assumed shared understandings between speakers, show our attitude towards what we are saying, and can be used as fillers to buy ourselves time when planning and producing our discourse. These diverse functions, and more, are often performed simultaneously. This makes discourse-pragmatic features different from any other kind of linguistic feature. Their use may even result from a different kind of cognitive activity: Heine *et al.* (2014) note that although we must be careful not to overgeneralise and more research is needed, there is evidence from neurolinguistic observations that the two hemispheres of the brain may be differentially activated when we use discourse-pragmatic features from when we use sentence grammar.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the nature of variation and the kinds of change that discourse-pragmatic features undergo is not the same as for other kinds of linguistic features, nor that, with some notable exceptions, discourse-pragmatic features have until recently been left out of the variationist enterprise. This volume is a landmark, putting discourse-pragmatic variation and change centre stage and demonstrating how it can be accommodated within the variationist framework. The chapters speak for themselves, with several authors suggesting new directions for future research. In this final chapter, therefore, I have decided to simply, and indulgently, elaborate on four new directions for research that particularly interest me, and to briefly relate them to other research on these topics. I will also, in the final section, reflect on the more general issue of analysing discourse-pragmatic features as linguistic variables.

**2. Discourse-pragmatic features and language change**

Denis and Tagliamonte (Chapter 4) suggest that they have uncovered a new type of language change associated with discourse-pragmatic features: lexical replacement. Their analysis focuses on pragmatic shift, which they take as a proxy for grammaticalisation since it is one of the changes typically associated with this process. If a discourse-pragmatic feature is undergoing pragmatic shift, younger generations would be expected to use it with a gradually increasing number of new pragmatic functions. If lexical replacement is involved, on the other hand, younger generations of speakers would use a different form from the one preferred by older generations, but there would be no change in the pragmatic functions for which the older and newer forms are used: younger speakers would use the newer form with all the same functions as the older form. This is the case for the utterance-final tags Denis and Tagliamonte analyse: younger speakers use utterance-final *right* more frequently than utterance-final *you know*, whilst older speakers prefer *you know*; but all speakers, both older and younger, use utterance-final *right* and *you know* with the same range of pragmatic functions. As Denis and Tagliamonte say, with lexical replacement a new variant ‘emerges full-blown with all the functional characteristics of earlier variants in the […] variable system’ (p. 93).

Lexical replacement is also occurring in the general extender (GE) system in Toronto. Denis and Tagliamonte’s earlier research (2010) found *and stuff* replacing *and things* in the speech of younger speakers, with both forms used for the same pragmatic functions. Furthermore, they found no evidence in their data of other changes associated with grammaticalisation such as decategorialisation or reduction in form.

It is possible that lexical replacement is a general process of change for GEs in English. Although I argued in earlier research that GEs appeared to be undergoing grammaticalisation in three English towns (Cheshire 2007), my analysis was based on data from one generation of speakers only and, as a result, the argument could be only a hypothesis. Pichler and Levey’s (2011) research in Berwick upon Tweed found no evidence of ongoing grammaticalisation in GE forms though there were changes in the frequency with which younger speakers used individual forms (again, *and stuff* was replacing *and things*) and evidence of social differentiation (working-class male speakers preferred the form *and that*). In London, too, recent research finds no evidence of grammaticalisation for at least one of the changes usually associated with grammaticalisation: reduction in form. Secova (MS) compared the GE forms used in Kerswill *et al.*’s (2007) Linguistic Innovators Corpus (LIC) by speakers aged 16-19 and speakers aged 70 and above, and found that both groups of speakers used short forms such as *or something* with approximately the same frequency as longer forms such as *or something like that*. In both the younger and the older speakers’ data, short forms accounted for approximately sixty-five per cent of all GEs. Note, though, that this apparently high frequency of short GE forms is partly due to *and that*, which is the most frequent form for both younger and older speakers; but even without *and that*, the distribution of short vs. long forms was not significantly different across the two age groups.

