The pragmatics of ritual
An introduction

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This introductory position paper aims to familiarise the reader with the pragmatics of ritual and previous research in this field. Ritual is a complex pragmatic phenomenon present in many types of interaction, and it has been subject to academic inquiries in various disciplines. We will draw on previous research to provide a working definition of ritual, which will help us to introduce the present collection of papers. We will then introduce the different, but interrelated, methodologies used in ritual research, categorising these complementary methodologies as 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' respectively. We use this categorisation to overview the contributions of the special issue from a methodological perspective. Finally, a summary of the contents of the special issue completes this introduction.

Keywords: ritual, definition, methodological approaches

1. Introduction

'Ritual' has many popular meanings and interpretations, from ceremonies to religious practices and in-group interactional habits. Ritual also extends into many other pragmatic phenomena, such as politeness, aggression and humour, which all have ritual or at least ritualistic aspects. Thus, experts in the pragmatics of ritual may feel reluctant to provide a single comprehensive definition of this phenomenon. For instance, in historical pragmatic research in which 'ritual' has been fundamental, this concept has been treated in a rather vague manner (see e.g. Arnovick 1984; Bax 1999). Defining ritual has been particularly challenging for the pragmatician because ritual has been extensively studied outside of the field of pragmatics – and even linguistics – in both the humanities and social sciences. For example, consider the ritual framework provided by Émile Durkheim (1912

[1954]), which has had an enormous influence on anthropology and sociology, as well as on anthropological linguistics, but has had a limited impact on pragmatics. Of course, there are a number of important intersections between anthropology, sociology and pragmatics, but as far as *mainstream* pragmatics is concerned, such intersections have limited influence, and therefore so has ritual itself. For instance, Durkheim described ritual as a cluster of practices organised around sacred objects, by means of which communities are bound together and socially reproduce themselves. Such a definition of ritual does not fit particularly well into the mainstream of pragmatic inquiries. And while the Durkheimian notion of 'sacred' has been implanted into pragmatic thought through Erving Goffman's (1967) concept of 'face', sacredness in its fully-fledged ritual tribal/historical (non-urban) meaning is not a phenomenon that pragmaticians would normally study. Such cross-disciplinary differences have terminological and related ontological implications. Take the concept of 'liminality' as an example. Liminality is a ritual term that describes the mental or relational changes that ritual triggers. 'Liminality' was introduced by the anthropologists Arnold van Gennep (1960) and Victor Turner (1969) into ritual research. Although 'liminal' is not unheard of in pragmatics, it has primarily been used by scholars such as Jeffrey Alexander (2004) working on the interface between pragmatics and sociology. While Gunter Senft and his colleagues (e.g. Senft and Basso 2009) have carried out invaluable work enriching pragmatics with the terminological inventory and related ontology of ritual research, their work has remained relatively marginal in pragmatics to the current day. This does not imply that ritual has been ignored in pragmatics: it has been featured as a simple concept in important works such as Austin (1962) and Brown and Levinson (1987). To provide a prime example, the notion of rights and obligations – which is essential to ritual and which has been broadly used in pragmatics – has been influenced by the Wittgensteinian philosophy, most notably Wittgenstein's notion of 'language games' (see an excellent overview in Kopytko 2007). However, such research has not studied ritual language use in its own right.

Considering the importance of ritual in interaction across a number of social settings and lingua-cultures, we believe that it is now time for a special issue to be dedicated to ritual language use. This introduction sets the tone for this special issue. In Section 2, we will provide an overview of what we regard as the main pragmatic characteristics of ritual; these characteristics will recur throughout the papers in this special issue. This conceptual overview will reflect on previous ritual research, an example of which is the aforementioned Durkheimian framework. On the basis of the pragmatic characteristics identified in Section 2, we will provide a working definition of ritual which will reflect on previous research conducted in this area. In Section 3, we will provide a synopsis of the contents of this issue. First, in Section 3.1, we will provide a general description of the contents

by categorising the papers according to their methodological take, and then, in Section 3.2, we will briefly introduce the content of each individual contribution.

