Week 14a. Interlanguage pragmatics

Interlanguage pragmatics

• Becoming a high-proficiency second language speaker requires knowledge of vocabulary, pronunciation, syntax…and knowing how to use it appropriately.

• Languages differ in how they use different speech acts (requesting, apologizing, refusing, requesting, inviting, complaining, …)—what works in one’s L1 may very well not work in the L2.

Anecdotal examples

• Finnish L1
  – We’re trying to find the train station. Could you help us?
  – Yes.

• Hebrew L1
  – I’m really upset about the book because I needed it to prepare for last week’s class.
  – I have nothing to say.

Breakdown

• Problems with interlanguage pragmatics can cause serious communication breakdown, particularly when other aspects of the L2’ers speech are highly proficient.

• Grammatical errors are recognized as such; pragmatic errors are often not recognized as errors, but rather as rudeness.

• Learning the pragmatic rules for an L2 is often very difficult, pragmatic errors persist even for otherwise very advanced learners.

Pragmatic transfer

• Lacking knowledge of the pragmatic rules of the target language, L2’ers commonly transfer the pragmatic norms from their native language.

• Counterintuitively perhaps, the more proficient a L2’er is, the more transfer from the native language (non-TL pragmatics) seems to be observed.
  – The L2’er has the linguistic means to express more subtle and complex meanings, and can implement pragmatic strategies—then, draws on the L1.

Modals and mitigation

• Many studies have found that even when L2’ers are highly proficient by general measures, they don’t show native-like performance with the particular pragmatic domain under investigation.

• Few studies have looked directly at the grammatical structures required specifically for the pragmatic domain under investigation.
Modals and mitigation
• One, Salsbury and Bardovi-Harlig (in press) look at emergence of modals and use in mitigation.
• Modals seem to emerge in a reliable order:
  – maybe < think < can < will < would < could
• But “even learners with grammaticalized expressions of modality rely heavily on lexical forms to unambiguously mark their pragmatic intent”
• So grammar seems to come first…

Pragmatic strategies
• Pragmatic strategies for illocutionary acts differ across cultures (here we do not seem to see the same degree of universal constraints as on syntax or phonology).
• House and Kasper (1981) rated “directness” in complaints and requests, comparing German and English native speakers, and found that on a scale from 1-8, English speakers most frequently were fairly indirect (3), while German speakers most frequently were more direct (6). Using a German strategy in an English environment would often be perceived as impolite.

Variables
• There is no unified “English strategy for refusal”—even within a single language, strategies differ.
  – Difference in authority between speaker and hearer.
  – Differences (even subtle) in culture
    • socioeconomic status
    • gender
    • education level
    • …

Some semantic formulas: refusals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Semantic formula</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direct</td>
<td>Performance</td>
<td>I prefer to…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-performative statement</td>
<td>I can’t</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect</td>
<td>Statement of regret</td>
<td>I’m sorry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wish</td>
<td>I wish I could help you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Excuse, reason, explanation</td>
<td>I have a headache</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Statement of alternative</td>
<td>I’d prefer to…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Set condition for past or future</td>
<td>If you’d asked me earlier, I’d have…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>acceptance</td>
<td>I’ll do it next time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Promise of future acceptance</td>
<td>I’ll do it next time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Statement of principle</td>
<td>I never do business with friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Statement of philosophy</td>
<td>One can’t be too careful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Attempt to dissuade interlocution</td>
<td>I won’t be any fun tonight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Acceptance that functions as refusal</td>
<td>Well, maybe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Avoidance (e.g., silence or hedging)</td>
<td>I’m not sure</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Refusals
• Refusals are a complex speech act because they are high-risk—they could very easily cause offense to the hearer. Yet refusals work differently in different cultures.
• Nelson et al. (1998): American English vs. Egyptian Arabic (L1’ers in L1 context). Similar use of formulas, but…
  – EA speakers used more direct refusals with peers than AE speakers.
  – For unequal status, AE = mitigate+excuse, EA=excuse+mitigate or refuse+reason (depending on status balance).

Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz (1990)
• Refusals in Japanese, American English, and in the interlanguage of Japanese speakers learning American English.
• Authors looked at the responses in terms of the order of semantic formulas, e.g. I’m sorry, I have theater tickets that night. Maybe I could come by later for a drink. (regret, excuse, alternative).
Overall patterns

- Native speakers of Japanese:
  - positive opinion/empathy (to higher status)
  - excuse (vague)
- Native speakers of American English:
  - positive opinion (to higher or lower status)
  - regret
  - excuse (specific)
  - can’t
- American English by native speakers of Japanese
  - positive opinion/empathy (to higher status)
  - excuse (vague)

Categorizing errors

- Sociopragmatic failure: Learner fails to respond with the correct speech act.
  - NS: You have such a lovely accent
  - NNS: (no response)
- Pragmalinguistic failure: Learner responds with the correct speech act but with the wrong linguistic means.
  - NS: I like your sweater.
  - NNS: This old thing? I got it at a rummage sale.

Apologies

- Converse of refusals, “face-threatening” to the speaker.
- Cross-cultural differences are fewer than in requests, refusals.
- Still, some “negative transfer” in terms of intensity (I’m sorry vs. I’m very sorry).
- L1 Hebrew speakers of English tend to offer fewer excuses, accept responsibility less frequently than NSs; L1 Chinese speakers of English tend to offer more intense regret and more explanations than NSs.

Some semantic formulas: apologies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Semantic formula</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expression of an apology</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expression of regret</td>
<td></td>
<td>I’m so sorry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offer of apology</td>
<td></td>
<td>I apologize</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A request for forgiveness</td>
<td></td>
<td>Excuse me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explanation or account</td>
<td></td>
<td>The bus was late</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgement of</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>responsibility</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accepting the blame</td>
<td></td>
<td>It’s my fault</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressing self-deficiency</td>
<td></td>
<td>I wasn’t thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognizing other person</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as deserving apology</td>
<td></td>
<td>You are right</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressing lack of intent</td>
<td></td>
<td>I didn’t mean to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offer of repair</td>
<td></td>
<td>I’ll pay for the broken vase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promise of forbearance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Perception of linguistic distance?

- Olshtain (1983): Frequency of semantic formulas in apologies:
  - English > Russian > Hebrew
- Hypothesis: Learners of H from R and E might “over-apologize” as a result of transfer.
- Turns out:
  - Learners of H from E approximated H frequency.
  - Learners of H from R over-apologized.
- Why?

Perception of linguistic distance?

- English > Russian > Hebrew
- Learners of H from E approximated H frequency.
- Learners of H from R over-apologized.
- Learners of H from R over-apologized.
- Though differences exist; E speakers in a severe situation (e.g., backing into someone’s car) will over-apologize, approximating H more in a less severe situation (e.g., insulting someone at a meeting).
- L1 R speakers took H to be like R because the difference is smaller, less noticeable.
Requests

- Requests also involve risk, they are inherently imposing.
- L2 requests tend to err on the side of over-polite, sometimes to the extent that the request is not communicated.
- One of the best studied of the illocutionary acts…

Some semantic formulas: requests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Semantic formula</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direct</td>
<td>Mood-derivable</td>
<td>You shut up.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Performative</td>
<td>I am telling you to shut up.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hedged performative</td>
<td>I would like to ask you to shut up.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Location-derivable</td>
<td>I want you to shut up.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conventionally</td>
<td>Suggestory</td>
<td>Let’s play a game.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>indirectly</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-conventionally</td>
<td>Strong hint</td>
<td>This game is boring.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>indirectly</td>
<td>Mild hint</td>
<td>We’ve been playing this game for over an hour now.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Determining pragmatic competence

- The field of interlanguage pragmatics is young, most of the studies use Discourse Completion Tasks, ratings of appropriateness, or Role-Plays. Some, but few, have made use of naturally occurring speech.

DCT examples

- A student has borrowed a book from her teacher, which she had promised to return today. When meeting her teacher, however, she realizes that she forgot to bring it along.
  - Teacher: Miriam, I hope you brought the book I lent you.
  - Miriam: _____
  - Teacher: Ok, but please remember it next week.

- Worker: As you know, I’ve been here just a little over a year now and I know you’ve been pleased with my work. I really enjoy working here, but to be quite honest, I really need an increase in pay.
  - You: ______
  - Worker: Then I guess I’ll have to look for another job.

