

How did the systems of space and time progress in discourse?

Spatio-temporal pursuit of the Pastons

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The purpose of this paper is to conduct a systematic discourse-pragmatic analysis of the spatio-temporal systems in the Paston letters along the lines of historical pragmatics and discourse analysis (Taavitsainen & Jucker 2015). The text used in the present study is taken from *Paston letters and papers of the fifteenth century* (Davis 1971), consisting of letters both by men and women mostly of Generations II and III (Bergs 2005).

Language is equipped with spatio-temporal systems by which the speakers/writers judge how distant the situations they wish to express are from their domain, that is, proximal (close) or distal (distant) (Nakayasu 2018). Such relationships are embodied by proximal and distal spatio-temporal elements such as pronouns, demonstratives, adverbs, tense forms and modals. These elements may be related to each other to take either a proximal or distal perspective not only in either the spatial or the temporal domain, but also in the integrated spatio-temporal domain. The speakers/writers can then continue to take the same perspective, or alternate different perspectives, in discourse.

This research integrates both qualitative and quantitative analyses of how the spatio-temporal systems in the Paston letters progress in discourse, taking into consideration sociolinguistic factors such as gender. A preliminary analysis of the corpus reveals that proximal perspectives are more likely to be taken in the Paston letters, and that women have a stronger tendency toward distal than men. This could reflect the power relationship between men and women in late medieval England, that is, men are more assertive and write about themselves more frequently, while women are more tentative and likely to report what happens in their vicinity.

This paper then addresses the following questions: 1) How does the perspective change as the discourse progresses? 2) What factors are relevant to this change in discourse? 3) How diverse are these factors among writers and recipients? and 4) How does the proximal-distal ratio change in discourse? To provide answers to these questions, this paper focusses attention on these factors: 1) elements structuring discourse (e.g. metadiscourse), 2) elements promoting a proximal or a distal perspective (e.g. address terms), 3) elements triggering alternations of these perspectives (e.g. discourse markers), and 4) factors facilitating such alternations in either the spatial, the temporal or the integrated spatio-temporal domain (e.g. contrast between two worlds). The analysis shows, for example, that the writers employ address terms to maintain a proximal perspective, considering their social role and the relationship with the recipients. Elements such as *wherefore* trigger the perspective change from distal to proximal, highlighting a cause-and-effect relationship. The contrast between two worlds such as those between the world of the living (proximal) and the world of the dead (distal) may cause perspective alternations in the integrated spatio-temporal domain. The analysis of proximal-distal ratio in discourse reveals, however, that such alternations between perspectives in letters are not so dramatic nor marked as in fictions such as Chaucer's *Canterbury tales*, because the letters' main purpose is to exchange information with family members.

In conclusion, this paper unveils how the Pastons exploited the systems of space and time in discourse, providing a fascinating new perspective to historical pragmatics and discourse analysis.

References

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