

Social Roles and Language Practices in Late Modern English

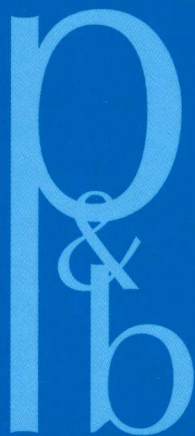
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Preface

The idea for this book came from the work carried out in our joint project, “Socio-cultural Reality and Language Practices in Late Modern England” (SoReaL), funded by the University of Helsinki in 2005–2007. The project examined communication patterns in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English public and private writings, developing and testing corpus-aided methods in sociopragmatic analysis for diachronic purposes. One specific area that interested us in the interplay of language and the social was the various ways in which writers used their linguistic resources to position themselves in relation to their interlocutors in the texts. The notion of “social role” began to appear significant and useful as one of the factors in operationalizing the analysis of language practices of writers of past periods.

With this concept in mind, we invited a group of scholars to a think-tank on Social Roles and Language Practices in Late Modern English, organized as a workshop in the Third Late Modern English Conference in Leiden in August 2007. The event proved fruitful and inspiring, as witnessed by this book. Six of the eight empirical studies included here are based on papers initially presented in the Leiden workshop, and two articles were solicited afterwards to complete the volume. The articles examine language practices in a variety of communicative situations, and draw on a range of theoretical and methodological approaches in the interface between social sciences and language analysis, combining a social and anthropological approach with (corpus) linguistics. Together they provide a rich view of the multiplicity of the means by which language users of the late modern period could and did construct and perform their social personae in written texts. We hope that these studies also inspire other researchers to follow suit and explore the dynamics of language and society in identity work and interaction in other written materials.

We would like to thank the contributors for their excellent co-operation in the different stages of the book project, and the participants of the Leiden workshop for inspiring discussions. We thank the anonymous Benjamins reviewers for their comments on the manuscript. A very special word of thanks to Jan Blommaert, Jonathan Culpeper, Marina Dossena and Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade, who took time to read parts of the manuscript and comment on the introductory chapter. We are thankful to Anita Fetzer for accepting the volume to

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The editors
December 2009

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Language practices in the construction of social roles in Late Modern English

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1. Social roles and language practices

Social roles are part of the social personae that make up a person's identity, together with their social status, position in society, relationships and institutional and other relevant community identities one may attempt to assign or claim in the course of social life (Ochs 1993: 288). Like identities, social roles can be seen as particular forms of semiotic potential, organized in a repertoire, and constructed and enacted by linguistic and other semiotic practices in social interaction (Blommaert 2005: 207). The relationship between social roles and language use is intriguing. Particular social roles can imply particular linguistic choices that are appropriate to enact those roles, but at the same time individuals can make linguistic choices and mobilize parts of their linguistic repertoire to index, negotiate and construct their social roles.

The studies in this volume address the relationship of social roles and language use in texts written in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain. They all examine language use as social practice, social behaviour and human interaction – as communication by which people build, index and maintain social relationships and influence other people in various ways. The focus is on the “identity” and “relational” functions of language, which, in addition to the “ideational” functions, are present in all texts and communicative situations.

1.1 Theories of social roles in social sciences

The notion of “role”, deriving from the theatre, began to appear in the social science literature in the 1920s and 1930s (Biddle and Thomas 1966), and has since then been widely studied and theorized in sociology and social psychology. There are two basic perspectives on roles in social sciences, structural-functionalist and symbolic-interactionist, which use the term “role” in two different but related senses.

In structural-functionalist approaches to roles, growing from the work of anthropologist Ralph Linton (1936), roles are attached to socio-cultural expectations and knowledge schemata (Ribeiro 2006: 50). They are defined as sets of behavioural expectations associated with given positions in the social structure, and seen as functional for the social systems within which they are embedded (Ashforth 2000: 3–4). In this approach, a role is a largely fixed attribute. Roles are created by society as a whole; they are relatively inflexible and universally agreed upon taken-for-granted positions, learned through the family, peer group, school and work (Haslett 1990: 332). Individuals take on their designated roles and “perform” them, attempting to fulfil their roles by doing what is expected in them. In addition to expectations, the notions of norms, patterns, rights and obligations are also important.

