CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

Researching Pragmatics

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Pragmatics as a field is a broad area and is investigated through an equally wide range of research approaches. The study of pragmatics traditionally focuses on the relationship between language use and context, that is, how features of the external, real-world context are reflected in the language used. Such context incorporates the physical context, which is reflected through deictic expressions (this, there, mine); the interpersonal context, including the interlocutors' shared history and their relationship in terms of acquaintanceship and power differential; and the social context with its rules of appropriate conduct.

Pragmatics research in applied linguistics is mostly concerned with the relationship between language use on the one hand and the social and interpersonal context of interaction on the other. Specifically, the field of cross-cultural pragmatics investigates differences in pragmatics based on first language background, whereas interlanguage pragmatics investigates how second language learners' knowledge and ability for use of target language pragmatics develops.

Research approaches in pragmatics range from the recording of authentic, unelicited discourse, via elicitation of extended discourse or individual utterances to elicitation of metapragmatic knowledge. Some psycholinguistic research has also appeared (Edmonds 2014; Holtgraves 2012; Taguchi 2011, 2013) but it remains a secondary concern.

Typical stages in this research

Stage 1: Which aspect of pragmatics is to be investigated?

The first decision to be made in this research is what aspect of pragmatics to investigate. Traditionally, the major focus has been on speech acts, and of the speech acts investigated, requests (Li 2013; Nguyen & Basturkmen 2013; Salgado 2011; Shively 2011; Takimoto 2012; Wang 2011) and apologies (Adrefiza & Jones 2013; Ho 2013; Sykes 2013) have been the most frequently researched ones. Other speech acts include refusals (Hong 2011; Ren 2012; Taguchi 2011), compliments and compliment responses (Bhatti & Zegarac 2012; Cheng 2011; Maiz-Arevalo 2012), suggestions/advice (Lee 2010; Li 2010; Park 2012), agreement and disagreement (Houck & Fuji 2013; Malamed 2010), complaints (Chen, Chen & Chang 2011; Do 2013; Ho, Henry & Alkaff, 2012), criticism (Nguyen 2013a, b) and some others.

Of course, pragmatics does not only consist of speech acts but research into other aspects of pragmatics is less common. Politeness has been investigated with and without regard to specific speech acts (Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei 1998; Bella 2012; Schauer 2006), and implicature, which describes indirect, implied language use, has also received some attention (Bouton 1988; Roever 2013; Taguchi 2011, 2012). Routine formulae have been more widely investigated (Bardovi-Harlig 2009, 2013; Bardovi-Harlig & Bastos 2011; Roever 2012).

Following critiques of the speech act approach (Kasper 2006; Meier 1998), there has recently been a move away from research on isolated utterances and increasing interest in discursive approach to pragmatics research, influenced by Conversation Analysis (CA; for an introduction, see Sidnell 2010). Rather than focus on head acts of speech acts, this discursive orientation sees requesting, apologizing, disagreeing etc., as social actions that unfold over longer discourse sequences and are co-constructed between interlocutors. This research approach encompasses longitudinal studies as well as cross-sectional work and has looked at requests (Al-Gahtani & Roever 2012, 2013, 2014), disagreement (Dippold 2011; Pochon-Berger & Pekarek Doehler 2011), topic management in discussions (Galaczi 2013) and displaying participantship (Ishida 2011).

Stage 2: What independent variables are to be investigated?

Pragmatics research in applied linguistics can be divided into two large camps and a smaller cluster of other studies. The large research areas concern *cross-cultural pragmatics* and *interlanguage pragmatics*. Cross-cultural

pragmatics typically makes membership in a cultural group, usually defined as an L1 group, the independent variable[1] and compares differences between the groups. Acquisition of second language pragmatics is not a concern in these studies. The largest study in cross-cultural pragmatics was the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Patterns (CCSARP) project (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989), which collected L1 and L2 request and apology data from 1,946 participants with Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs), covering seven native and three target languages. One problem with cross-cultural pragmatics research is the type of conclusions to be drawn from findings. A difference between two cultural groups in their speech act realization or the cultural norms underlying their pragmatic performance does not necessarily mean that communication between them will be problematic or flawed. It simply means that a difference exists which may or may not impact communication.

