

Karin Aijmer. *Understanding pragmatic markers. A variational pragmatic approach.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 2013. 162 pp. ISBN: 978-0-7486-35550-4 (paperback). Reviewed by **Christoph Rühlemann**, Philipps University Marburg.

Pragmatic markers represent a major area for pragmatic research. Also, a substantial number of corpus linguistic studies have investigated pragmatic markers in recent years. The volume under review builds on this large body of corpus pragmatic research pushing it into a new direction, that of ‘variational pragmatics’ (Barron and Schneider 2009), an emerging discipline intended to study the influence of social factors on how language is used in interaction. The central hypothesis guiding the analyses in the book is “that in addition to a general analysis of pragmatic markers we need to take into account their occurrence in different varieties (of English), text types and activity types” (p. 2).

The book falls into two broad parts, the (theoretical) Introduction in Chapter 1, and the (empirical) case studies in Chapters 2–4 concerned with *well* (Chapter 2), *in fact* and *actually* (Chapter 3), and ‘general extenders’ such as *and stuff like that* (Chapter 4). The volume is rounded off by brief conclusions (Chapter 5).

The Introduction is an extremely dense piece of writing. In addition to outlining the above hypothesis and locating the analyses to come within the “new discipline” (p. 2) of variational pragmatics, the author undertakes to define pragmatic markers. Aijmer takes a two-way approach to defining pragmatic markers corresponding to speaker and hearer: (i) as reflexive or metalinguistic indicators “mirror[ing] the speaker’s mental processes” (p. 4) (speaker perspective) and (ii) as contextualization cues “help[ing] the hearer to understand how the stream of talk is organized” (p. 6) (hearer perspective). Aijmer stresses that, as contextualization cues, pragmatic markers “typically occur at transitions in the discourse where the hearer needs to be made aware that a new activity starts or that the speaker takes on a new role” (p. 7). Aijmer also outlines in the Introduction the corpus underlying the great bulk of the analyses, namely the ICE-GB corpus. This corpus stands out from most other corpora in that “it is possible to listen to

the spoken recordings accompanying the texts” (p. 9), thus facilitating the author’s own analyses of how pragmatic markers are realized differently in terms of prosody. Other corpora used include other members of the ICE corpora family as well as the DCSPE corpus and the COLT corpus, to name only a few. The Introduction further discusses the complex relationship between pragmatic markers and context as well as linguistic theories to account for this relationship. These theories include ‘integrative theories’ such as Schiffrin’s (1987), which emphasizes the role of pragmatic markers in flagging discourse structure, Relevance Theory, which “takes a hearer perspective and regards pragmatic markers as a signal to the hearer to take an inferential route” (p. 11), and most important, what Aijmer refers to as the “theory of meaning potentials”, that is, semantic networks with more peripheral meanings organized around more prototypical meanings (p. 13) which are selected by, and in accordance with, the relevant context. In outlining her understanding of the notion of context, Aijmer draws on indexicality, indexing the dimensions of time and place as well as what she calls “speech act features” (p. 14); these include, following Ochs (1996), parameters related to speaker and hearer, such as social identity (roles, relationships, group identity, etc.), social act (socially recognized behavior such as offer or request), activity (sequence of at least two social acts), and stance (epistemic and affective). Finally, Aijmer sketches some formal and functional features of pragmatic markers. Formal features include, for example, prosody and positioning in the utterance, while functional models vary with regard to the number of basic functions attributed to pragmatic markers. The Introduction is rounded off by a summary, which is useful given the chapter’s theoretical complexity.

The second chapter describes a case study on *well*, a pragmatic marker which has, as the author notes, “received more attention than any other English pragmatic marker” (p. 20). Accordingly, Aijmer devotes some space to surveying at least key studies on *well* placing the emphasis on studies of *well*, not in conversation, like most previous research, but in more specialized spoken text types such as narratives, courtroom proceedings, classroom discourse, and television commentaries. The focus on these text types is deliberate in that, unlike previous studies characterized by ‘meaning minimalism’ where *well* is seen as having “a single core meaning from which new meanings can be derived” (p. 22), a synopsis of these studies “show[s] that a large number of contextual elements contribute to the frequency of *well* and its interpretation” (p. 25), a theme taken up and developed further in Aijmer’s own case study.