2. The main features and a working definition of ritual

The most salient characteristic of ritual is that it is manifested in many different ways and forms across different data types. The scope of ritual practice spans formal areas of interaction such as institutional talk (see e.g. Luger 1983; Alexander 2004) to socially controversial forms of behaviour such as ritual insults and aggression (see e.g. Culpeper 1996; Kádár and Márquez-Reiter 2015). There is significant variation across lingua-cultures with regard to the degree of importance dedicated to ritual in its fully-fledged, ceremonial interpretation. For instance, in Japanese, the word *gishiki* 儀式 is almost inseparable from conventional ceremonies (see e.g. Ide 1998; Haugh 2004), while as Muir (2005) argues, in 'Western' lingua-cultures influenced by Latin, the word 'ritual' has a much broader semantic scope. Consequently, the question emerges: What ties these various manifestations of ritual together?

One answer to this question is conventionalisation (see Kádár 2017). All ritual forms of ritual behaviour are very familiar to those who practise them, even though they may be 'exotic' or 'unusual' to those outside the lingua-culture in which they occur. In this respect, variation in how ritual behaviour is manifested is of secondary importance. For instance, teasing by means of which members of a workplace engage in a relationally constructive form of language socialisation (Sinkeviciute 2013), or exchanges of social pleasantries peppered with ritual small talk (Ohashi 2013), are all pragmatically super-familiar to their participants. Terkourafi (2001, 130) describes conventionalisation as follows:

> [Conventionalisation is] a relationship holding between utterances and context, which is a correlate of the (statistical) frequency with which an expression is used in one's experience of a particular context. Conventionalisation is thus a matter of degree, and may well vary in different speakers, as well as for the same speaker over time.

Ritual encompasses conventional utterances, utterance-chains and interactions with conventionalised formal or topical features. Thus, it consists of different units of language use, including utterances (such as performatives, as defined by Austin (1962)), chains of utterances (Bax 1999) and relatively freely co-constructed instances of interaction with recurrent and conventionalised features (Kádár 2013). Rituals that come into existence in the form of simpler units of language use may occur to be 'more conventional' than others which are realised in more

complex forms. For instance, a ritual performative utterance such as 'We hereby invite you to give a plenary talk at our conference' in an academic invitation might appear to be more explicitly conventionalised than ritual parliamentary heckling (McIlvenny 1996), even though both the former and the latter forms of ritual behaviour represent conventionalised pragmatic practices. Yet, since any ritual is conventionalised in the social unit in which it occurs, ultimately the difference between the degree of conventionalisation of ritual practices remains illusory. An interactionally co-constructed ritual operates with conventionalised pragmatic features, and although interactional engagement might trigger unexpected moves, paradoxically such unexpected moves themselves may be part of the expected repertoire of the ritual practice (Kádár 2017). A typical example of this phenomenon is rites of aggression in the political arena (see e.g. Bull and Waddle 2019). In 'Western' cultures, when a politician is verbally attacked, there is not only an expectation that he should verbally counter this attack, but also conventional rights and obligations influence the way in which this response is expected to occur.

The context in which a particular ritual practice is conventionalised is subject to significant variation. Some rituals, such as rites of 'civil inattention' (e.g. Horgan 2019), are so conventionalised in urban setting in many lingua-cultures that they are not usually noticed until they are violated. This also applies to expressions that indicate an awareness of ritual contexts, or 'ritual frame indicating expressions' (RFIEs), studied by Kádár and House (in this issue) (see also Section 3). Other rituals, such as ritual ceremonies (e.g. Keane 1997) are 'demarcated' – a term used by Fritz Staal (1979) – that is, they can only take place during specific moments in a person's social life. As a result of their ceremonial character, these rituals become conventionalised to such a degree that detailed manuals are often used to regulate their realisation. Still, other rituals are only demarcated in the sense that they occur at specific times and places, but once they take place, they are relatively freely co-constructed within certain ritual rights and obligations.

Note that this ritual diversity is often manifested in a sense of imbalance: demarcated ceremonial rituals are inevitably more visible to both lay observers and academics than small and 'mundane' ceremonial events. As Goffman (1983, 10) notes,

> If we think of ceremonials as narrative-like enactments, more or less extensive and more or less insulated from mundane routines, then we can contrast these complex performances with 'contact rituals', namely, perfunctory, brief expressions occurring incidental to everyday action – in passing as it were – the most frequent case involving but two individuals.