The second major type of research is interlanguage pragmatics research, also known as acquisitional or developmental pragmatics research. In this research tradition, the focus is on the acquisition of pragmatic competence in a target language, so the independent variable in such studies is a factor that is hypothesized to affect L2 pragmatic competence, most commonly L2 proficiency or exposure to the L2 environment. The independent variable can simply be native-speaker status and would then involve a comparison between learners' and native speakers' performance on the research instrument. Alternatively, the independent variable can have various levels, for example, low-proficiency, mid-proficiency and high-proficiency learners can be compared in a 'pseudo-longitudinal' design, which hopes to predict developmental trajectories. Similarly, learners with different levels of exposure can be compared, for example, no exposure, 5 months in the L2 country and 10 months in the L2 country (e.g. Grieve 2013). Often, there is also a native speaker comparison group to establish a baseline of native speaker performance with which learners are then contrasted.

Stage 3: What research instrument is to be used?

The most commonly used research instruments in pragmatics research are DCTs, role plays, metapragmatic judgements and multiple choice instruments. Other less commonly used research approaches include interviews, observations and the collection of natural data. In this section, the two most frequently used research tools will be discussed: DCTs and role plays (for discussion of other possible instruments, see Golato & Golato 2013; Martinez-Flor & Uso-Juan 2010).

Discourse completion tasks

DCTs used to be the standard way of collecting data in interlanguage and cross-cultural pragmatics research because they allow rapid and targeted

collection of a large amount of data. However, critiques of DCT research (Golato 2003; Kasper 2006; Meier 1998) have made the uncritical use of DCTs impossible, and researchers must now make a case for the use of a DCT as a research instrument.

A DCT traditionally consists of a situational prompt, which is followed by a gap for the participant to enter their response. The prompt is a situation description that provides background on the setting that the imaginary interaction occurs in as well as on the imaginary interlocutor. Prompts can be more or less detailed, and their level of detail has been found to influence participants' responses (Billmyer & Varghese 2000). It is very important in the design of the prompt to assign the participants roles that they can identify with and describe situations that are familiar to them. In addition to the prompt, the gap can be preceded by an opening utterance of the imaginary interlocutor and followed by a rejoinder. A DCT item might therefore look as in Figure 22.1 (the parts in brackets are optional).

You need to print out a letter but your printer is not working. You decide to ask your housemate Jack if you can use his printer. Jack is in his room reading a book as you walk in.

[Jack: Hey, how are you?]

You: _____

[Jack: Sure, go for it.]

FIGURE 22.1 *Example of DCT item*

The relationship with the imaginary interlocutor is crucial, and DCT situations are usually constructed to incorporate some of the context variables identified (Brown & Levinson 1987) as influencing politeness in conversation: *power*, *social distance* and *degree of imposition*.

Power concerns the relative power difference between the participant and the imaginary interlocutor and can have three basic settings: high power (of the imaginary interlocutor), equal power and low power. In the example shown in Figure 22.1, power would be equal. Examples of high power interlocutors for student participants are professors, landlords, employers or police officers, but it can be difficult to find lower-power interlocutors if participants are students and do not have much experience being in positions of power. Possibilities include casting the participant as an assistant manager of a small shop who is talking to an employee or as a graduate assistant/tutor talking to a student. Depending on the target culture, they could also be cast as talking to a younger relative.

Social distance is the degree of shared group membership and/or acquaintanceship. In the DCT example in Figure 22.1, social distance would be considered low as housemates tend to know each other fairly well. High social distance pertains to interlocutors that the participant does not know and has little in common with, for example, strangers on the bus, customers in a shop, a professor they do not know. Medium social distance might apply to interlocutors who are vaguely but not well known or who share group membership with the participant without much personal knowledge, for example, a colleague in another department, a fellow student of the same age that the participant has never talked to or a distant relative.

