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In-group ritual and relational work

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Abstract

This paper presents some preliminary insights into an important yet generally neglected discursive phenomenon which we define as 'in-group ritual'. In-group ritual refers to ritual practices formed by relational networks. In terms of typology, in-group ritual represents a different type of ritual than 'social ritual', i.e. ritual which counts as 'normative' on a social level (see more on ritual typology in Kádár, 2013). Examining in-group ritual and, in particular, its relational functions, we endeavour to approach ritual language use from a discursive viewpoint; as we see it, such an approach is long overdue, as rituality is relatively ignored in pragmatics.

Keywords: Ritual; In-group; Relational work; Convention

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to present some preliminary insights into an important yet generally neglected discursive phenomenon which we specify as 'in-group ritual'. In-group ritual refers to the ritual practices formed by smaller social units (relational networks). In terms of typology, in-group ritual represents a different type of ritual practice than 'social ritual', i.e. ritual practice which counts as 'normative' on a wider, 'social' level (see more on ritual typology in Kádár, 2013). Examining in-group ritual acts and, in particular, their relational functions, we endeavour to approach ritual language use from a discursive viewpoint; as we will argue, such an approach is long overdue, as rituality is relatively ignored in recent inquiries within pragmatics.[1]

Ritual can be approached from various angles, including, most importantly, from the perspective of interactional understanding by participants themselves, or from a theoretical perspective, i.e. by rationalising the interactional meaning and function of relational ritual. The former perspective is often referred to as the so-called 'first-order perspective' and the latter one as the 'second-order perspective' (see a detailed discussion of the complexities of this issue in Kádár and Haugh, 2013). This distinction has so far been neglected by pragmatics and other theories of rituals. Most scholars describe rituals from their outsider (etic) perspective, and they provide technical (second-order) models for rituals, i.e. first-order expectancies (the etic perspective is a first-order one) are often implicitly present in

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[1] We need to note, however, that the phenomenon studied has been dealt with in other areas within linguistics such as sociolinguistics, and also in other fields within humanities such as psychology, education studies, anthropology and so on (see more in Kádár, 2013). A novelty of the present approach is that it describes in-group ritual from a discursive perspective, and by focusing on its relational function; this allows us to capture various manifestations of the in-group ritual phenomenon – such as teasing, mocking, irony, sarcasm, ritual insults, routines, etc. – within a single, relational concept of ritual.

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these models.[2] This is why ritual is often defined in a narrow sense, without making an argument for, or even explicitly describing, this analytic perspective. In fact, objectivity cannot be reached in the examination of a phenomenon as ritual (it is not even self-evident whether objectivity is the prime aim of a qualitative research), and the culture-boundedness of interpretation and modelling probably need to be reflected upon as being 'necessary' components of any analysis of ritual. The interpreter is embedded in his or her own culture(s) which is also an influence on the analytical process. However, it seems necessary to make the first-order/second-order distinction (and also to further refine this distinction in terms of ritual research, cf. Kádár, 2013), in order to be able to approach rituals in a self-reflexive way, and also to broaden our definition of ritual.

An important issue that the analyst needs to bear in mind is that the expectancies and evaluation of rituals differs greatly across societies. Due to this fact, models that implicitly include culture-specific expectancies of 'ritual', especially those which do not make this stance clear, present this phenomenon from specific perspectives, which often contradict each other's expectancies (see more in Kádár, 2012, 2013).

In this paper, we rely on a theoretical (second-order) interpretation of 'ritual' that is broad enough, and which can consequently accommodate different second-order models based on different (first-order and *emic* or *etic*) expectancies (cf. Kádár, 2012, 2013). While this model of ritual is a theoretical one, we should study relational ritual as it is constructed and evaluated in real-life discourse. This methodological uptake can be enriched in certain ways, like for example taking on the retrospective approach through conducting post-event interviews (cf. Spencer-Oatey, 2000). This is often needed in order to understand what a certain ritual implies for those who perform it.

An important rationale behind this approach is that in certain cases in-group rituals come about unnoticed by ''unratified'' persons who are ''not contained'' in the ritual activity (cf. Goffman, 1974, 1981; section 2.1). While this might be taken to imply, albeit erroneously, that it concerns a marginal discourse variety, there is every reason to stress, in advance, that the present paper aims to bring research into ritual within the theoretical, conceptual and methodological bounds of discursive approaches to pragmatic phenomena and genres.

As it will be argued (see section 2.3) ritual can fulfil – simultaneously, as a matter of fact – quite a few pragmatic, social and cultural-societal functions; the present paper singles out one such function, i.e. relational work. Our understanding of relational work follows Locher and Watts (2012), Watts (2003) and, more in general, Goffman (1967); that is to say, we conceive of relational work as verbal and non-verbal practices directed at the participants' socio-psychological needs or wants so as to (re-)establish or maintain intragroup relationships.[3]

The present paper studies in-group ritual by analysing the e-mail interactions of a group of speakers of Hungarian. This dataset has been chosen primarily because it neatly represents the most important characteristics of in-group ritual, and consequently it shows similarities with forms of in-group rituals, such as school and workplace rituals, which have been identified by previous studies such as Goodwin (2006), Yedes (1996) and Rampton (2006). It is pertinent to note that previous research is not ritual-focused, i.e. the cited works do not usually study the ritualistic aspects of in-group ritual. In this sense the present study fills an important knowledge gap, as it incorporates the behavioural forms identified by these previous works into a pragmatic framework of rituals.

Due to space limitations, the present paper outlines some main features of in-group rituals.[4] Section 2 introduces the concept of in-group ritual; here, we describe some differences between in-group rituals and 'social rituals'. In section 3, we argue, on the basis of a number of excerpts, that despite the notable differences discussed in section 2 the crucial formal and functional properties of in-group ritual accord with those of social ritual. In section 4, in-group ritual is discussed from the viewpoint of a more general pragmatic theorisation of ritual performance, in that we make an attempt at characterising in-group ritual in terms of Bax's (2010a) proposal about the 'pragmatic space' of ritual (language) behaviour.

2. Defining in-group ritual

2.1. Mere ritual?

Even though the understanding of rituality per se is amenable to substantial variation (cf. e.g. Bax, 2010a), researchers of historical ritual generally agree as to the relative insignificance of ritual in modern society, also with regard to relational work. Historian Edward Muir posits that, with the advance of modernity, ritual has lost most of its affective appeal and

[2] An exception is Kyriakidis (2007); however, this book describes these perspectives in a relatively simplistic way, by limiting their description to etic and emic (i.e. the first-order and second-order perspectives are left unmentioned).

[3] Importantly, the way in which relational work is represented here is only one of the possible conceptualisations of relating. For different perspectives see Arundale (2010) and Spencer-Oatey (2011).

[4] The present paper is a preliminary report on some of the findings of Kádár's project on ritual and/as relational work. Readers with an interest in this topic might consult Kádár's (2013) volume.