An appealing question for future research, then, is to consider whether other discourse-pragmatic features may be undergoing different types of change from those to which we are accustomed. We would need diachronic corpora for investigations of this kind. Using just such a corpus, Denis (2015) analysed real-time changes in the use of epistemic parentheticals (forms such as *I think* and *I guess*) that are usually assumed to be grammaticalising. He found no evidence of the changes associated with grammaticalisation and proposed that rather than grammaticalising gradually from lexical material, the epistemic parentheticals included in his analysis have developed through abrupt reanalysis of lexical material from one syntactic category to another.

Intensifiers would be an interesting case to consider in this context; they are subject to constant change and renewal, are often recycled rather than developed afresh, and are sometimes considered to be subject to lexical change rather than a change moving through the grammar (see, for example, Bakht 2010). Barnfield and Buchstaller’s research (2010) confirms, in fact, that lexical replacement may be involved in some changes in intensifier use. In Tyneside, northeast England, the intensifier *dead* did not occur at all in data from the 1960s, but by 1994 it had soared in frequency to become the most popular form for younger speakers aged between 18 and 40, used with all semantic classes of adjective as soon as it appeared. This seems a clear example of lexical replacement of one form by another. By 2007, however, *dead* had become the least frequently used intensifier form for young people rather than the most frequent one. As Barnfield and Buchstaller point out, this type of change represents a linguistic fad: a particular form becomes fashionable for a while but the next generation then spurns it and finds a new form to use as an intensifier.

However, other intensifier forms were involved in different types of change. In Tyneside, as elsewhere in England, *really* is taking over from *very* as the most frequent intensifier form, but through a process of steady long-term replacement over the generations rather than by abrupt lexical renewal. Unlike *dead*, *really* was used in the 1990s Tyneside data with only two semantic classes of adjective: those describing human characteristics (e.g., *kind, posh*) and those describing a value (e.g., *good, bad*). As the frequency of *really* increased, it became used with an increasing number of adjective classes. The introduction of *really*, then, spread through the grammar in the same way as change in other components of language, beginning in a small number of linguistic contexts and then used in a gradually increasing number of contexts. Later, as *really* stabilised as an intensifier, it became more specialised, so that although in the most recent Tyneside data collected in the mid- to late-2000s the overall frequency of *really* had not changed, it occurred more often with adjectives referring to age (e.g., *new, young*), measurement (e.g., *big, thick*) and speed (e.g., *fast, slow*).

It is important not to overgeneralise, then. Different discourse-pragmatic features may be involved in different types of linguistic change, even if they belong to the same functional category as is the case with intensifiers. Furthermore, it seems clear that some discourse-pragmatic features may undergo lexical replacement, a different type of change from those that we are used to seeing in most previous work on discourse-pragmatic change. Furthermore, some features that we have assumed to be grammaticalising may not be involved in grammaticalisation at all. Future research could consider whether lexical replacement is a general mechanism of change for discourse-pragmatic features, or only for some. If only for some, which features are affected and what makes them susceptible to this kind of process?

It could also be interesting to consider the extent to which a change involving lexical replacement is likely to be localised. This was the case for the Tyneside intensifier *dead*; unlike steady long-term changes such as the introduction of *really*, *dead* did not occur throughout the UK as an intensifier. On the other hand, the new GE form *and stuff* is not localised, despite being involved in lexical replacement; on the contrary, it is widely used across the UK and in Toronto – and perhaps across the English-speaking world more generally. Fuchs and Gut’s contribution to this volume (Chapter 8) finds that intensifiers are localised across national varieties (more so, they point out, than the grammatical feature of past tense marking): why is this, and does it bear any relation to the type of change that different intensifier forms may be undergoing in the different national varieties? This volume has raised some thought-provoking questions for the future, then, about the nature of discourse-pragmatic change.

**3. Discourse-pragmatic features and the clause peripheries**

Over time, some discourse-pragmatic features tend to migrate from one periphery of the clause to another. For example, although words like *though* or *then* may occur at either the beginning or the end of a clause, during the last few decades they have become more frequent at the end of the clause (Haselow 2012: 182).

