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AN INTRODUCTORY COURSE

Second Edition

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9.4. INTERLANGUAGE PRAGMATICS

The final area we deal with in this chapter on language in context is pragmatics. Interlanguage pragmatics deals with both the acquisition and use of second language pragmatic knowledge. We noted in Chapter 1 that in learning a second language, one must learn more than just the pronunciation, the lexical items, the appropriate word order; one must also learn the appropriate way to use those words and sentences in the second language. For example, we pointed out that one must learn that within the context of a telephone conversation, *Is Josh there?* is not only a request for information, but is also a request to speak with that person. In fact, children are known to respond to this question only on the basis of an information request such that a typical response from a child is *Yes*, with no further indication that he or she will call the person to the phone. Thus, a child in learning a first language must learn to go beyond the literal meaning of utterances to understand the pragmatic force. The same can be said for second language learning and use. Consider 9-23, an example of a conversation between a British tourist and a native speaker of Finnish provided by Maisa Martin (personal communication):

- (9-23) Tourist: We're trying to find the railway station.
 Could you help us?
Finn: Yes. (full stop)

In Finnish, the pragmatic force of a request for directions does not coincide with the pragmatic force in English. Thus, despite a Finn's perfectly grammatical English, one often finds what might be interpreted as abrupt responses.

Much of the work in interlanguage pragmatics has been conducted within the framework of *speech acts*. Speech acts can be thought of as functions of language, such as complaining, thanking, apologizing, refusing, requesting, and inviting. Within this view, the minimal unit of communication is the performance of a linguistic act. All languages have a means of performing speech acts and presumably speech acts themselves are universal, yet the *form* used in specific speech acts varies from culture to culture. Thus, the study of second language speech acts is concerned with the linguistic possibilities available in languages for speech act realization and the effect of cross-cultural differences on both second language performance and the interpretation by native speakers of second language speech acts.

It is easy to imagine how miscommunication and misunderstandings occur if the form of a speech act differs from culture to culture. An example was presented in 9-23. Native speakers of British English and native

speakers of Finnish differ in the ways they ask for directions and interpret requests for directions. When breakdowns occur, they are frequently disruptive because native speakers attribute not linguistic causes to the breakdown, but personality (individual or cultural) causes. Thus, in 9-23, the British tourist is likely to have interpreted the Finnish speaker's response as rude and/or uncooperative. Or, similarly, consider the response to the situation in 9-24, produced by a native speaker of Hebrew (Cohen & Olshtain, 1993, p. 54):

- (9-24) Context: You promised to return a textbook to your classmate within a day or two, after xeroxing a chapter. You held onto it for almost two weeks.
 Classmate: I'm really upset about the book because I needed it to prepare for last week's class.
 Response: I have nothing to say.

It is clear that this response sounds rude to an NS of English and suggests a lack of willingness to apologize. However, what was meant was the translation of something equivalent to *I have no excuses*.

In terms of language learning, the area of pragmatics is perhaps one of the most difficult areas for learners because they are generally unaware of this aspect of language and may be equally unaware of the negative perceptions that native speakers may have of them as a result of their pragmatic errors. Miscommunication resulting from NS perceptions of relatively proficient NNSs (as opposed to learners with low-level comprehension and productive skills) is often serious in terms of interpersonal relations because the source of the difficulty is more likely to be attributed to a defect in a person (or a culture) (e.g., Americans are insincere, Israelis are rude, Japanese are indirect), than to an NNS's inability to map the correct linguistic form onto pragmatic intentions. As Gumperz and Tannen (1979, p. 315) pointed out, because the interlocutors "assume that they understand each other, they are less likely to question interpretations." This is precisely the communicative situation that Varonis and Gass (1985a, 1985b) labeled the most dangerous: Without a shared background, linguistic system, and specific beliefs, "when one interlocutor confidently [but inaccurately] interprets another's utterance, it is likely that participants will run into immediate problems because they do not share a common discourse space" (1985a, p. 341).

We take the speech act of refusal as a way of illustrating the speech act research paradigm. Refusals occurs in all languages. However, not all languages/cultures refuse in the same way nor do they feel comfortable refusing the same invitation or suggestion. That is, not all cultures view the same event as allowing a refusal. How does this affect second language use?

Refusals are a highly complex speech act primarily because they often involve lengthy negotiations as well as face-saving maneuvers to accommodate the noncompliant nature of the speech act. Because oral refusals are the result of an initial request (*Would you like to come to my house for dinner tonight?*), they preclude extensive planning on the part of the refuser.