Imposition differs somewhat by speech act. In a request, like the example in Figure 22.1, it is the cost to the imaginary interlocutor of complying with the participant's request. Such cost can be in terms of time, money, effort or inconvenience. The example above would be considered a low-imposition situation, with high-imposition examples including borrowing a large amount of money, asking for a ride to a distant airport, borrowing a laptop that the interlocutor also urgently needs or asking for help with a difficult and time consuming move. In apologies, imposition is the severity of offence, that is, the cost of the damage to the interlocutor caused by the participant's (imaginary) action or the severity of violation of a norm. Low-imposition apology situations include almost but not actually breaking an item, losing or destroying something cheap that belongs to the interlocutor (a magazine, a pencil) or bumping into somebody without causing any damage. In high imposition apology situations, the participant might be cast as destroying a valuable possession of the interlocutor's (a camera, a laptop), spilling red wine on a light carpet or bumping into the interlocutor and knocking them over.

All three context variables (power, social distance and degree of imposition) are measured on a continuum, and they are not all-or-nothing propositions. In addition, there may be culture-specific variables, such as age or gender that may affect responses. It is recommended that researchers check prior to data collection whether their own intuitions about context variables and other variables match the target participants' views.

DCTs are usually designed so that they systematically incorporate combinations of contextual variables (and other variables, where applicable). However, researchers frequently have to make choices as to which context variables they will focus on in their study because even if the three context variables identified by Brown and Levinson were only varied dichotomously, this would lead to eight possible variable combinations, as shown in Table 22.1.

Table 22.1 Combinations of power, imposition and social distance if varied dichotomously

	Power (P)	Imposition (I)	Social distance (D)
1	High (+)	High (+)	High (+)
2	High (+)	High (+)	Low (–)
3	High (+)	Low (–)	High (+)
4	High (+)	Low (–)	Low (–)
5	Equal (+/–)	High (+)	High (+)
6	Equal (+/–)	High (+)	Low (–)
7	Equal (+/–)	Low (–)	High (+)
8	Equal (+/–)	Low (–)	Low (–)

If some variables are considered to have multiple levels, the number of possible combinations would increase according to the following formula:

number of combinations = levels of power * levels of imposition * levels of social distance * levels of additional variable × * levels of additional variable y etc.

So, in a study that incorporates a medium social distance setting in addition to varying power and imposition dichotomously and also looks at gender of the imaginary interlocutor as a variable (male/female), eight different combinations would result. Given that each combination of context variables should be represented by at least two DCT items (better three or four), it is often not possible to vary more than two variables (either two context variables or a context variable and another variable) in a given study. To avoid fatigue and inauthentic responses, participants should not be expected to complete more than twenty DCT situations, preferably no more than twelve. Care must be taken to ensure that the other context variables and possible other variables are controlled and kept equal for all situations. So if power and imposition are varied, social distance needs to be kept constant for all situations (usually low), and there must be reason to assume that other possible variables do not have much of an influence, or they must be systematically controlled as well. Keeping variables constant limits the range of conclusions that can be drawn from the study, but this trade-off between practicality and external validity is common and unavoidable.

Role plays

Design considerations for role plays are similar to DCTs in terms of the context variables of power, social distance and degree of imposition. For role plays as well, researchers vary one or more of these context variables

and design role play situations so as to include different combinations of them. However, since role plays are much more resource intensive, time consuming and tiring for researcher and participants alike, the number of situations will generally be smaller and not exceed six. The major obvious difference between role plays and DCTs is that role plays involve extended conversations between the interlocutor and the participant. This allows speech acts to unfold over several turns and data resembles authentic conversation more than in a DCT. Also, role plays elicit ability for use rather than knowledge like DCTs, because participants have to produce language under the pressures and constraints of a communicative situation.

However, it is important to note that role plays are not the same as authentic conversations. Most importantly, participants are aware of the simulated nature of role plays, which have no stakes attached, unlike authentic conversation, and role plays do not impact real-world outcomes and/or relationships. Participants therefore do not have the same motivations as they would in authentic interactions, and they simultaneously orient to two social situations – the role played scenario as well as the role play setting itself. In addition, role plays tend to be conducted in controlled environments to enable recording, so facilitative and inhibiting effects of the natural environment, such as background noise, visual cues or model interactions by others, are lacking.