Appropriateness rating

- You’re a member of a research group. Many people are missing from a meeting and it is necessary for someone to notify them about the next meeting. Your boss turns to you and says:
  - Notify those who are missing, OK?
  - Perhaps you could notify those who didn’t come?
  - Could you please notify the others about our next meeting?
  - How about getting in touch with the people who were absent?
  - I’d appreciate it if you could notify the people who were absent.
  - You will notify the people who were absent.

Problems

- Written tasks can only approximate actual responses.
  - No option to refrain from comment.
  - No option to leave.
  - No non-linguistic communication available.
- DCTs pros:
  - Establish initial categorization of semantic formulae
  - Rapid data collection
  - Controlled situational context
  - NNS less anxious than in role-playing (or real life)
  - Vs. Role-plays, subjects not over-polite to experimenter
- DCTs cons:
  - Range of formulae and strategies may differ
  - NNS written responses are shorter than oral responses
Other problems

- Current research generally is…
  - cross-sectional (vs. longitudinal)
    - no evaluation of development
    - focused on groups rather than individuals
  - generally no evaluation of individual L2’ers L1 pragmatic use (usually monolingual NSs of the L1)
    - not necessarily perfectly matched for context
    - very hard to do, across L1’er, L2’er and L2’er’s L1.

Can pragmatic competence be taught?

- A few studies have looked at this, and the general result is: yes.
  - L2’ers who have been instructed in appropriate language use have an advantage over those who haven’t.
  - Implicit and explicit learning methods both provided improvement.
  - Explicit learning methods provided more improvement than implicit methods.
  - Even beginning learners benefited from instruction.
  - Few things have been observed not to respond to instruction.
    - One possible case: Understanding and generalizing implicatures as in *Is the Pope Catholic?* or *—How was your dinner last night? —Well, the food was nicely presented.*

Can pragmatic competence be taught?

- Can pragmatic competence be taught?
  - Standard language learning classroom situation does not generally prepare the L2’er well for discourse in the real world.
    - Fairly rigid structure: Teacher question, student response, teacher feedback.
    - Constant power structure (teacher vs. student).
  - Argues for, among other things, classroom management in the L2, since this provides examples of the L2 in a communicative function.
  - Hypothesized (Kasper 1997) to be useful:
    - Awareness-raising
    - Practice.

Academic writing

- Academic writing (English) is replete with indirect statements and hedges.
  - Often quite problematic for L2’ers (who tend to write too directly, sometimes as the result of explicit instruction, even from textbooks), yet vital given the pervasiveness and importance of English language research journals.
    - A plausible conclusion is…
    - These findings suggest…
    - The verb seems to move to T…
  - Still has face-saving issues involved in the imposition of claims or refutation of claims.
    - Wishnoff (2000) contains discussion, shows that instruction is beneficial (and also transfers to non-academic writing as well)

Cultural variation

- Variation of pragmatic strategies across cultures is quite wide-ranging and seemingly not very constrained.
- Does not appear to be constrained in the same way as grammatical acquisition.
- Almost certainly to a great extent taught.
  - Give me a cookie.
  - What’s the magic word?
  - Give me a cookie, please.
  - Here you go. Now what do you say?
  - Thank you.
- What universals there are probably stem from more functional desires to save face, maintain good relationships.
The state of the field

- Studies of interlanguage pragmatics are still preliminary.
- Few studies of development exist.
  - Is there a natural order?
  - Is there a minimum proficiency requirement?
  - Do children have an advantage?
  - Do motivation or attitudes play a role?
- Few studies of nonverbal aspects of communication exist.
  - What effect does intonation have?
  - Is intonation used early on to make up for deficient grammatical knowledge?
  - Is there intonational transfer in the domain of pragmatics?
    - I think I need to take Intro to Linguistics next fall.

A guess at phases of pragmatic development (?)

- Message-oriented and unsystematic
  - Uses any linguistic or non-linguistic means at his/her disposal to achieve a communicative end.
- Interlanguage-oriented, potentially systematic
  - Can use strategies. Yet: more verbose, and pragmatic transfer evident.
- Interculturally-oriented, potentially systematic
  - Mostly appropriate; may still show “deep” transfer, as in status differentiation, may still be too verbose