A study by Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz (1990), in which the major concern was the existence of pragmatic transfer, deals specifically with second language refusals. Four groups of native speakers of Japanese and English (two NS controls and two second language groups) filled out a Discourse Completion Test involving 12 situations, including refusals of requests, refusals of invitations, refusals of suggestions, and refusals of offers. In describing the setting, it was made clear that the refuser was to take the role of a higher or lower status person. Each situation involved an initial segment of written speech followed by a blank and then followed by a rejoinder that forced the subjects to write a refusal in the preceding blank. In analyzing the results, the authors considered the order of semantic formulas. Semantic formulas consist of such factors as expressions of regret, excuses, offer of alternatives, and promises. For example, a refusal to a dinner invitation at a friend's house might elicit the following response: *I'm sorry, I have theater tickets that night. Maybe I could come by later for a drink.* The order of formulas in this refusal is (a) expression of regret, *I'm sorry*, (b) excuse *I have theater tickets that night*, and (c) offer of alternative *Maybe I could come by later for a drink*.

The data from this research suggest evidence of pragmatic transfer. The range of formulas used is similar from language to language, but the *order* in which the formulas are used differs from language to language. That is, the order of semantic formulas used by L2 learners in both the native language and second language is similar. For example, Table 9.11 shows Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz's data from refusals of requests:

TABLE 9.11

Order of Semantic Formulas in Refusals of Requests When Refuser Is of a Higher Status

Japanese Native Speakers	Positive opinion/empathy Excuse
English by Native Speakers of Japanese	Positive opinion/empathy Excuse
Native Speakers of American English	Positive opinion Regret Excuse Can't

Source: Adapted from Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz (1990).

Other work involving refusals, but using a different methodology for data elicitation, suggests that a complex and negotiated interaction takes place in second language refusal situations. Research by Houck and Gass (1996) and Gass and Houck (1999) on refusals, using roleplay as a source of data collection, showed that the refusals in these roleplays were often lengthy interactions in which the participants negotiated their way to a resolution. An example is given in 9-25:

- (9-25) Setting: The NNS is a guest in a family's home. The family members have gone to a neighbor's home for a few minutes. The NNS has been instructed not to let anyone in. The NS in this role-play is playing the part of a cousin passing through town who would like to come in and wait for her cousin.
- NS: Oh hi how are you doing?
 NNS: oh fine thank you
 NS: is uh is uh Quentin in
 NNS: no uh no sh I'm not
 NS: no he's not in
 NNS: uh no no he's not in
 NS: ahh where'd he go
 NNS: ahh he goes to neighbor house
 NS: ah well do you mind if -I'm I'm his cousin and I'm just passing through Lansing tonight and I'm I'm on my way to Detroit. I'm on a on a business trip and and uh I'd like to see him. I've got about half an hour or so. Would you mind if I come in and wait for a minute or so until he comes back
 NNS: ah no wait wait I'm a guest to uh this home the-I can't uh I don't uh uh um I can't I don't know what uh I do this situation then eh
 NS: I'm sorry?
 NNS: uh he he don't tell me uh
 NS: ahh
 NNS: if another person come in his home
 NS: yeah yeah but I I I'm his cousin I'm sure it's going to be ok
 NNS: but I don't know
 NS: I I know it'll be all right
 NNS: my first time to meet you I don't know you
 NS: y'know actually this is the first time I've met you too how do you do
 NNS: wait wait I think uh I think uh he came back uh not so late

NS: nice to meet you uh huh
 NNS: yeh-uh please wait uh your car

In this example, the two speakers hemmed and hawed, cut each other off, self-corrected, modified and elaborated their positions, and generally became involved in negotiating semantic, pragmatic, and social meaning. The episodic nature of this example, with multiple refusals, requests and rerequests, has not been documented in native speaker speech.

In coming to an understanding of second language pragmatics, one must ultimately deal with the wide range of social variables that might determine how language is used. For example, what is the relationship between the two people involved in a particular speech event? Are they of equal status? Are they of equal age? Same sex? Are there other people witnessing the speech event? What is their relationship to those speaking?

Many of these differences have been incorporated into what is known as the Bulge Theory (Wolfson, 1988, 1989). The basic idea is that when speech events are considered in relation to the social relationships of speakers, one finds many similarities between the two extremes of social distance (i.e., those who are intimates [minimum social distance] and those who are strangers [maximum social distance]). The term bulge comes from the frequency of responses and the way these are plotted on a diagram: The two extremes show similarly low amounts of speech whereas the center has a bulge. The bulge group is comprised of nonintimates, status-equal friends, co-workers, and acquaintances. The explanation for the similarities/differences between these groupings lies in the certainty of the relationships. It might seem strange for the extremes to be similar. Why should speech events between intimates and strangers share characteristics? Within the Bulge Theory, the explanation lies in the fact that the status and therefore the predictability of the responses is known. On the other hand, those in the middle require much more verbal negotiation for the relationship to be made clear.