Another consideration in role plays concerns interlocutor effects. While interactions in role plays develop more naturally than they ever could in DCTs, comparability between different interactions is limited due to the co-constructed nature of conversation. However, interlocutors can try to keep their conversations with participants fairly similar by following broad guidelines. For example, in exchanges where participants are meant to make a request, interlocutors might follow a strategy of not immediately acceding to the request but introducing a complication, which then leads to a successful solution having to be negotiated. Such complicating strategies lengthen the interaction and thereby force participants to display more of their pragmatic competence, but at the same time, they may not be feasible for low-proficiency learners, whose L2 proficiency may be too limited to support lengthy negotiations.

Another possible interlocutor effect relates to the plausibility of the role taken on by the interlocutor. Interlocutors frequently perform a variety of very different roles to accommodate different context variable settings. For example, if the variable 'power' is varied and the participant is a graduate student, the interlocutor might play a professor (P+), a fellow graduate student (P=) and an employee in the video store where the participant is cast as the manager (P–).[2] Participants have to suspend disbelief to imagine the interlocutor's portrayed persona as real, and this increases their awareness of the simulated and non-authentic nature of role plays.

Besides these caveats, role plays also have logistical limitations. Unlike DCTs, which can be administered to large groups of participants in far-

flung locations, role play data has to be collected in individual sessions between participants and researcher/confederate, which increases time and costs.

The eventual decision as to whether a DCT or a role play is more suitable for a given study depends primarily on the types of conclusions to be drawn from the study. If researchers are interested in isolated pieces of participants' knowledge that do not require discourse unfolding over various turns, DCTs are appropriate. For example, studies on address terms, formulaic expressions or investigations of the repertoire of semantic formulae participants know can rely on DCTs. However, if ability for use or complex speech acts are to be investigated or participants' ability to construct extended discourse, role plays are preferable. For example, investigations of how participants realize speech acts in discourse need to employ role plays rather than DCTs.

Stage 4: How will the data be analysed?

Data analysis of the most frequently investigated speech acts, request and apology, traditionally follows the coding scheme developed originally in the CCSARP project (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989) and later modified by several authors (Hudson et al. 1995; Trosborg 1995). The CCSARP coding scheme and its derivatives atomize speech acts into head acts and supportive moves and can code for modifications within both. The unit of coding is 'strategy' and as an example, take the following apology situation and participant response (from Roever 2000):

> *Rushing to get to class on time, you run around the corner and bump into another student almost knocking him down. The other student is male, about your age, but you don't know him.*
>
> Oh my gosh! I'm so sorry. Are you okay? I'm late and I guess I wasn't watching where I was going. Are you sure you're okay?

According to CCSARP, this utterance would be segmented and coded as follows:

'Oh my gosh!' = Alerter

'I'm so sorry.' = Illocutionary force indicating device (IFID) with intensifying adverbial

'Are you okay?' = Concern for the hearer

'I'm late and I guess I wasn't watching where I was going.' = Taking on responsibility

'Are you sure you're okay?' = Concern for the hearer

The frequency of strategies is counted and compared between the groups of interest, for example, native speakers and L2 learners. Such comparisons can be done simply by contrasting different frequency counts or using an inferential statistical procedure such as chi-square, which indicates a relationship between group membership and the frequency of use of a certain strategy.

There has, however, recently been increasing criticism of the atomistic CCSARP approach because it does not handle extended interactions well and because the categories are not always well-defined (Kasper 2006; Meier 1998). An alternative is an approach that considers how linguistic and social actions are accomplished not just through individual utterances but through the larger organization and sequencing of discourse. CA has amassed a large amount of research on the analysis of extended discourse over the fifty years of its existence, taking the turn as the fundamental unit as analysis and describing how interactions are structured around a central exchange (e.g. request followed by acceptance/refusal) with pre-expansion sequences recognizably preceding and foreshadowing this exchange, insert expansion sequences occurring between the two components of the central exchange and post-expansion sequences following it (Schegloff 2007). Fundamentally, CA prefers a bottom-up approach to the analysis of discourse, frowning on analysts imposing pre-existing categories or research questions on the data.

The ultimate goal of any analysis is to compare the different levels of the independent variable, for example, NS versus NNS or NNS of different proficiency or exposure levels. Different combinations of context variables and their effect also need to be explored, possibly nested within the other independent variable. Quantitative approaches to this are more common in traditional speech act research than in CA-inspired discursive research, which uses qualitative analysis of coding and categorization. Finally, differences between groups and context variables are described and interpreted.