According to structural-functionalist role theory, social roles can be experienced and understood in terms of specific role relationships (e.g. parent-child, doctor-patient, teacher-student), memberships in general social categories (e.g. parents, medical professionals, academics), or as more or less institutionalized positions in given social structures (e.g. mother in a family, doctor in a hospital, professor in a university). Groups of interlocking roles, interdependent or complementary, create social institutions. In social institutions, various more or less directly interlinked roles will form role sets, where the roles tend to be differentiated by function and power. Because of this differentiation, the nature of the interaction between any two roles in a role set tends to be more or less unique. According to Ashforth (2000: 6–7), the notion of differentiation has several implications for the enactment of a role. Firstly, it suggests that a role identity is largely defined by its role set, and as such, complementary roles serve as foils for one another. The role identity of the doctor, for example, is largely defined by the complementary role of the patient. Second, the notion of differentiation suggests that any given role is multifaceted in the sense that a role occupant will display a certain characterization of the role toward each member of the role set. Furthermore, individuals have multiple roles, sequential and simultaneous, that tend to be bounded by time and space and imply interrole transitions from one role to another. Some of these transitions are macro role transitions, defined as

the psychological, sometimes also physical, movement between sequentially held roles (e.g. becoming a mother or getting a promotion at work). Some are micro role transitions, or role alternations, involving the psychological and possibly physical movement between simultaneously held roles, including shifts between one's home and work roles, one's at-work roles of supervisor and subordinate, one's at-home roles of parent and spouse, and between work or home roles and roles embedded in other social domains, such as church or a health club. An interesting question concerning multiple simultaneous roles is how and to what extent these different roles are and can be differentiated (Ashforth 2000: 260–261). The total role of an individual in society is often described as consisting of sets of relations of various types linking this person as ego to sets of others (see e.g. Lorrain and White 1971; Brewer and Gardner 1996).

The interactional and interpersonal nature of roles is emphasized in social-psychological role theory, symbolic interactionism, based on the work of George Herbert Mead (1934), and social action theory, which has its foundations in Max Weber's interpretive sociology (1947). In these approaches, providing a very different view on roles, a role is seen primarily in an interactionist frame, as a more fluid and subtle concept, depending on the situation, not on a fixed social structure. A role is not something that is simply prescribed and enacted, but, like identity, something that is constantly negotiable – an emergent and negotiated understanding between individuals in social interaction (Burr 2002: 71–73). The ideas of role-taking *and* role-making are important: in social interactions, each individual actively tries to define the situation, understand his or her role in it, choose a role that is advantageous or appealing, construct that role, and persuade others to support it. Here roles, like identities, can be self-claimed, or they can be appointed by others – achieved or ascribed (Blommaert 2005: 205–206). Instead of moving between fixed positions in a social structure, individuals are seen as having multiple roles that they are “capable of fulfilling or representing in the socio-cultural relationships in which they participate” (Omoniyi 2006: 12), and foregrounding different roles in different situations. Or, as Agha (2007: 242) puts it, actors semiotically display *a range* of roles in different kinds of interactional scenarios. For Goffman (1959), for example, the “presentation of self” to others in the various multiple role scenarios in which individuals participate forms a major daily enterprise of social life.

Contemporary social psychology aims at establishing a general theory of the self that attends to both macro and micro processes (Stets and Burke 2000; Stryker and Burke 2000). Stryker and Burke's discussion integrates the social structural sources of identity and relations among identities with internal, cognitive identity processes, and they use the term identity to refer to “parts of a self composed of the meanings that persons attach to the multiple roles they typically play in highly

differentiated contemporary societies” (2000: 284). Similarly, Stets and Burke discuss the different bases of identity, including group, role and person, posited in different strands of social identity theory and identity theory, and conclude that “a complete theory of the self would consider both the role and the group bases of identity as well as identities based in the person that provide stability across groups, roles, and situations” (2000: 234).

