Learners’ Pragmatic Performance: Making Mistakes and Making Choices

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Where does pragmatics come in?

• It is not enough just to know the vocabulary.
• Learners need to determine the situationally-appropriate utterances:
  — what can be said
  — where
  — when, and
  — how.

• There are various influences working against the appropriate use of target-language forms:
  — how we do it in the native language,
  — how we do it in other languages we know,
  — how comfortable we feel doing it in the target language way (regardless of whether we are capable of doing it).

Speech Acts as a Major Player in Pragmatics

• Speech acts are relatively patterned routines that speakers and writers use to perform language functions, such as thanking, complimenting, requesting, refusing, apologizing, and complaining.
• At times speech acts are performed in an indirect manner that may be difficult to interpret.

• Pragmatic ability
  — The ability to interpret the meaning of language that is communicated by a speaker or writer.
  — What needs to be interpreted?
    • people’s intended meanings,
    • their assumptions,
    • their purposes or goals, and
    • the kinds of actions (for example, requests) that they are performing when they speak.
    (Yule, 1996: 3-4).

Compliments are rather predictable, for example. Several decades ago, almost half the time that an adjective was used in an English compliment in the U.S., it was either "nice" or "good" (e.g., "That’s a nice shirt you’re wearing." "It was a good talk you gave."), with "beautiful," "pretty," and "great" making up another 15% (Wolfson & Manes, 1980).
• What would it be today? Similar, though in some U. S. dialects, also "sweet," "da bomb," "phat," or "ill."
The components of a speech act:
- A basic or propositional meaning:
  - E.g., "Do you have a watch?" = inquiry as to whether the other person owns a watch and most likely, whether the other person has it with him/her.
  - "Is that your cell phone?"
- An intended effect or intended illocutionary meaning as conceived by the speaker:
  - E.g., a request that the other person say what time it is.
  - A request that the person shut off the cell phone!

- The actual illocutionary force on the hearer or the uptake (usually the other person will say what time it is or turn off the cell phone).
- Generally predictable for native and highly competent speakers of the language.
- When the interlocutor’s response is not within the expected parameters of the situation, it may be a source of mirth or possibly annoyance, such as if "Do you have a watch?" is met with "Yes, I do" or "Yes, it's a Seiko," and the cell phone query gets a "Yes" reply.

Semantic Formulas
- Fraser (1980) referred to the strategies specific to a speech act as semantic formulas. LoCastro (p. 239) refers to them as subacts. Fraser presented a set of intuitively-, not empirically-based semantic formulas for apologizing.
- Semantic formulas can also be referred to as speech act-specific strategies: if they are used alone or in combination with one or more other strategies, they could serve to constitute the given speech act.

- Studies have identified strategies in both oral and written language that tend to have a functional role to play in speech acts, especially with regard to the more common and sometimes even perfunctory speech acts such as “thanking.”
- With more complex speech acts (such as “complaining”) it is possibly more challenging to describe the likely strategies since sociolinguistic behavior by its very nature is characterized by its variability.

- The same semantic formulas may be used for performing a given speech act in numerous languages: e.g., apologizing is likely, in principle, to include an expression of apology, acknowledgement of responsibility, an offer of repair, an explanation or account, and a promise of non-recurrence.
- Use of a particular configuration of these strategies in a given social situation depends on:
  - the language and culture,
  - the particular subculture,
  - the particular interlocutors,
  - their personalities,
  - their willingness to conform to the norms for language behavior within their speech community.

- Modifications in order to lessen or increase the potential impact, such as through the use of mitigators ("I have a little favor to ask of you") or intensifiers ("I am so awfully sorry about that!").
- Strategies for performing the speech act specific to certain languages:
  ➢ E.g., in Japanese apologies, hesitation when apologizing to a person of higher status so as to show proper humility, and in Japanese refusals, to leaving a refusal statement incomplete, again out of deference to the other person.
Social and Language Norms for Behavior in a Given Community

- Communities have **social norms** for the circumstances under which speech acts are likely to be performed— that is, norms of behavior for realizing the given speech act in a given context, taking into account (1) the culture involved, (2) the relative age and gender of the interlocutors, (3) their social class and occupations, and (4) their roles and status in the interaction (based on Thomas, 1983).

- **E.g. of the social dimension**: in requesting, knowing to what extent it would be acceptable to ask acquaintances in a given context in a given language how much they paid for their new house, how much their new car cost them, or how much they are making a month.

- **E.g. of the language dimension**: using an acceptable way to ask—whether acceptable to ask directly, "How much did get that new car for, George?" or more indirect, "Boy, that new car must have set you back a bit!"

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A Taxonomy of Strategies for Learning and Performing Speech Acts

- A taxonomy identifying key learner strategies in the acquisition of speech acts (Cohen, 2005):
  1) strategies for the initial learning of speech acts, 
  2) strategies for using the speech act material that has already been learned to some extent, and 
  3) strategies for planning, monitoring, and evaluating the deployment of these strategies.

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**Strategies for the Initial Learning of Speech Acts**

- **Taking practical steps to gain knowledge of how specific speech acts work by:**
  1) identifying the L2 speech acts to focus on, using criteria such as:
     - a) frequency of use in common situations encountered by the L2 speaker in the given speech community (e.g., "requesting," "refusing," "thanking"),
     - b) their potentially high-stakes value in discourse (e.g., "apologizing" and "complaining"),
     - c) their special role in the given community of practice in the speech community, such as in creating solidarity (e.g., cursing as part of factory work).