The majority of documented changes of this kind involve movement from the left periphery (LP) of the clause, as in (1), to the right periphery (RP), as in (2). Beeching and Detges (2014b: 7) note that there are very few counter-examples to this trend. The direction of travel is assumed to represent a change in the function of the feature. Although the differences cannot be upheld in a strong, exclusive way, there is a tendency for an asymmetry of functions at the LP and RP of the clause (Beeching and Detges 2014b: 19). At the LP, where speakers connect what they are about to utter to the preceding discourse, discourse-pragmatic features tend to have informational structuring or discourse structuring functions; at the RP, speakers can reformulate or correct what they have just uttered and reveal their attitude or stance. Features that move to the RP, then, are involved in the expression of more interpersonal and intersubjective functions.

Pichler’s contribution to this volume (Chapter 3) is all the more interesting, then, because it documents a change in the reverse direction from what we might expect: *innit* in Multicultural London English (MLE) is moving from the RP of the clause to the LP. *Innit* also occurs after a lone or left-dislocated noun phrase (NP). The recruitment of tags to the LP is not completely unknown cross-linguistically, as Pichler notes, but she has caught the ongoing change at a very early stage, and this offers an unusual and important opportunity to discover what motivates speakers to use a discourse-pragmatic feature in a new clause position, and the extent to which a feature may change its meaning and functions as it moves.

Pichler discovers that at the RP of the clause, as might be expected, speakers regularly (but not exclusively) use *innit* to involve their interlocutor in the interaction or, sometimes, to seek corroboration for what has just been uttered. She finds that *innit* has similar functions when it is used at the LP of the clause, with the important difference that here *innit* has scope over the following proposition rather than a preceding one. Speakers may seek corroboration by using *innit*, therefore, but when it is at the LP of the clause, the corroboration is for the proposition that is about to be uttered; as such, LP *innit* is used to secure the hearer’s attention or to give advance warning of a request for confirmation. Very interestingly, when *innit* occurs after a lone or left-dislocated NP, speakers continue to seek the involvement of the interlocutor, but this time it is in order to secure collaboration in referent activation and identification, or to mark referents that become topicalised. Securing the involvement of the interlocutor is, of course, especially important when speakers mark a referent as a potential topic, as it will only become a topic in the subsequent discourse if their interlocutors cooperate by elaborating on the topic themselves or by allowing the speaker to keep the floor.

This brief account oversimplifies the detail of Pichler’s analysis, but a general point that can be made is that in the early stages of its change in clause position the general function of *innit* remains the same at both clause peripheries, seeking to involve the interlocutor in all cases. It is only as its scope becomes narrower that the discourse functions of *innit* become more focused on information structure, a function that lies at the syntax-pragmatics interface.

It would be interesting in future research to see whether other discourse-pragmatic features preserve their core discourse functions in the early stages of a move from one periphery of the clause to another, as this goes against the general tendency for there to be an asymmetry between functions at the LP and RP. Perhaps functions change only as a feature becomes more established at a different periphery. It would also be interesting to see whether functions become more focused on the syntax-pragmatics interface as discourse-pragmatic features move to positions where their scope is narrower. For example, discourse *like* could be usefully analysed in this way, since this is another discourse-pragmatic feature that has moved from the RP to the LP and from there to an increasing number of clause-internal positions (D’Arcy 2005). Pichler’s chapter will serve as a model in our future analyses of other migrating discourse-pragmatic features.

We also have yet to discover why a speaker would decide to use a discourse-pragmatic feature in a new position. One possibility suggested by Pichler’s analysis of the LIC data is the nature of the recurrent interactions in which speakers are engaged (see Pichler [MS] for internally-driven hypotheses). Pichler finds that speakers consistently use *innit* at the LP of the clause to seek the attention of others who are not engaged in the interaction or when they are engaging in intense competition for the floor. Interaction in the adolescent peer groups where the LIC data was recorded is fast and lively, with a great deal of interruption and overlap. In lively adolescent speech between several friends, conversational management is more challenging than in other types of interaction and it may be more necessary to seek attention for what one wants to say in order to secure the floor. A feature that seeks the involvement of the interlocutor but that is usually at the end of an utterance could be an effective way of gaining attention and thereby securing the floor whilst maintaining solidarity with other speakers. It remains to be seen how the migration of other discourse-pragmatic features to the LP can be explained (such as, for example, discourse *like*), but if the data is available, future research could consider the types of interaction in which speakers first begin to use the feature in the new position and how this relates to its core function (if there is one).