1.2 Language and social roles

Social interaction enables us to develop a sense of who we are, our self (Burr 2002: 71). It also enables us to acquire language, and remains at the core of how we use language to communicate with others – to present ourselves, define, construct and negotiate our identity and roles, and those of others, in the varying socio-cultural relationships or interactional scenarios in which we find ourselves in the course of our social life (Heiss 1976: 5). How exactly this construction and negotiation is done through language is a question that over the past decades has received a fair amount of attention in various branches of linguistics. The idea of speakers displaying variation in the ways they use language in different communicative situations, something that now seems a commonplace, is a major contribution of early sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology to our understanding of the relationship of language and the social (e.g. Labov 1966; Gumperz and Hymes 1972; Hymes 1974; Gumperz 1982). According to Hymes, for example, each language user has at his or her disposal a verbal repertoire, a complex of linguistic resources or a set of ways of speaking, consisting of “*speech styles*, on the one hand, and *contexts of discourse*, on the other, together with *relations of appropriateness* obtaining between styles and contexts” (1996: 33). The ideas about the relationship of these basic components of the communicative situation have been developed in various ways in subsequent research studying language use in its social embedding from different perspectives and relying on different methodological approaches. In stratificational sociolinguistics, the quantitative paradigm in the study of linguistic variation in relation to social systems, viewing the social largely as a fixed and external structure that is only reflected in linguistic variability, has held centre stage. Major lines of research here include quantitative analysis of linguistic features in correlation to social class (e.g. Labov 1972) or domain-specific contexts of use, i.e. registers (e.g. Biber 1988). In linguistic anthropology, relying on qualitative ethnographic methodologies, the focus of attention has been on meaning-making processes that are at the core of understanding language as social practice. Here linguistic forms and processes, with other semiotic means, provide a window to the interpretation of socio-cultural

processes, including socialization, ideologies and identities (e.g. Silverstein 1985; Ochs 1988; Kulick 1992). Meaning-making processes have also been focal in the linguistic orientations of pragmatics and discourse analysis, examining language-in-use and language-in-action in its various social contexts, spoken and written (e.g. de Beaugrande and Dressler 1981; Brown and Yule 1983; Levinson 1983). These different orientations towards the relationship of language and society have given rise to several interesting “mergers”, also providing a perspective on social roles. These include interactional sociolinguistics, grounded in the work of Gumperz, concerned with how speakers signal and interpret meaning in social interaction (e.g. de Fina, Schiffrin and Bamberg 2006; Auer 2007), social network analysis (e.g. Milroy 1980), and research on communities of practice (e.g. Eckert 2000). While much of the research into language and the social paradigm has focused on spoken language, the role of literacy, a resource which is generally unequally distributed in any society and has effects on the way in which people construct roles and identities, has also been examined in some work in New Literacy Studies, shedding light on the complex relationship between literacy as a practice and identity work (e.g. Collins and Blot 2003; Blommaert 2008).

In this body of research, the notion of social role has rarely been the centre of attention, largely because of its “passive” connotations, deriving from structural-functionalist conceptions, where roles are seen as fixed, objectified attributes. According to Agha (2007:242), the term “role”, like the related term “status”, once so fashionable in anthropological and sociological studies, is now considered questionable, and this is also reflected in socially-oriented linguistics. Instead, the focus of attention in research on social personae has been on identity, and during the last ten years, the relationship of language and identity has become one of the most intensely studied topics in linguistics (see e.g. Joseph 2004; de Fina et al. 2006). This has happened simultaneously with an increased interest in identity as a subject of inquiry across the humanities and social and behavioural sciences. In research on institutional language use, for example, in studies on doctor-patient interaction, the notion of roles is relevant, although not always explicitly thematized in terms of roles but related concepts, such as voices (e.g. Cordella 2004). In some of the research that does explicitly deal with roles, they have in fact often been portrayed in a rather negative light, as something forced upon individuals, as in, for example, gender studies (see Holmes and Meyerhoff 2003).