A sample study

An interlanguage pragmatics study (Byon 2004) investigated knowledge of Korean requests by native English speaking Korean as a foreign language (KFL) learners in the United States and compared their responses with Korean native speaker and American English native speaker data. While the focus of his paper was on the learners, Byon included native speakers of both languages to facilitate the identification of transfer effects. He used a DCT, which does not allow conclusions as to actual, real-world realizations of requests in conversation, but his focus on cataloguing learners' repertoire of request strategies and detecting the effect of sociopragmatic variables justifies his choice of research instrument. He systematically varied the context variables Power (higher/equal/lower) and

Social Distance (high/low). This generated six possible combinations of context variables, and he used two items per combination, leading to a 12-item DCT. He validated his DCT by having a small sample of native Korean and native English speakers evaluate the plausibility of the situations and the degree of imposition. He found that the situations were plausible and that imposition was rated similarly in both speech communities, although he does not provide these ratings in the paper.

It is worth noting that Byon did not keep imposition constant (i.e. always low or always high) for his situations nor did he claim that he did. For example, both his +P/+D situations are clearly not low imposition, requiring participants to ask a professor to allow them into a class where registration has already closed or to ask a professor to schedule a special exam sitting for them so they can attend a relative's wedding. In contrast, his =P/+D situations are certainly low imposition, requiring participants to ask a passing student for a dorm location or to ask a passing student to take a picture of the participant and a visiting friend. The imposition of another situation depends on (unmentioned) context variables when the participant needs to ask a roommate to borrow his/her computer for an evening to complete an assignment. If the roommate also needs the computer, this is a high-imposition situation, but if the roommate is going to be out for the evening and does not need it, it is much lower imposition. However, no such background information is given. These inconstant imposition settings do not matter much if only groups are compared and context variable effects are not investigated, but since Byon does investigate them, not keeping imposition constant introduces an intervening variable and makes the results and any conclusions drawn from them less defensible.

Byon investigated two independent variables:

- language background, with three levels: native Korean speaker, learner of Korean, native English speaker
- context variables, with six levels: +P/+D, =P/+D, –P/+D, +P/–D, =P/–D, –P/–D

His dependent variable was use of request strategies.

Byon recruited fifty female participants for each of his three groups. He screened his KFL participants to make sure they had sufficient Korean proficiency to answer the questionnaire but he eliminated potential participants who had spent extended periods in Korea to keep the sample homogenous. He further limited his sample to female participants in order to avoid gender effects but did not specify what these gender effects might be. While such limitations of the sample group are legitimate and often necessary to avoid having to consider too many variables for too small a sample, limiting the sample to a subset of the target population reduces the range of conclusions that can be drawn from the study. Strictly speaking,

Byon's conclusions should be limited to female language users and for learners of Korean, they should be limited to learners in a foreign language situation.

Byon administered his DCT to his participants and then analysed the data in a series of steps. He started out using the CCSARP and the coding scheme developed by Hudson et al. (1995) and adapted these existing schemes for his data. Such adaptation is commonly necessary because pre-existing coding schemes often do not represent a new data set well and need even more revision if the data set consists of a target language different from the one used in the creation of the prior coding schemes. In adapting the scheme, the original scheme is first applied to the data and exemplars that do not fit are identified and new categories are created to accommodate them while deleting categories that do not occur in the data set.

Byon reports his results by first providing an inventory of the strategies used with examples and then shows total frequencies for each strategy across all situations by group. In the next section, he compares the most frequent supportive moves for the three groups and discusses selected differences that are particularly striking or pedagogically relevant. It is often impossible and unnecessary to discuss all differences and similarities, so researchers need to focus on the ones that are of most theoretical or practical interest.