It may also be useful to consider the personalities and the social characteristics of the speakers who first use a migrating discourse-pragmatic feature in a new position. Pichler notes that the two most prolific users of negative tags in non-canonical positions share the characteristics associated with linguistic innovators in the London corpus. These two speakers were particularly outgoing and talkative, and they produced many other linguistic innovations in the LIC corpus (see further Cheshire *et al.* 2008). This ties in with Denis’s (2011) finding that outgoing people with many friends used the new GE form *and stuff* more frequently than their less gregarious friends.

**4. The acquisition of discourse-pragmatic variation**

Levey’s contribution (Chapter 7) adds a new dimension to our understanding of discourse-pragmatic variation, considering whether children’s acquisition of variable discourse-pragmatic features mirrors their acquisition of phonetic and morpho-syntactic variation. As he points out (p.153), the acquisition of adult-like patterns of variation and change in quotative usage is developmentally protracted relative to that of phonological features. He suggests that this may reflect the complexity of the syntax-discourse interface, noting Sorace’s (2004) research on developmental instability and problems of learnability at this interface. Hulk and Müller’s (2000) research confirms that the interaction between syntactic and pragmatic information is particularly difficult for children to acquire (see also Müller and Hulk 2001).

Researchers working on quotative *be like* usually analyse as internal constraints on its use the effect of temporal reference, grammatical person, content of the quote and, sometimes, mimesis. Temporal reference and grammatical person have syntactic reflexes in verb form and subject realisation, but content of the quote and mimesis are a different type of constraint, perhaps best considered as

Table 11.1 *Contribution of external and internal factors to the use of* be like *in MLE*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **16-19 year olds** | | | **12-year-olds** | | | **8-year-olds** | | |
| *Total N* |  | 1282 |  |  | 516 |  |  | 473 |  |
| *Input* |  | .30 |  |  | .32 |  |  | .10 |  |
|  | FW | % | N | FW | % | N | FW | % | N |
| **Sex** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Female | .59 | 29 | 182 | .60 | 37 | 55 | .76 | 24 | 81 |
| Male | .42 | 20 | 131 | .46 | 22 | 79 | .06 | 1 | 2 |
| *Range* | *17* |  |  | *26* |  |  | *70* |  |  |
| **Grammatical person** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 2nd person | .52 | 26 | 11 | .28 | 15 | 2 | .74 | 33 | 2 |
| 1st person | .51 | 28 | 147 | .60 | 46 | 48 | .68 | 28 | 33 |
| 3rd person | .49 | 30 | 150 | .48 | 28 | 83 | .43 | 14 | 48 |
| *Range* | *3* |  |  | *32* |  |  | *31* |  |  |
| **Tense/aspect** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Habitual *would* | .67 | 51 | 18 | .68 | 50 | 1 | - | - | - |
| Habitual *will* | .57 | 41 | 17 | .50 | 38 | 3 | .99 | 67 | 2 |
| Simple past | .52 | 32 | 167 | .60 | 47 | 70 | .50 | 21 | 56 |
| Present | .47 | 29 | 55 | .42 | 26 | 21 | .49 | 17 | 14 |
| CHP | .41 | 29 | 51 | .44 | 25 | 35 | .46 | 15 | 11 |
| *Range* | *26* |  |  | *26* |  |  | *53* |  |  |
| **Content of the quote** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Non-lexicalised sound/gesture | .78 | 57 | 12 | [.40] | 25 | 5 | [.61] | 16 | 17 |
| Direct speech | .54 | 25 | 267 | [.50] | 26 | 124 | [.46] | 18 | 65 |
| Internal dialogue | .26 | 13 | 25 | [.59] | 33 | 5 | [.70] | 50 | 1 |
| *Range* | *52* |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

pragmatic. If the interaction between syntax and pragmatics is particularly difficult to acquire, this could mean that children will acquire the pragmatic constraints on variation later than the syntactic constraints. It is very interesting, therefore, that the 8-9-year-old children in Levey’s study have acquired the two grammatical constraints on the use of *be like* (notably the effect of temporal reference and grammatical person) and are advancing its use in these linguistic environments, but that they have not yet acquired the pragmatic constraints: the effect of the content of the quote and the use of mimesis does not pattern in the same way in their speech as it does in the speech of older children and adults.