From a historical perspective, research that explicitly thematizes or theorizes the notion of social roles and their relationship with language use is practically non-existent. We think that social roles, however, are worthy of attention also in historical linguistics. No one would deny, we believe, that roles are part of the various interactional social structures, systems, relationships or scenarios in which individuals of past periods also participated, presenting themselves to others and

negotiating and constructing their places and positions in interaction. The studies in this volume, focusing on language-in-use in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain, demonstrate the ways in which the notion can be applied in studying language of the past in social interaction. Making use of the concepts of social networks, discourse communities and communities of practice, hierarchies and power relations, intimacy and social distance, the studies show that the concept of roles can be useful for our understanding of the linguistic meaning-making processes by which individuals participating in various social relationships in late modern Britain built, indexed and maintained these relationships and influenced each other in various ways in their writings.

2. Studying historical language-in-use

In this volume, the texts studied from the perspective of role construction range from journals and personal correspondence to business correspondence, from the *Spectator* essays and book reviews to children's books. These genres include both private manuscript texts written by one individual to another, or even to herself, as well as published writings intended for a wider circulation. Thus, the production circumstances, the audience and the purpose of writing vary, but the texts entail the interpersonal dimension, "enacting our personal and social relationships with the other people around us" and are studied as interaction between writers and readers (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004: 29). A letter writer just like a journal writer, a book reviewer, a periodical editor or a novelist position themselves or the characters they create in relation to the expected audience, the intended effect of the text and the conventions of a genre at a particular moment in history. In this section we focus on methodological issues in the study of interpersonal meanings in language use in past periods, including the type of materials, recent developments in corpus methodology and the nature of available contextual information.

2.1 Characteristics of historical linguistic data

Since the bulk of research on role construction focuses on present-day communities, mainstream analytic models are not always directly applicable to the historical context, even though research methods in historical sociolinguistics and pragmatics in general are adopted from current theories of language (cf. Taavitsainen and Fitzmaurice 2007: 15–16). Present-day studies on role and identity construction, for instance, deal overwhelmingly with talk-in-interaction using conversation or

discourse analytic methods. Alternatively or in addition to such analyses, ethnographic methods including interviews, questionnaires and participant observation are frequently used. Moreover, studies concerning present-day languages and speech communities typically pay attention not only to the linguistic repertoires used in interaction but also to auditory features like prosody, or extralinguistic features like posture and gesture (see e.g. studies in de Fina et al. 2006; Auer 2007; Spencer-Oatey and Ruhi 2007).

For a historical linguist, face-to-face interactions are available only in written transcriptions, but some of the methods employed for the analysis of talk-in-interaction may be used to explore historical genres like drama or trial records. Dialogues in plays are fictional representations of spoken interactions, while trial records are written transcriptions of oral legal procedures. Both types of texts have been used to study patterns of interaction in the past. Articles in Jucker, Fritz and Lebsanft (1999) provide examples of historical dialogue analysis in different text genres in the Romance languages, German and English. Culpeper (2002; also Culpeper and Kytö 2010) focuses on the analysis of character description in plays drawing on a rich theoretical background of literary criticism, linguistic description and pragmatics. Archer (2005) employs socio-pragmatic methods to study question-answer sequences in courtroom interaction from 1640 to 1760 and establishes changes in the institutional roles of judges, defence lawyers, defendants and witnesses during the period as a result. Among the genres studied in this volume, letters are apparently the most dialogic and interactional in the sense that the writer-addressee dyad can be located in specific individuals. Ideally, letters sent between the correspondents could even be observed as “turns” in interaction, but unfortunately this is seldom possible, as all the letters sent between the correspondents have not necessarily been preserved and/or edited (for the preservation of letters, see Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2005).