Wolfson (1989, p. 131) illustrates these differences. In 9-26 (between intimates), there is little need for negotiation. Each speaker is certain of where he or she stands with relation to the other. In 9-27, however, the relationship is less clear and there is a resultant tendency to avoid a direct invitation because with directness comes the risk of rejection. Rather, what we see is a give-and-take until they come to a resolution.

- (9-26) Speaker 1: Do you want to have lunch tomorrow?
 Speaker 2: Okay, as long as I'm back by one-thirty.
- (9-27) Speaker 1: You doing anything exciting this weekend?
 Speaker 2: No, I'll be around the pool here.

Speaker 1: Okay, I'll see you.

Speaker 2: Maybe we'll barbecue one night.

Speaker 1: Okay, that's a nice idea. I'm tied up Sunday night.

Speaker 2: All right. We'll keep it loose.

(Speaker 1 begins to walk away and then turns and walks back, saying)

Speaker 1: We're supposed to do something with Helen tomorrow night. Want to do something with us?

Speaker 2: Okay. Let us know.

Thus, interlanguage pragmatics, in dealing with how people use language within a social context, must take into consideration not only how language is used (i.e., how grammatical forms are used to express semantic concepts), but also what it is being used for and who it is being used with.

It is clear from the preceding discussion that the bulk of research on interlanguage pragmatics has focused on pragmatic use rather than on acquisition. In pointing this out, Bardovi-Harlig (1999b) and Kasper and Schmidt (1996) made the important point that there is a dearth of studies dealing with changes in or influences on pragmatic knowledge. Kasper and Schmidt also outlined a number of research questions that need to be addressed regarding the acquisition of second language pragmatic knowledge. We list some of these questions here. As can be seen, they do not differ significantly from many of the issues related to other parts of language discussed in this book.

1. Are there universals of pragmatics and how do these universals affect the acquisition of second language pragmatic knowledge?
2. What are the issues relating to methodology and measurement?
3. What is the role of the native language?
4. Is development of L2 pragmatic knowledge similar to the development of L1 pragmatic knowledge?
5. Is there a natural route of development?
6. What is the role of input? Instruction? Motivation? Attitude?
7. What are the mechanisms that drive development?

Bardovi-Harlig (1999b) correctly pointed out that one cannot consider the development of pragmatic knowledge without a concomitant consideration of grammatical knowledge. Hence, for learners who do not have a variety of verbal forms as part of their linguistic repertoire, their use of verbal forms to express pragmatic functions will be limited.

Scarcella (1979), for instance, found that low-level learners relied on imperatives when making requests in every situation. As proficiency increased, imperatives were appropriately restricted to subordinates and intimates. Bardovi-Harlig (1999b, p. 694) gives the following example.

- (9-28) Context: Graduate students addressing a faculty advisor.
Advisor: OK, let's talk about next semester.
NS: I *was thinking of* taking syntax.
NNS: I *will* take syntax.

According to Bardovi-Harlig, this example suggests that the NNS shows an excellent understanding of the core meaning of *will* as an indicator of the future, but does not understand the use of the progressive as a marker of the future. Thus, the pragmatic extension of progressives to refer to the future is a later developmental stage.

9.5. CONCLUSION: SLA AND OTHER DISCIPLINES

In this chapter and the three preceding chapters we have concerned ourselves with the relationship between second language acquisition and other disciplines, notably linguistics, psychology, and sociolinguistics. Of course, these are not the only areas that relate to second language acquisition. Others—such as neurolinguistics, sociology, anthropology, communication, artificial intelligence, cognitive science, and philosophy—are also potential contributors to an understanding of the nature of second language acquisition. But they have not been included here given that at present they have had less of an impact on the field of second language acquisition.

We have presented data to show how a linguist, a psycholinguist, and a sociolinguist would look at second language data. But what about the opposite direction? What can the importance of second language acquisition data be in an understanding of these source disciplines? There are different perspectives one can take on this issue. Gass (1989) and Gass and Schachter (1989) argued with regard to the fields of linguistics and second language acquisition that there are important bidirectional implications to the relationship. We extend that argument to other fields as well. In other words, it is our belief that second language acquisition is not only dependent on other disciplines for models, theories, ways of asking and answering questions, but also gives back to those fields a broader perspective on the nature of human language and the human mind.