In MLE, the constraints on the use of *be like* do not follow the patterns found elsewhere in the English-speaking world (Fox 2012). Nevertheless, a similar acquisition tendency to that reported in Levey’s chapter can be observed. Table 11.1 shows the results of a multivariate analysis using Goldvarb X (Sankoff *et al*. 2005) on the use of *be like* vs. all other quotative expressions used by 8-year-olds, 12-year-olds and 16-19-year-olds in London,[[1]](#footnote-1) all of whom are speakers of MLE. If we take the constraint hierarchies in the speech of the 16-19-year-olds as the baseline for the quotative system in MLE, we see that content of the quote is the only factor group that does not show significant results for the two younger age groups. (We did not code for mimesis in this analysis.) The 16-19-year-olds favour *be like* when the content of the quote is non-lexicalised sound or gesture but younger speakers do not. In fact, the younger speakers in our study quote non-lexicalised sounds and gestures more often than older speakers (see Kerswill *et al.* 2014), but their preferred quotative expression for this type of quote is *go* rather than *be like*. It seems clear, then, that younger MLE speakers have not yet acquired this pragmatic constraint on *be like* use.

The two grammatical factors, on the other hand – grammatical person and tense/aspect – are significant for all age groups. The range is very high for tense/aspect in the data from 8-year-olds, showing that for this age group it is the most important internal constraint. The ordering of the constraints for tense/aspect are inconsistent between the age groups and there are low numbers of tokens for some tense/aspect factors, but nonetheless we can see that the same tense/aspect factors disfavour the use of *be like* for all age groups: present tense and conversational historic present forms, in all cases. The results for the effect of grammatical person are less consistent: the range is again high for both 8-year-olds and 12-year-olds, though not for the older speakers, for whom the factor weights hover around the 0.5 mark.

To some extent, then, speakers of MLE show the same developmental tendency as Levey found for young speakers in Ottawa: younger speakers in London have acquired grammatical person and temporal reference as significant constraints on the use of *be like* (even though they have not yet acquired the full variable system), but they have not acquired the pragmatic constraint of content of the quote.

A valuable question for future research would be to determine whether these internal constraints follow the same developmental pattern as children acquire *be like* in other communities. It is possible that Levey has uncovered a general pattern for discourse-pragmatic features, with linguistic constraints at the syntax-pragmatics interface such as content of the quote

acquired later than linguistic constraints that are more integrated into the syntax of the language that children are acquiring. It would be interesting, too, to see whether the order of acquisition of constraints follows the same pattern in second language acquisition and whether there are differences between adult and child learners.

More generally, we do not yet know whether other discourse-pragmatic features are acquired later than features in other components of language, nor whether some discourse-pragmatic features are acquired earlier than others. Levey (2013) found preadolescents (aged between 7 and 11) using an extensive range of GE forms (though somewhat less extensive than in teenage and adult cohorts) and participating in contemporary patterns of variation in their use, but we lack information about children’s use of many other discourse-pragmatic features. In language contact situations, discourse-pragmatic features with the function of monitoring and directing the interaction are more susceptible to language transfer. Matras (2010: 81) suggests that this is because these features are subject to automatic routine rather than to ‘inflection and intent.’ Does this make them easier or more difficult for children to acquire? This too, I would suggest, is an important topic for future research, with implications for our understanding of how pragmatic competence develops.

