

PRAGMATIC FUNCTIONS IN JAPANESE LANGUAGE FOREIGNER TALK: A Case Study

Robert Gray
Senshu University

INTRODUCTION

Until comparatively recently, second language acquisition (SLA) theory was dominated by two language acquisition models: 1) a behaviorist model, which stressed the importance of learner-external factors, such as the 'quality' of linguistic input; (Brown, 1987, 8-9) and a nativist model, which emphasized learner-internal factors, such as innate cognitive processing mechanisms, and a 'language acquisition device' (Brown, 1987: 9-10).

The appeal of the behaviorist model was its congruence with the popular 'layman hypothesis', that language is learned primarily by imitating a linguistic caretaker. 'Right' and 'wrong' were categories which teachers could use, measured against their own speech behavior, to adjudicate on students' speech behavior. Because the techniques associated with the audio lingual method of SLA seemed, at the time, to have common-sense appeal; and because the *observation instruments* used for assessing language performance - written tests - were easy to construct, implement and score, the

behaviorist school and its various offshoots held, and in fact continue to hold a position of considerable influence in SLA pedagogy in the form of reception-based theories such as the Frequency Hypothesis (Wells, 1985).

The appeal of the nativist model was that it could account for the universality of language acquisition itself, and by extension, second language acquisition. Nativists, claiming that the cognitive devices which regulate the acquisition of language could only be 'triggered', not formally 'assessed', (Krashen, 1985), paid little attention, if any at all, to *observation instruments* for assessing language performance.

Although situated at opposite ends of a paradigmatic spectrum, both models stressed the importance of learner *input* for second language acquisition, without, however, showing how input ('comprehensible input') advances actual acquisition of new linguistic material, or how to operationalize the 'I + i' construct.

While a more recent reception-based theory of SLA - the Interaction Hypothesis (Long and Porter, 1985) - has drawn attention to the importance of input that is negotiated, many researchers have turned their attention to production-based hypotheses of SLA, such as Swain's Output Hypothesis (Swain, 1984), and Ellis's Collaborative Discourse Hypothesis (Ellis, 1985).

Because of the extent to which research in the last decade has focused on the learner's linguistic output, and the interactional conditions under which that output is generated, the need for *observation instruments* which are both useful and manageable for assessing learners' performance, and for action-based research has presented itself forcefully.

In response to this need, a number of researchers have attempted to develop observational / evaluative instruments, such as the Foreign Language Interaction Analysis System (FLINT) (Moskowitz, 1970), and the Communicative Orientation of Language Teaching (COLT) (Allen, Frohlich and Spada, 1983). In spite of the inherent difficulties, there is a felt need for some kind of yardstick against which global second language proficiency can be gauged; an index not based on the structure of English itself, in acknowledgement of the fact that different processes influence the L₂ acquisition process, and so that second language teachers might possess a way of measuring any change in overall proficiency of their students over the course of a term" (Larsen-Freeman, 1983: 287).

PURPOSE:

In line with the same general aim of trying to develop some kind of index or yardstick for assessing relative proficiency, and changes in overall proficiency of EFL students, but an index not based on the structure of English itself, the present case study addresses the following question: can NNS discourse in carrying out a task be evaluated in terms of *pragmatic categories* such that, when

compared with those of a NS for the same task, interlanguage proficiency can be assessed on the basis of the similarities or dissimilarities between the *range* and *frequency* of specified pragmatic categories? 'Pragmatics' as used here is understood to mean speech acts by which a speaker realizes intended goals.

FOCUS:

Since the issue under investigation addresses a much wider range of questions than can possibly be accommodated within an experimental, hypothesis-testing framework, the present case study is not directed towards hypothesis testing: rather it is an action research probe into the question of whether or not designated pragmatic categories from among those being used in the discipline of Speech Therapy could be considered a basis on which to design more sophisticated research instruments for SLA theory and practice.

METHOD

SUBJECTS

Two subjects were asked to participate in an interactive language task. One subject, a NNS of Japanese, was a 43 year old American male who had completed a one-year full-time Japanese language study programme. The second subject was a 47 year old female, a NS of Japanese, who, on a separate occasion completed the same 'task' as the NNS, described below, to provide the base-line data for the study. Speech was elicited from both subjects by a

female Japanese speech therapy specialist, who was not related in any way to either the NNS or the NS subjects, hereafter referred to as the interviewer.

THE TASK:

The task involved the interviewer, in possession of a picture which could not be seen by the subject, interacting verbally with the subject so as to have the subject draw a likeness of the original picture held by the interviewer. The interviewer and the subject were seated face to face at opposite sides of a table. The subject had drawing paper and pencils, and was informed by the present writer about the format of the task. The subject and the interviewer were requested that, from the very outset of the task, all linguistic interaction relating to the task be conducted in Japanese. The interviewer was told that she could offer as much verbal assistance as would help the subject complete the task.