  2) gathering information (through observation, interview, and written material) on how certain speech acts are performed by members of one or more “communities of practice” within a given speech community (e.g., at the workplace: making requests of age mates, refusing requests made by people of higher status, and thanking people in service— e.g., cafeteria workers, custodians).
Strategies for Performing Speech Acts

- Devising and then utilizing a memory aid for retrieving the speech act material that has already been learned
  - E.g., visualizing a listing of the semantic formulas for a given speech act – possibly remembered through an acronym – and then scanning down this list in order to select those members of the speech act set that seem appropriate for the given situation.
- Practicing those aspects of speech act performance that have been learned:
  1) Engaging in imaginary interactions, perhaps focusing on certain pragmalinguistic aspects of the speech act.

2) Engaging in speech act role play with fellow learners of the L2 or with native speakers playing the other role.
3) Engaging in “real play” or simulation with native speakers in the speech community, where the native speakers perform their usual roles
   - E.g., lawyer, doctor, shop clerk, etc., but with the added knowledge that the learners are simply practicing speech acts and may say things that are contrary to fact (e.g., apologizing for something that in reality they did not do).
4) Engaging in interactions with pragmatically competent speakers without them being aware that the learner’s purpose is actually to practice speech acts.

Strategies for Planning, Monitoring, & Evaluating Speech Acts

- It is up to the learners to determine the speech act(s) they will work on and the aspects of performance that will get attention. E.g., to what extent should the learners’ focus be on comprehension of the speech act, on the production of it, or on both? How much concern will there be for tone, facial expressions, and gestures in speech act delivery? (Whereas an actor usually gets coached in such matters, language learners are invariably left to figure it out by themselves.)

- Learners need to determine how much planning of the speech act to do beforehand, as well as the nature of the monitoring that will go on during its delivery, and the evaluation that will go on afterwards. In an effort to avoid pragmatic failure, learners may monitor for:
  1) the appropriateness of the chosen level of directness or indirectness in the delivery of the speech act (e.g., finding the right level of directness with an L2-speaking stranger on an airplane),
  2) the appropriateness of the selected term of address (e.g., referring in the L2 to Dr. Stephen Blake as “Doc,” “Steve,” or “you”—either tu or vous),

3) the appropriateness of the timing for a speech act in the given situation (e.g., for example, whether to make an apology for a work-related incident to a colleague during a social event),
4) the acceptability of how the discourse is organized (e.g., conveying the bottom-line message right at the start of the communication, gradually building up to it, or saving it for the last possible moment),
5) the sociopragmatic appropriateness of the selected semantic formulas and the pragmalinguistic appropriateness of the linguistic material used to represent them (e.g., whether it is appropriate for a college student to give an outright refusal to the department chair’s invitation to dinner and whether the refusal could include – even in jest – an informal phrase like “No way!”).

Learners’ Pragmatic Performance

- If no formal instruction is provided, acquiring native-like pragmatic competence is considered to take an extended period of time – over ten years even in an L2 (as opposed to an FL) environment (Cohen & Olshtain, 1993; Wolfson, 1989).
- Even in an L2 context, sufficient and appropriate input may not always be available to learners (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1993).
• Learners of an L2 may differ from native or highly competent speakers in terms of at least four areas of pragmatic performance:
  – which speech acts they choose to perform when and where,
  – the semantic formulae (strategies) they use to perform them,
  – the content they include,
  – the grammatical forms they use (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001; Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 2005).

• Let’s look at potential causes of pragmatic failure.
• This exercise will assist you in understanding why students fail to communicate what they intend to convey.
• This knowledge can facilitate the design of effective pragmatic instruction.

2. Limited L2 grammatical ability
• Lack of ability to comprehend and produce more complex grammatical forms may lead to pragmatic failure.
• Learners may know the forms but not when to use them.

3. Overgeneralization of perceived L2 pragmatic norms
• Dependence on preconceived notions about the application of L2 norms: learners unknowingly applying them to contexts where differing social, geographic, or situational factors prevail.
• Pragmatic failure may occur as a result (see Teachers’ Guide, pp. 5-5 to 5-8).

4. The effect of the instruction or the instructional materials
• Behavior appropriate for a classroom setting (e.g., responding in complete sentences) may not work so well in real-life conversations.
• Generalizations found in instructional materials (e.g., “Americans tend to speak directly”) may be misleading.
Pragmatic divergence due to learners’ choice

5. Resistance to using perceived L2 pragmatic norms

• Learners’ intentional divergence from L2 pragmatic norms.
• When the learners’ subjective disposition – social identity, attitudes, personal beliefs, and principles – influences how they present themselves in their L2 pragmatic behavior.

• Learners may deliberately diverge from L2 norms to accentuate their linguistic differences, with an intention to isolate themselves from the L2 group and to assert their self-identity.
• Learners may refuse to learn certain language forms that conflict with their own subjective position, or could choose not to use the forms that they have mastered linguistically and are capable of producing (Ishihara, 2006; LoCastro, 1998).

• You will now engage in an activity where you look at examples of L2 learners’ pragmatic divergence in order to recognize the potential source or combination of sources for your divergent pragmatic behavior.

References