The case study is started with an overview of the frequencies of *well* in the spoken part of the ICE-GB. It is shown that *well* is by far most frequent, not in face-to-face conversation, where it is second-most frequent, but in telephone

conversation, where *well* “can also compensate for the absence of body language and gestures” (p. 27). Aijmer notes that her more detailed analyses will focus on five select text types: face-to-face conversation, telephone conversation, broadcast discussion, cross-examination, and spontaneous commentary, the former two representing private dialog, the latter three public dialog. Before embarking on the analyses the author outlines and exemplifies the analytical categories used. These include formal properties such as position, prosodic features, and collocation. They also, centrally, include a functional classification of three “core meanings (or sub-senses)” (p. 30): coherence (word search and self repair, projecting a new turn, transition according to an agenda, transition to quotation), involvement (agreement, disagreement, evaluation, feedback to a preceding question), and politeness. The subsequent analyses of *well* in the five text types are organized around these formal and functional parameters.

In analyzing *well* in private dialog (face-to-face and telephone conversation), Aijmer uses sample analysis, that is, she subjects samples of 200 occurrences each to a very close line-by-line reading. (The numbers of instances examined for public dialog are lower, e.g., 130 for broadcast discussion, 72 for spontaneous commentaries, etc.). It is not stated though on what principle the sampling was based: by corpus order or random order (which would be preferable in terms of representativeness).

In the subsequent sections of the analysis of *well*, Aijmer lays out a rich mosaic of observations on form-function-context interactions in the use of the marker; space considerations dictate that only a few key ones can be related here. In analyzing *well* in face-to-face conversation Aijmer observes a position-function interaction: “[w]hen *well* was embedded in the turn it always had a coherence function (word-search, self-repair). Initial position, on the other hand, was associated with involvement” (p. 44). Since *well* was predominantly initial (62 %) it follows that the marker in conversation is less used for coherence than much more for involvement and also stance (p. 48). In telephone conversation, by contrast, Aijmer reports an increase in the coherence function, which she plausibly attributes to the absence of the visual channel and the concomitant need for speakers to signal turn continuation verbally (instead of non-verbally). In the public dialog text types, where “the interaction takes place in a professional setting and (...) the speakers have special roles and professional identities” (p. 55), *well* shows a different functional profile. For example, in broadcast discussion, the public-dialog type with most occurrences of *well*, a functional divide is found between moderator and discussants: while the moderator uses *well* mostly for coherence (introducing a controversial issue, inviting a new speaker to take the floor, achieving a shift of topic, etc.), discussants use *well*

mainly to signal stance, that is, to “present, develop or defend a position” (p. 59), thus conveying “assertiveness and authority” (p. 60), and also to soften disagreement (p. 63).

The next chapter explores two “closely related” (p. 74) pragmatic markers, *in fact* and *actually*. After a review of previous work, Aijmer first briefly discusses frequencies in various corpora, including ICE-GB, BNC, and DCPSE (which combines both the London-Lund corpus (LLC) and the ICE-GB). The resulting amount of numbers places heavy demands on the reader. To conclude from a mere comparison of frequencies in the LLC (whose data date from the 1960s) and the ICE-GB (from the 1990s) that “*actually* is becoming more frequent and has developed additional functions over time” (p. 79) seems a little stretching the evidence (since at that point no functional analysis has yet been presented). *In fact* and *actually* are examined in a variety of dialogic and monologic text types. *In fact*, for example, is investigated in conversation, legal cross-examinations, and broadcast discussions (dialog) and demonstrations and unscripted speeches (monolog). Again, the findings for the two pragmatic markers are too detailed and too numerous to be reported here exhaustively. I will restrict the account to *in fact* and present findings selectively. In conversation, Aijmer finds three core meanings of this marker: adversative (“what appears to be the case – what is really the case” (p. 83)), elaborative “upgrading and strengthening” (p. 88), and softening (particularly in end position), with the elaborative meaning being predominant in conversation. This predominance is related to exigencies of the situation type underlying this text type, viz. the scarcity of planning time, which means that “speakers have to make continuous adjustments or corrections” (p. 90). In public dialog, where Aijmer notes significantly higher occurrences for *in fact* than in conversation (p. 91), *in fact* has different formal and functional properties. Formally, Aijmer finds a striking preference for medial position (while in conversation the preferred position is initial). This observation is seen in relation to the structure, goal, and roles typical of the varieties of public dialog considered. For example, in legal cross-examination, questions and answers provide the structural backbone, the goal is to establish the ‘facts’, thus building up an argument (the ‘truth’) and roles are differential with regard to power (with defendant and witness less powerful than defence counsel, plaintiff, and judge). Given the competition between these interactants for what counts as facts and, consequently, as the truth, it is not surprising that *in fact* turns out highly multifunctional in cross-examination, not only with adversative and elaborative sub-senses, but also “indexical stance meanings associated with power or politeness” (p. 95).