Pragmatic studies on ritual should devote similar attention to "contact rituals" (defined above by Goffman) as to demarcated and ceremonial forms of ritual interaction. Of course, these forms represent two ends of a scale, as we will highlight in Section 3. One can argue that ceremonies embody the macro-end and contact rituals the micro-end of a ritual typological scale. In social interaction, contact-rituals are every bit as important as their ceremonial counterparts (see e.g. Coulmas 1981; Edmondson 1981). This is particularly so when rights and obligations (cf. Wittgenstein's 'language games') are the focus of pragmatic inquiries: a body of pragmatic and sociolinguistic research has studied a number of essentially ritual phenomena in daily interactions where such rights and obligations are in some way important, such as ritual insult (e.g. Labov 1972), crossing (e.g. Rampton 2009), ritual games (Turner 1974), and so on.

The diverse ways in which ritual is manifested discussed so far leads to the following question: Why do language users, as well as members of social units and lingua-cultures engage in such appealingly diverse forms of ritual interaction at all? The obvious answer is that one of the key functions of language use is to help social units to reproduce themselves, and ritual practices are the most important means by which the interactional order (Goffman 1983) is reproduced and maintained (Wuthnow 1989). Note that this reproduction and maintenance of order is not at all automatic. As Goffman (1983, 11) notes,

> [S]ocial ritual is not an expression of structural arrangements in any simple sense; at best it is an expression advanced in regard to these arrangements. Social structures don't 'determine' culturally standard displays, merely help select from the available repertoire of them.

Indeed, significantly different forms of ritual practice can be deployed across settings to reproduce and maintain both the order of an interaction and the broader (moral) order of the social group in which the interaction takes place. But what about rites of aggression, such as parliamentary ritual aggression or public shaming, which are a fundamental aspect of ritual behaviour? Can a practice – which is upsetting to many and which challenges the 'orderly' flow of events – reproduce and maintain any sense of 'orderliness'? It certainly can, provided it is communally oriented and ratified. Once a rite of aggression gains interactional momentum, its participants are expected to 'align' themselves with the ritual process (Goffman 1974) due to its communally endorsed nature.[1] Note that, due to their

1. Note that the degree of a particular ritual's endorsement may be subject to variation, in the respect that not all participants may endorse a ritual (see Kádár 2017). However, even such controversial rituals tend to enjoy the endorsement of some language users, and as such are communally-oriented.

communally oriented character, rituals tend to be ideologically and emotionally loaded (Collins 2004).

On the basis of our discussion so far, let us provide a working definition of ritual in the form of bullet points:

- Language use is ritual if it is conventionalised in a particular social unit. In ritual, rights and obligations prevail and participants know who and where they are.
- Ritual includes conventionalised utterances, the utterance-chains of conventional interactional structures and co-constructed interactions with conventionalised formal or topical features. It exists in both ceremonial and contact ritual forms, which are the two ends of a ritual topological scale.
- Ritual helps social units to reproduce themselves, and instances of ritual 'are amongst the most important means by which the interactional (and moral) order is reproduced and maintained.
- As ritual is communally oriented, and the participants of a ritual interaction are expected (or forced) to communally align themselves with the ritual process.

3. Contents

3.1 Methodologies

This volume provides a balance between bottom-up and top-down methodologies in ritual research. In the top-down approach, researchers identify a particular form of ritual behaviour, or an interactional context that triggers this ritual behaviour, and collect data to study its pragmatics. Representative examples of this type of research are Ide (1998), Bax (2010) and Koutlaki (2002) who have all engaged in such a top-down approach to ritual language use. A bottom-up approach complements this top-down approach and includes research on how interaction constructs ritual, and how language use indicates ritual contexts. Noteworthy examples of this bottom-up approach are Rampton (2009), Smith et al. (2010), and Horgan (2019).