As the vast majority of extant historical texts are anything but recordings of talk-in-interaction, new methodologies and a different toolkit from present-day analyses have to be developed. Most clearly this toolkit includes a means of tackling written data that have been haphazardly preserved and are consequently patchy in many ways (for advantages and disadvantages of historical data, see e.g. Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg 2003: 26–28). Additionally, historical people are available for observation only in their texts and possibly through notes and interpretations of contemporaries and/or historians, and researchers do not have first-hand experience of the communities they work with (for examples of the methodology of historical network reconstruction, see Bax 2000 and Sairio 2009). Reliable and systematic methods of linguistic analysis and contextualization are thus essential, but the historical linguist is not severely hampered by the temporal distance of the data as pointed out by Archer (2005: 8): “although the distance in

(historical) time may exacerbate the [analyst's] potential to 'err', it is nevertheless possible to reconstruct 'plausible' intentions, *given adequate evidence*". The analyst's closeness and involvement with the analysed community also introduces biases. Blommaert (2005: 50–56) observes that critical discourse analytical studies of present-day communities often contain a priori statements on power relations that are used as perspectives on discourse. The same power relations are then confirmed in a circular manner by the analysis.

Since sociolinguists and pragmaticians dealing with present-day languages prioritize spoken data, historical sociolinguists and pragmaticians used to feel apologetic about their "bad data", but attitudes have now changed. Jucker (2008: 896) identifies three aspects contributing to a "new appreciation of the communicative complexity of historical data". First, spoken language and written language are no longer regarded as dichotomous opposites, as both exhibit linguistic variation and may be more or less (in)formal or interactive (Biber 1988). Thus, more fluid conceptualizations, such as a scale between the language of immediacy and the language of distance, are felt to be more appropriate (Koch and Österreicher 1985). Linguistic variation within the letter genre, for example, is evident as business correspondence in general tends to be more formal than private correspondence, but private correspondence may also be formal particularly if the correspondents are socially distant and/or unequal in status. Second, the communicative nature of written language is now widely recognized. Consequently, written language can be analysed as a communicative act for its own sake, not just as a poor substitute for spoken interaction. Nurmi and Palander-Collin (2008), for example, discuss letters as written interaction and conclude that although personal letters are highly interactive in general, interactive involvement features surface most prominently in correspondence between socially equal and/or intimate writers. Third, linguists have moved away from describing language in general to describing specific varieties and genres, as illustrated by all the articles in this volume that are highly contextualized in particular settings and/or located at certain individuals.

Finally, issues concerning literacy, relevant for language practices in any period, have a profound impact on the nature of historical linguistic data in many ways. Literacy practices, access to literacy and varying levels of literacy in the community as such have important implications for individual identities and possible situated roles, as various roles and identities may or may not be available depending on the nature of the individual's reading and writing skills (Blommaert 2008; see also p. 11 below). In historical studies, the language practices observed are usually those of highly literate elites, although there is also a distinct language history from below paradigm focusing particularly on the language of the majority (e.g. Elspass, Langer, Scharloth and Vandenbussche 2007; Vandenbussche and Elspass 2007).

2.2 Corpus methods

Corpora and corpus methodology are identified as the key feature of current research in historical sociolinguistics and pragmatics (Jucker 1999, 2008; Taavitsainen and Fitzmaurice 2007). Electronic corpora and corpus tools facilitate data searches and analyses of linguistic features, and, ideally, corpora provide plentiful evidence. With corpus methodology, it is possible to draw conclusions about typical linguistic patterns in a given data set without reliance on intuitions only. It is also possible to observe differences in usage between data sets, as well as to reveal lexical and grammatical characteristics of the text that are not immediately observable to the reader but still form an important part of the style of the text (for ideas on using corpus tools for discourse analysis, see Conrad 2002). This is a good heuristic tool, as linguistic features indexing identity and social roles may encompass a variety of linguistic phenomena including labels, implicatures and presuppositions, stances, styles and linguistic structures and systems, but it is difficult to know beforehand which will be relevant in a given situation (Le Page and Tabouret-Keller 1985; Rampton 1999: 501; Bucholtz and Hall 2005: 593–598).