In Chapter 4 follows an analysis of what Aijmer refers to as ‘general extenders’ such as *and things* and *and stuff like that*, which are typically “placed at the end of the utterance or a phrase and extend the utterance by referring to a category ‘in the air’” (p. 127) (which is why other scholars refer to extenders as ‘category markers’ (e.g., O’Keeffe 2004)). Unlike the previous chapters, which focus on differences between text types, the focus in this chapter is on differences between national varieties of English; these include Great Britain (ICE-GB), Australia (ICE-AUS), New Zealand (ICE-NZ), Canada (ICE-CAN), Singapore (ICE-SIN) and the US (Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English (SBC)). Formally, Aijmer distinguishes two basic “collocational frames contain[ing] *and* and *or* followed by a generic noun or an indefinite pronoun” (p. 130) and, accordingly, two basic types: *and*-extenders and *or*-extenders.

The author dedicates a long section to the distribution of extenders across varieties (Section 4.6). Given the prohibitively large number of variants times the large number of varieties, the level of detail presented here places considerable demands on the reader. They are compounded by the fact that some tables are not, or not sufficiently, explained. For example, Aijmer notes that “[t]he difference between variants using *stuff* and *things* is striking. See Table 4.4” (p. 134). The table referred to contains figures for raw and normalized frequencies as well as significance levels grouped in 12 columns and three rows. Despite this sheer complexity, no explanation of the data in the table is offered; the reader is left to their own devices in figuring out how ‘striking’ the differences are. To cite another example, the only comment on Table 4.3, which covers an entire page (12 times 14 cells), is the dry note that “[t]here are a large number of patterns with *and*” (p. 134).

Following this section, the analysis shifts to a description of the variability of extenders “in terms of their association with politeness norms favoured by different regional varieties” (p. 137). Aijmer observes that, as a consequence of grammaticalisation, extenders develop interpersonal functions invoking shared knowledge and establishing solidarity. She emphasises that (adjunctive) *and*- and (disjunctive) *or*-extenders “correspond to different structures and have different functions” (p. 139), with *and*-extenders used “to stress in-group membership and social similarity” (positive politeness) and *or*-extenders “convey[ing] vagueness and hav[ing] functions as hedges” (pp. 139–140) (negative politeness). The regional variation in these functional terms of positive and negative politeness is not treated systematically but explored rather casually with a few mentions of specific extenders, which fulfill specific functions, being more or less prominent here or there; for example, the form *and all that* functioning as “a marker of shared knowledge and solidarity” (p. 143) seems to be highly favored

in Singaporean English, while it is relatively infrequent in the other varieties. (A quick look back at Table 4.3 confirms this observation: *and all that* has a normalized frequency of 600 occurrences in ICE-SIN but only low two-digit frequencies in all other varieties.)

In sum, despite minor shortcomings in the last of the empirical chapters (which is, interestingly, also the only one in which occasional typos catch the eye), Aijmer's study is a major achievement in the study of pragmatic markers: not only does it push the door wide open to viewing markers in hitherto neglected text types and also regional varieties, but it does so in presumably unprecedented detail and conceptual depth. Aijmer's theory of pragmatic markers having a 'meaning potential' from which speakers and hearers make choices depending on large numbers of contextual variables will undoubtedly have a considerable impact on future theorising about pragmatic markers. The study is a must for everybody working in the widening field of variational pragmatics and the already vast field of research into pragmatic markers. It is, at the same time, a prime example of 'corpus pragmatics' making use of the best of two worlds: the vertical-reading methodology of corpus linguistics (instructing computer software to plough through myriads of text samples in search of occurrences of a target item) integrated into the horizontal-reading methodology of pragmatics (weighing and interpreting individual occurrences within their contextual environments) (cf. Aijmer and Rühlemann forthcoming). More of this fruitful marriage is to be expected.

References

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