In the former top-down approach, the researcher needs to preset the context that s(he) is intending to investigate, and then engage in data collection and analysis on this basis. This approach has various advantages. Firstly, it helps researchers to study ritual by using typologies. Typology has been a key instrument in both anthropological/sociological research on ritual (see e.g. Grimes 1990) and the pragmatics of ritual (see Kádár 2017). In a top-down approach, the researcher collects data in a predetermined setting – usually in a particular 'activity type'

(Levinson 1981) – in which the researcher expects the ritual to take place. Thus, such research starts from the assumption that a ritual phenomenon is important and academically interesting in a particular environment. Secondly, a top-down approach provides a gateway to the relationship between ritual behaviour and the enveloping sociocultural context. For instance, by collecting ritual data in a particular social group, one can gain insights into phenomena such as ritual and gender (Edwards 1989), the socialisation of ritual (Rampton 1995), and so on. Thirdly, a top-down approach helps researchers to cross-culturally investigate similarities and differences between rituals in different cultures (e.g. Shardakova 2005). In this volume, four papers pursue such top-down research methodologies, including Ran et al. on mediation rituals in Chinese conflict settings, Kádár and Szalai on the socialisation of Romani ritual cursing, Koutlaki on Iranian wedding ceremonies, and Bull et al. on rituals in the British House of Commons.

Bottom-up methodologies tend to examine contact rituals (Goffman 1983) that are such an integral part of our daily lives that they are not manifested in a single context, but rather span a number of contexts. In such approaches, the researcher cannot assume in advance that a specific ritual practice exists – although some *a priori* knowledge unavoidably influences our research – but rather examines whether ritual emerges from a particular interaction or use of expressions. A bottom-up approach encompasses both interactional and pragmalinguistic/corpus-based methodologies. With regard to the former methodology, previous research such as Rampton (1995, 2009), and Horgan's contribution to this special issue are both interested in how an interaction reveals the operation of a certain ritual. For instance, Horgan's study explores the Goffmanian phenomenon of 'civil inattention', a ritual that emerges in interaction only when it is clearly violated. The reason why this ritual can be difficult to analyse in a top-down manner is that it cannot be pinned down to a specific context because it is applicable in almost every public space, at least in a variety of lingua-cultures which value individual privacy. Pragmalinguistic bottom-up research lends itself to exploring the operation of language use by deploying corpus-based methodologies. In this special issue, Kádár and House propose such a framework, based on the notion of 'ritual frame indicating expressions' (RFIEs), that is, pragmatically-heavy expression indicating ritual standard situations. This framework focuses on how expressions indicate the contexts in which the use of ritual language prevails. With the aid of corpora, Kádár and House develop a contrastive pragmatic analytic model which can be used to comparatively study the pragmatic scope of RFIE pairs.

Bottom-up and top-down approaches to ritual are equally important and complementary.

3.2 Contributions

This volume is comprised of 6 papers. As previously mentioned, the first 4 contributions are predominantly top-down in character, and are sequenced according to the degree of ceremoniality displayed in the ritual data being investigated.

Kádár and Szalai explore the ways in which ritual cursing operates as a form of teasing in (Gabor) Roma communities. Cursing is an archetype of non-ceremonial but highly conventionalised ritual – adopting the wording that was provided earlier in this introduction – the 'proper' use of which is a must for all language users in Roma communities. To date, little pragmatic research has been conducted on this phenomenon, reportedly due to a scarcity of interactional data in cultures where cursing is actively practised. Kádár and Szalai examine cursing in teasing interactions which are used to socialise young children. They argue that cursing is a fundamental tool which allows groups of Roma language users to reproduce their social and moral order. Although Roma cursing is often very negatively stereotyped by people from outside this culture, Kádár and Szalai demonstrate that, in the social lives of Roma communities, it is an intriguingly complex pragmatic tool and often contradicts negative stereotypes. In addition to the relevance of this finding to ritual theory, it provides a disciplinary link between pragmatics and language socialisation.

Ran et al. examine the ritual of conflict mediation in Chinese village communities. Such highly conventionalised rites of aggression are typically communally-oriented, referring to the definition provided in Section 2 of the present introduction. Studying interactional data drawn from TV, Ran et al. examine mediation as a 'ritual frame' (see more in Kádár and House, in this issue) in which rights and obligations are extremely strict, and the mediator uses these rights and obligations to pressurise the debating parties. This pressure is in the form of ritual shaming, which encompasses ritually mitigated form of shaming the participants of the mediation practice. The data examined by Ran et al. displays a notable similarity with the Romani curses studied by Kádár and Szalai, in that aggression in the ritual of mediation is constrained by elaborate sociopragmatic conventions. In other words, an interactional and related moral order underlies such instances of shaming.