Yet another question concerns the effect of frequency on the acquisition of discourse-pragmatic variation. As Levey points out in the conclusion to his chapter, in communities where *be like* occurs with lower frequencies than the community he investigated, preadolescents had acquired neither the form itself nor its associated structure to any appreciable extent. As he says, this raises the critical question of how quantitatively robust (and socially salient) a form must be before children can acquire it. In the MLE analysis discussed above, *be like* occurs with relatively low frequencies (it accounts for approximately twenty-five per cent of all quotative expressions used by the 16-19- and 12-year-olds, and only seventeen per cent of all quotatives used by 8-year-olds), so perhaps this accounts for the incomplete acquisition of the grammatical constraints on its use. Future research of the kind conducted by Levey will lead to a greater understanding of the role of frequency and salience in the acquisition of patterns of discourse-pragmatic variation.

**5. The social meaning of discourse-pragmatic features**

Kiesling (2009) argues that stance has a fundamental role in driving both change in the community and children’s acquisition of language. It is important, therefore, to advance our understanding of the relation between variation and the expression of stance; and Drager’s contribution (Chapter 10) suggests some exciting ways forward in investigating the specific contribution of discourse-pragmatic features to this relationship.

Drager’s research in a girls’ secondary school (‘Selwyn High’) found that discourse *like* was socially salient in this community, and that, as a result, its use or non-use carried a locally-defined social meaning. Speakers belonging to the self-defined Goths group avoided using discourse *like* when discussing ways in which they were different from other groups in the school. Drager points out that the girls at this school were known for using discourse *like*; thus, by refraining from using it, the Goths take a stance that overtly marks them as different from the other girls. As far as I know, the use of specific discourse-pragmatic features when discussing different topics has not previously been investigated, so there is plenty of scope for more of this kind of analysis.

Drager also shows that for some girls who used discourse *like*, the phonetic realisation of the vowel and the final consonant related to the stance they were adopting towards the people they were discussing. Drager’s analysis fits with a growing body of work on the use of phonetic variation more generally in the construction of stance, such as Kiesling’s (1998) analysis of the realisation of (ing) in the speech of fraternity men, or Levon and Holmes-Elliott’s (2013) analysis of /s/-fronting by working-class Essex speakers in reality TV shows. Drager’s focus on variation in the realisation of a specific word recalls Eckert’s (1996) analysis of (ay) in the speech of the self-defined Burnout adolescent group. The nucleus of the (ay) variable is undergoing raising in the Detroit area where Eckert carried out her research. Eckert found that nucleus raising was higher for Burnout speakers in words referring to cultural themes that were important to the group (such as *fight* or *all-nighter*).[[2]](#footnote-2) In Eckert’s entire corpus there was only one token of extreme raising on a word that was not associated with key cultural themes of the group. The Burnouts also used nucleus raising as an ‘interactional device’ (1996: 62), for example to convey emphasis at the climax of a narrative. Of course, words referring to key cultural themes are a somewhat different phenomenon from discourse-pragmatic features that are frequent and salient for a group, as discourse *like* is for the girls at Selwyn High. But in both cases, speakers use phonetic variation on specific words that for them are significant. Future research, then, could focus on phonetic variation in other discourse-pragmatic features that speakers find socially salient, to see whether speakers use variation in the phonetic realisation of these features to express their stance towards what they are saying. It is possible that those discourse-pragmatic features that are frequent and that change rapidly between generations are particularly susceptible to stance-related variation. Discourse *like* has these characteristics; changing intensifier forms and GE forms might be other candidates for this kind of analysis.

It is possible that the functions of some discourse-pragmatic features make them particularly susceptible to the expression of stance through phonetic variation. Kiesling’s (2005) research on word final (er) in multi-syllabic words such as *brother* in Australian English is relevant in this regard. Kiesling (2005: 22) found that a new ‘bundling’ of length and open realisation of (er), plus high rising tone, was used by second generation migrants as a resource for the expression of stance. The new realisation of (er) was especially frequent on the word *whatever*, which was used by interviewees in utterance-final position as a GE. Since *whatever* occurred in phrase-final position, it was more likely to occur with a high rising tone and the final vowel was more likely to be lengthened, but the discourse function of *whatever* was also crucial. Like other GEs, a frequent discourse function of *whatever* is to signal common ground. It is not surprising, therefore, that the migrant interviewees’ use of *whatever* occurred as they built solidarity with the interviewer, herself a second-generation migrant, and as they displayed stances of ‘authoritative connection’ on the basis of their assumed shared understanding of life as a migrant (Kiesling 2009: 188). Kiesling claims that the new open realisation of (er) began in non-Anglo communities as speakers took stances of authoritative connection with each other; it then spread to those Anglo speakers who had contacts with these communities, becoming linked in the process to any kind of authoritative connection, not just to experiences connected with migration.