Next, Byon analyses the effect of the context variables Power and Distance to understand the level of sociopragmatic awareness (sensitivity to contextual features) learners have attained. He finds, for example, that the native speakers used more indirect strategies when talking to someone higher in power but more direct strategies when talking to someone lower in power. The KFL learners on the other hand used indirect strategies in both cases. This can indicate that the KFL learners do not understand the sociopragmatic rules of Korean conversation about using directness/indirectness, in other words, their sociopragmatic knowledge is not adequately mapped to their pragmalinguistic knowledge. It can, however, also indicate that the learners construed the social relationships in a non-Korean way and did not consider a junior student club member or younger roommate as less powerful than themselves. This shows that they do not have a comprehensive understanding of social relationship structures in Korean society but does not allow the researcher to draw conclusions about the relationship between their sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic knowledge. To ensure that effects of social variables are due to sociopragmatic-pragmalinguistic mapping rather than differences in knowledge about social structures and relationships, researchers should ask a pilot sample of participants from both speech communities to rate power and distance, just as Byon did.

In the final section of his presentation and discussion of results, Byon compares the use of request head acts between groups and under different context conditions and explains findings in terms of transfer effects.

Byon's study is a fairly typical interlanguage pragmatics study conducted in a traditional, speech act oriented way. Among its major strengths is Byon's focus on Korean as a target language, which adds to the still very spotty knowledge base of the acquisition of pragmatics in languages other than English. Byon's careful checking of the plausibility of his situations and his development of a coding scheme that is based on previous work but fits his own data set are also strong points of his study. One of the major methodological issues in Byon's paper is the impact of imposition, which was not kept constant for all situations. This makes findings on the effect of context variables somewhat questionable. Similarly, he did not ensure that all groups had similar perceptions of power and distance, so he cannot draw conclusions about the structure of learners' pragmatic knowledge. Finally, the use of DCTs imposes limitations on the type of data to be collected, and Byon's conclusions must be seen as limited to pragmatic knowledge about speech act formulae rather than ability for use in discourse.

The methodological shortcoming of much traditional interlanguage and cross-cultural pragmatics research has led to a shift in focus towards collecting interactive data, with researchers increasingly collecting and analysing extended discourse. This does not mean that DCT research no longer has a place in pragmatics work, but the challenges and opportunities inherent in investigating longer stretches of discourse, be they real or role played, are becoming foregrounded in this research area.

Notes

1 The independent variable is a factor that distinguishes groups of participants or tasks from each other and is hypothesized to cause the outcome.
2 There is some confusion in the literature with regard to the meaning of P–. It can mean that the interlocutor is in the lower power position or it can mean that there is no power differential. In this paper, P– means that the interlocutor is in the lower power position and P = means that there is no power differential. P+ always indicates that the interlocutor is higher in power.

Resources for further reading

Blum-Kulka, S, House, J & Kasper, G (eds), 1989, *Cross-Cultural Pragmatics: Requests and Apologies*. Ablex, Norwood, NJ.

Though a bit outdated, this is still the 'grandfather' of the cross-cultural pragmatics research literature. The use of DCTs limits this study a bit, and Kasper herself is now critical of some of the categorizations used (Kasper 2006), but the CCSARP manual is still an invaluable and highly influential tool.

Golato, A 2003, 'Studying compliment responses: A comparison of DCTs and recordings of naturally occurring talk', *Applied Linguistics*, vol. 24, no. 1, pp. 90–121.

Golato's paper was extremely influential in showing the limits of the DCT research by contrasting DCT data with authentic real-world data. It illustrates very well how cautious researchers have to be in interpreting data and how the use of certain research instruments shapes the data we obtain.

Bardovi-Harlig, K, Felix-Brasdefer, JC & Omar, AS (eds), 2006, *Pragmatics and Language Learning*, vol. 11 and Greer, T, Tatsuki, D & Roever, C (eds), 2013, *Pragmatics and Language Learning*, vol. 13, National Foreign Language Resource Center, University of Hawai'i at Manoa, Honolulu, HI.

These edited volumes contain selected papers from the Pragmatics and Language Learning conferences in 2005 and 2010 and illustrate the breadth of pragmatics research as well as the increasing importance of discursive approaches to pragmatic analysis.

Martinez-Flor, A & Uso-Juan, E (eds), 2010, *Speech Act Performance*, John Benjamins, Amsterdam.

This edited volume discusses the main research instruments used in pragmatics research as well as the main speech acts that have been investigated. It provides a comprehensive overview of pragmatics research with a methodological focus.

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