Many of the contributions in this volume are based on electronic corpora of varying sizes, compiled from original manuscripts, original printed sources or modern editions. Authors also make use of analytic tools easily available in corpus software such as *WordSmith Tools* (Scott 2004–2007). As a case in point, Susan Fitzmaurice as well as Arja Nurmi and Minna Nevala employ a relatively new corpus tool for identifying positive and negative keywords in a given text. These are words that occur significantly more or less frequently in the corpus investigated than in a reference corpus (for a detailed methodological presentation of a keyword analysis applied to character description in plays, see Culpeper 2009). This statistical tool of analysis helps them identify linguistic patterns and then interpret the significance of these patterns in role construction through qualitative readings of the texts and by means of situating the texts in their socio-cultural and discursive contexts. Using frequency lists of words occurring in the corpus as a starting point may also help us identify typical semantic domains in the text. In the case of nineteenth-century children's literature, family roles are important in the children's world and such social roles are often labelled, as words referring to people occur particularly frequently among the 500 most common words. Thus, Hanna A. Sveen divides these words into gender roles, adult and child roles and family roles and explores which recurring adjectival patterns are used to describe them in order to understand what the typical contents of the roles are.

However, corpora and corpus tools do not always facilitate searches. Minna Palander-Collin and Minna Nevala investigate reporting constructions and their functions in terms of social role construction. As reporting constructions and

reporting frames vary to quite an extent, it would be difficult to identify reporting events comprehensively by automatic means using corpus tools based on specific words or characters, or even POS tags or grammatical annotation, but the corpus would have to be manually coded for the array of reporting constructions. It is similarly difficult to use corpus programs to search for thematic issues in texts, like Carol Percy does, or particular linguistic functions. Relevant linguistic constructions would have to be identified from the texts first. This is what Marina Dossena does when dealing with trust-building in business letters. She shows that building trust is a complex function in linguistic terms including various lexical, syntactic and politeness features. At the next stage, corpus tools could perhaps be used to search for these items.

2.3 Contexts of language use

Social role construction in this volume is discussed as a situated linguistic phenomenon, but to make interpretations as plausible as possible the context has to be approached in a systematic way. How can this be accomplished, and what kind of contextual information is there? First, the notion of context is not unproblematic, and the relevance and definition of context varies in different linguistic paradigms, as shown by Archer and Culpeper (2003) in their discussion of research traditions in corpus linguistics, historical linguistics, sociolinguistics and pragmatics. Even though each of these disciplines regards language and context as inseparable, they often emphasize different aspects of context. In variationist, correlational sociolinguistics, such social categories as gender, class and ethnicity tend to be regarded as discrete, stable and primary contextual factors affecting linguistic variation, whereas some strands of conversation analysis do not allow any prior categorization, requiring interpretations to be based on insiders' understanding of what makes talk comprehensible for them at that moment (for a discussion, see e.g. Coupland 2001). In order to make sense of historical interactions, it soon becomes evident that context has to be treated as multilayered, where the layers are simultaneously important and incorporate the "here and now" of the interaction as well as wider expectations and possibilities stemming from various societal constellations. One such multilayered notion of context is provided by Schiffrin (1994: Ch. 10), who identifies "context as knowledge" and "context as situation". When defined as knowledge, context is viewed essentially in terms of knowledge that the interactants can be assumed to have, such as awareness of social institutions and of the general wants and needs of others. Context as situation, meanwhile, signifies knowledge of the "here and now". Context as knowledge of cultural norms and conventions and context as situation are intertwined in