Other frequent discourse-pragmatic features may have a more tangential effect on language innovation and change. In Cheshire (2013), I argued that the frequency and function of the discourse-pragmatic feature *man*, as in (3), was relevant to the emergence of *man* as a new pronoun in MLE, as in (4).

(3) I got raped in the toilet once . seriously ***man*** no yeah I got raped three times there ***man***

(Cheshire 2013: 620, ex. 30)

(4) I don’t really mind how . how my girl looks if she looks decent yeah and there’s one bit of her face that just looks mashed yeah I don’t care it’s her personality ***man***’s looking at

(Cheshire 2013: 621, ex. 33)

The discourse-pragmatic feature *man* is multifunctional, of course, but one of its more frequent functions is to construct solidarity and empathy between speakers. Its frequency allows the connotations of mutual solidarity and friendship to bleed into the homonyms of *man* – which include the new pronoun – and to encourage its use. The link with words referring to key cultural themes noted by Eckert (1996) is relevant here as well, since speakers used the singular noun *man* in a range of collocations to refer to types of individuals that were culturally salient for MLE speakers. For example, *my man* refers to older gang members who command respect and fear; *big man* to someone who feels superior for no good reason; and *waste man* to someone who does nothing with their life. These connotations may have further reinforced the salience of the word *man* for MLE speakers and, in an indirect way, contributed to the emergence of *man* as a new pronoun. I analysed the functions of the *man* pronoun in terms of politeness and rhetorical effect, but it may have been more revealing to consider its functions in terms of the expression of stance, and the phonetic realisation of the word *man* may also prove to be relevant. Drager’s analysis, then, suggests that future research on variation and change in any component of language, including discourse-pragmatics, could benefit from considering the potential relation between phonetic variation and stance.

**6. Discourse-pragmatic variation and the variable**

In this final section I want to briefly comment on the issue that is at the heart of this volume: the accommodation of discourse-pragmatic variation and change within the variationist framework.

The excellent chapters in this volume showcase what can be achieved by analysing discourse-pragmatic variation in this way. One of the principal gains, of course, is in analytical rigour. The feature under analysis is carefully defined, as is the envelope of variation. Sophisticated statistical analyses tease out the factors that are relevant to the variation: Chapter 4 by Denis and Tagliamonte is exemplary in this regard. Researchers recognise that it is variable structure that is relevant, rather than simple frequency counts. As a result, analyses can be replicated and advances achieved in our understanding; this is well illustrated in this volume, for example, by Rodriguez Louro’s analysis of quotative expressions in West Australian English (Chapter 6).

Many of the chapters show how further advances in methodological rigour can be achieved in future research: for example, by using prosodic phrasing and intonation to identify the scope and clause position of a discourse-pragmatic form (see Chapter 3 by Pichler), by using wave-form analysis to identify unambiguously an utterance-final tag (see Chapter 4 by Denis and Tagliamonte), and by formulating a replicable way of avoiding researcher subjectivity in the analysis of the pragmatic function of GEs (see Chapter 9 by Wagner *et al*.). Several contributions combine a qualitative analysis with a quantitative one, a development that can ‘tap the best of both worlds,’ as Tagliamonte points out in Chapter 5 (p. 116). In this way, we can avoid one of the disadvantages of the variationist approach: we have sometimes tended to decide in advance what the potential constraints on variation might be, rather than to first investigate how speakers use a variable in interaction. The innovative methodology described in Andersen’s contribution (Chapter 1) for identifying new and emerging discourse-pragmatic forms provides a way of avoiding a further problem: the fact that analysts tend to analyse the same variables over and over again. Pichler rightly notes in the final paragraph of her Introduction that the volume should encourage researchers ‘to investigate a wider and more diverse range of variables, and to explore new and unexplored dimensions of discourse-pragmatic variability’ (p. 15).

