Historical pragmatics and early speech recordings
Diachronic developments in turn-taking and
narrative structure in radio talk shows

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Abstract

In this study we analyse diachronic developments in some of the details of the turn-taking system (turn length, question intonation, hesitation markers) and the role they play in the narrative structures of conversations. Our investigation is based on audio recordings of a popular BBC Radio 4 talk show programme ''Desert Island Discs''. These recordings have recently become available as a collection of podcasts reaching back to the 1950s. The early recordings are styled as interviews in a question – answer format. In more recent years, however, the presenter and the celebrity are more likely to cooperate in their different roles to jointly produce a narrative. The presenter brings in a larger amount of background knowledge on the details of the celebrity's life, which the audience may or may not share, and encourages the celebrity to pick up the narrative and continue the story. This overall change from an interview format to the format of a shared narrative is reflected in the minute details of the turn-taking system with differences in turn length and the use of question intonation and hesitation markers.
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1. Introduction

So far studies of historical pragmatics have invariably relied on written data, and scholars have spent a great deal of effort to assess the legitimacy of written sources for pragmatic investigations. They have argued that speech-related data, such as court records or plays, and dialogic data, such as correspondence, provide sufficiently good approximations of spoken interaction. Or they have argued that written data can be assessed from a pragmatic perspective in their own right (see Taavitsainen and Fitzmaurice, 2007; Kytö, 2010; or Jucker and Taavitsainen, 2013 for details).

In recent years, however, archives of audio recordings have become available that reach back to the early decades of the 20th century, and they have opened up a rich potential of research opportunities into the diachronic development of spoken language with a time depth of almost a century. In fact, the earliest recordings go back almost 150 years, and many early recordings can easily be found on the Internet, e.g. early recordings of the inventor Thomas Edison (Thomas Edison National Historic Park, New Jersey, http://www.nps.gov/edis/index.htm). But such recordings are rarely suitable for pragmatic analyses. They often consist of just a few sentences, a short poem, a nursery rhyme or a tune from a children's song. Even the recordings from the early decades of the 20th century that we have been able to locate consist mostly of prepared speeches. Such recordings are fascinating in and of themselves but they offer only limited potential for pragmatic analyses, and they do not offer themselves for any diachronic comparisons across the decades.

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From the middle of the last century, however, the available recordings become more varied, and some recordings have appeared that allow a more systematic diachronic analysis. One particular source that has attracted our attention is the programme ''Desert Island Discs'', which has been produced by the BBC since 1942, has recently been published as an online archive of audio recordings and offers a unique opportunity to study the interaction between the host and a celebrity guest. The archive contains downloadable audio files, so-called podcasts of approximately half of the nearly 3000 editions of the programme. The earliest ones date from the 1950s providing a time depth of some 60 years (BBC Desert Island Discs, http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/features/desert-island-discs/find-a-castaway). Listening to samples of these recordings provides a fascinating journey back in time to the celebrities of previous decades and the listener is struck by the very different style of interaction from the earliest recordings to the most recent ones. We shall introduce these recordings in more detail in the next section.

It is the aim of this paper to pinpoint some of these changes on the pragmatic level and thus to present what is, to the best of our knowledge, the first exercise in historical pragmatics based on audio recordings of spoken language rather than written records, except for the work by Seppänen (1998, 2003) on Finnish demonstrative pronouns in addressing and referring in Finnish, which makes use of tape recordings dating back to the 1950s and 1980s.

2. 70 years of Desert Island Discs

According to BBC's website on Desert Island Discs, the first ever edition was broadcast during the war, on 27 January 1942. The presenter was Roy Plomley, a freelance broadcaster, and the guest who played the role of the castaway was the Viennese comedian, actor and musician, Vic Oliver. The structure of the programme was very similar to what it still is today.

> a well-known person is asked the question, if you were to be cast away alone on a desert island, which eight gramophone records would you choose to have with you, assuming of course, that you had a gramophone and an inexhaustible supply of needles.
>
> (http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/features/desert-island-discs/about/history-of-desert-island-discs)

In the early years, these interactions were fully scripted and read out by the presenter and the castaway, but from the mid-1950s onwards, the programmes consisted of free conversations (Magee, 2012:52). Desert Island Discs did not air between 1946 and 1951. Soon after it had resumed broadcasting, the programme added two new features. First the castaway was asked about a luxury item that he or she would take along to the desert island and then he or she was also allowed a book in addition to a volume of Shakespeare and the Bible, which were assumed to be available anyway.

Over the seven decades, the programme was presented by only four presenters. Roy Plomley, the inventor of the programme, presented it for over 40 years from 1942 to 1985. Michael Parkinson was the presenter from 1986 to 1988. Sue Lawley took over in 1988 and continued until 2006, and since then the programme has been presented by Kirsty Young.

What is particularly striking about this fascinating archive of podcasts of a programme that spans across the six decades are the differences in the style of interaction between the presenter and the castaway. In the early recordings the two interactants followed a strict question-answer format giving the impression of a traditional interview. The language was formal, showing many of the features of the language of distance in Koch and Oesterreicher's (2011) sense (see also Koch, 1999). The more recent recordings, on the other hand, give the impression of a joint narrative with distributed roles for presenter and castaway. The language is informal and shows all the hallmarks of the language of immediacy.

With only four presenters, it might be assumed that the differences over the decades are merely differences that are due to personal style and have nothing to do with language change in a broad sense. However, we argue that these differences are not independent of more general style shifts at the BBC. Three of the four presenters were extremely successful and presented the programme for many years, so they must have been right for their time and selected by the BBC because they seemed to be right for the job. It seems intuitively very implausible that the BBC would turn back to a presenter with Plomley's style. Moreover, the trends we observe fit very well with previous accounts of tendencies towards informalisation and conversationalisation of public discourse (see, for instance, Fairclough, 1992, 1995; Hundt and Mair, 1999; Linke, 2000; Mair, 2008; Landert and Jucker, 2011). This line of research has shown that stylistic characteristics that are typically associated with informal interaction in private contexts can increasingly be found in texts from public contexts, such as advertising and news writing (Fairclough, 1992, 1995), and even in more conservative genres such as scientific writing (Mair, 2008). So far, research on this aspect has concentrated on written language and included spoken interaction mostly in an anecdotal way (for instance Linke, 2000). Our data can add to this research by providing insights into how the spoken language of a popular radio programme has been affected by these changes.

On this basis, we shall focus on two aspects of the interaction between the presenter and the castaway in particular: the narrative structure and the interactive aspects of the interaction. In the next section of this paper, we are going to present a fairly detailed analysis of three short extracts from the beginning, the middle and the end of our database in order to highlight some of the diachronic developments of the narrative structure in the programme. We will address the questions of how the presenter and the castaway share the story-telling and what narrative elements each of them contributes. In