The concept of ritual frame which imposes constraints on a particular instance of ritual aggression is also evident in Bull et al. This paper examines ritual aggression during Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) in the British House of Commons. PMQs is a parliamentary session during which the Prime Minister can be ritually attacked by intrusive questions. As such, it is a prime example of what we have referred to in our working definition above as the role of ritual in reproducing the social (and moral) order of a community. As Bull et al. argue, PMQs

resemble archaic tribal councils and, as such, are ceremonial in nature because of the sacred role of the Speaker and the prevalence of conventionalised conflict avoidance between the PM and those posing challenging questions. Yet, the importance of conventionalised indirectness and related ceremoniality does not correspond with a lack of face-threat and challenges at PMQs. Such parliamentary debates represent an aggressive ritual setting in which the ritual roles and rules only offer a façade for packaging aggression. As Bull et al. demonstrate, the ritual features of PMQs can even operate as interactional resources by means of which the participants increase the efficiency of their verbal attacks.

Finally, in this group of papers, Koutlaki examines Tehrani wedding rituals, which are examples par excellence of ritual in lingua-cultures in which ceremonies continue to play a central role in social life. In addition to the empirical importance of presenting data which has resulted from decades of ethnographic work, Koutlaki's study provides an insight into the phenomenon of ostensivity, which is an important but inadequately studied pragmatic component of ritual. Ostensivity is noteworthy because it provides a pragmatic insight into why ritual manifests itself in interactional 'chains', a concept previously described by Collins (2004). In Iranian ritual practices, particularly weddings, the participants are expected to behave ostensively. Koutlaki demonstrates that in the Iranian lingua-culture ostensivity is present in almost every layer of ritual communication, including words, utterances and discursive behaviour.

The second group of papers in this issue provides examples of what we have described as bottom-up approaches to ritual in this introduction. The macro bottom-up approach of Horgan studies North American urban settings. In such settings, ritual consists of the observance of one another's sacred face needs by minimally noticing each other. Horgan's study of civil inattention, strangership and everyday incivilities is highly innovative, not only because it brings together linguistic pragmatics and mainstream sociology, but also because it captures the notion of 'civil inattention' by deploying a bottom-up investigation of pragmatic violations of this ritual. Such violations are reflected by the meta-narratives which Horgan uses as data. These meta-narratives point to the fact that civil inattention is an integral order of public life.

Finally, Kádár and House explore what they define as 'ritual frame indicating expressions' (RFIEs), to provide a corpus-based bottom-up approach to ritual language use. They take two seemingly 'simple' expressions from English and Chinese corpora – *please* and *qing* (please) – and demonstrate that the pragmatics of these expressions is actually complex. On the one hand, the traditionally assumed relationship between these RFIEs and the speech act of request that they are often claimed to indicate is shown to be tenuous. On the other hand, and more importantly, these expressions are found to indicate a complex cluster of at least ritu-

alistic 'standard situations' (House 1989). The examination of such expressions is particularly illuminating, as the study of Kádár and House reveals, because they indicate significantly different 'standard situations' across lingua-cultures and, as such, have different pragmatic scopes. In terms of the working definition of ritual provided in this introduction, Kádár and House's paper provides an insight into the function of ritual as a communally-oriented form of language behaviour in which participants are expected to align themselves with the ritual process and related rights and obligations.

4. Conclusion

This introduction has provided an overview of the contents of this special issue. We have provided a working definition of ritual, based on relevant research in the field. We believe that the analytical relevance of concepts such as 'chains' of utterances and the 'reproduction' of interactional (and moral and social) order showcases that ritual ranges across many different disciplines because such concepts are not integral to mainstream pragmatics. In this introduction, we have also described the methodological approaches to ritual, categorising them as predominantly 'top-down' and 'bottom-up'. We have argued that these methodological approaches are equally important and, in many respects, complementary. These two methodological approaches have been used to classify the individual contributions to this special issue.

As the contributions illustrate, a ritual focus makes a fundamental contribution to pragmatics because it allows us to capture phenomena that often remain on the periphery of pragmatic inquiries, in spite of their importance in our daily lives. We hope that this special issue will trigger further interest in the fascinating topic of the pragmatics of ritual.

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