And yet, I am not entirely convinced that the analytical concept of the variable is appropriate for studying all types of discourse-pragmatic variation. Both Waters (Chapter 2) and Pichler (Introduction, Chapter 3) describe the heterogeneous category of discourse-pragmatic features as a ragbag, calling for a bespoke analysis. Waters points out that any one analysis that is performed can just as readily be performed in a different way, depending on the goals of the investigation. Future research might determine whether, and how, the ragbag could be refined into a smaller number of categories; it seems unlikely, for example, that it will be helpful to consider interjections such as *duh* and *rah* (identified by Andersen’s methodology in Chapter 1 as innovations in the LIC/MLE corpora) as members of the same overall linguistic category as quotative expressions or intensifiers. The latter are integrated into linguistic structure whereas the former are not (though future analyses may well prove me wrong). Quotative expressions and intensifiers fit with Labov’s (1972: 78) early comments that the variables that are most useful to study are both frequent and integrated into linguistic and social structure, but many other discourse-pragmatic features, though frequent, are outside linguistic structure. Although some of the contributors to the volume define a discourse-pragmatic variable in (partly) structural terms (see, for example, Denis and Tagliamonte in Chapter 4), the fact remains that some discourse-pragmatic features are easier to conceptualise as a variable than others.

Waters does an excellent job in Chapter 2 of describing the different ways that previous researchers have dealt with the issue, and she and some of the other contributors to this volume illustrate innovative ways of setting up the discourse-pragmatic feature they analyse as a variable. It seems to me, though, that an analytic tool that is made so flexible that its definition can change on different occasions, sometimes quite drastically, is a weaker tool. And I am not sure that attempting to fit a discourse-pragmatic feature into a concept for which it was not designed is always the best way forward. As I stressed at the beginning of this chapter, discourse-pragmatic features differ from any other kind of linguistic feature in being inherently multifunctional. I remain uneasy about privileging one function over another, as some of the contributors to the volume have done, since this is unfaithful to the phenomenon that we are investigating. I would prefer to find a way of incorporating multifunctionality into an analysis rather than devising innovative ways of excluding it. I would be on stronger ground, of course, if I could suggest a way of doing so. Perhaps future researchers will be able to resolve the problem.

Not everyone will share my reservations. To some extent, my criticism of using the concept of the variable to analyse discourse-pragmatic variation is a matter of terminology. Discourse-pragmatic features can be investigated with all the rigour of a variationist analysis even if the terms ‘variable’ and ‘variants’ are not used, and this volume will certainly inspire all of us who are interested in discourse-pragmatic variation to strive for this kind of rigour in our analyses.[[3]](#footnote-3) The volume is brimming with ideas, and the care with which the contributors have outlined their methods makes it possible for future researchers to replicate their studies and in this way to advance our understanding of this essential yet rather neglected aspect of language. The chapters have the common theme of analysing discourse-pragmatic variation in English; while there are some quantitative analyses of discourse-pragmatic variation in other languages (see, for example, Kern [2014] or Secova [2014], to mention just two relevant studies), it will be valuable in the future to consider discourse-pragmatic variation and change in other languages from the same kinds of perspectives as those illustrated here. In this final chapter I have briefly considered just some of the directions for future research that I found particularly exciting, but other readers will find many different types of inspiration. The future looks bright for research on discourse-pragmatic variation and change.

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1. The data for the 16-19-year-olds is taken from the Linguistic Innovators project (Kerswill *et al.* 2007), and the data for the two other age groups from the Multicultural London English project (Kerswill *et al.* 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ‘Pulling an all-nighter’ referred to staying out all night without the parents’ permission, especially when the night-time activities included brushes with the police. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It is odd that some of the contributors refer to my own research on discourse-pragmatic forms as variationist, when I have never thought of it in this way and have certainly never tried to define the discourse-pragmatic form under analysis as a variable. (If I had thought of it in this way, I would have tried to be more rigorous in the analysis!) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)