The subjects were told that their speech would be recorded on a tape recorder placed on the table. They were further informed of the present writer's intention to make a transcript of the cassette recording for use as the primary data in this study. Both subjects and the interviewer gave their consent.

The task between the NNS-subject and the NS-interviewer yielded 18 minutes of tape recorded speech, comprising 282 turns. The task between the NS-subject and the NS-interviewer yielded 12 minutes of tape recorded speech, comprising 202 turns.

METHOD OF ANALYSIS:

In the present study, the author has adopted certain elements from two discourse analysis instruments currently being used to analyze communication behavior in the discipline of Speech Therapy:

1) INREAL (Inter-Reactive Learning and Communication)
(Tanaka,

1985); and

2) NAUDS (Nagoya University Autistic Child's Developmental
Scale

(Kamino, 1984).

Because of their diagnostic nature, the analytical units of these two instruments covering a wide range of linguistic and paralinguistic variables go well beyond the need of the present probe. Therefore, only a limited number, fourteen, of more salient variables have been selected for trialing in the present study, based on their recurrence in the discourse transcripts obtained from the speech-eliciting tasks, described above. The fourteen categories adopted from both INREAL and NAUDS are:

1) C = CHANGING the original utterance by saying the same thing in another way, e.g.: "...migi san-bun-no-ni wa, zashiki...washitsu desu".

- 2) CON = CONFIRMATION CHECK, to establish whether correct understanding has taken place, e.g.: "*Wakarimashita yo ne !*".
- 3) RE = REPETITION, e.g.: "*Futari wa uchi no hito de, sono uchi no hito de, ato no futari*".
- 4) EX = EXPLANATION, e.g.: "*...daidokoro de wa, nagashi no ...osara toka, shokki wo arau tokoro...*".
- 5) AF = AFFIRMATION, e.g.: "*...so desu ne !*".
- 6) NE = NEGATION, e.g.: "*...Ie , mae desu*".
- 7) LE = LEADING the NNS to a more complete grasp of an idea, e.g.: "*... mo chotto, mo chotto migi gawa desu*".

These seven categories (1-7) will be used to evaluate the speech which the NS INTERVIEWER is obliged to use in interacting with both subjects. The seven categories below (8-14) will be used to evaluate the speech used by both subjects (NNS and NSS):

- 8) COM = COMPREHENSION CONFIRMED, e.g.: "*Hai*".
- 9) COM? = NON-COMPREHENSION, e.g.: "*Wakarimasen*".
- 10) FS = FORMULAIC SPEECH, e.g.: "*Mo ichido itte kudasai*".
- 11) VS = VERTICAL STRUCTURE, i.e.: the NNS immediately repeats words or phrases that have been used by the NS.
- 12) S = STATEMENT, i.e.: the NNS initiates discourse.
- 13) Q = QUESTION, i.e.: the NNS elicits information by taking the initiative to ask questions.
- 14) PCQ = PERFORMANCE CHECK QUESTIONS, e.g.: "*ii desu ka ?*".

RESULTS

Table 1(a) below shows the frequency of occurrence of the discourse categories designated 1) to 7) above, in the speech of the NS (the native speaker interviewer) in interaction with the NNS (the non native speaker subject); and 1(b) for interaction with the NSS (the native speaker subject):

Table 1: Range and frequency of salient speech categories of the NS in interaction with the NNS (1a) and the NSS (1b):

TABLE 1

	1		2		3		4		5		6		7	
	(COM)		(CON)		(RE)		(EX)		(AF)		(NE)		(LE)	
	f	RF	f	RF	f	RF	f	RF	f	RF	f	RF	f	RF
1a NS-NNS	17	.09	18	.10	46	.25	34	.18	40	.22	15	.08	9	.10
1b NS-NNS	3	.06	2	.04	13	.26	5	.10	21	.42	1	.02	4	.08

Table 2(a) below shows the range and frequency of occurrence of the discourse categories designated 8) to 14) above, in the speech of the NNS (the non native speaker subject); and 2(b) in the speech of the NSS (the native speaker subject):

Table 2: Range and frequency of salient speech categories of the NNS (2a) and the NSS (2b) in interaction with the NS interviewer::

TABLE 2

	8		9		10		11		12		13		14	
	(COM)		(COM?)		(FS)		(VS)		(S)		(Q)		(PCQ)	
	f	RF	f	RF	f	RF	f	RF	f	RF	f	RF	f	RF
2a NNS	89	.54	1	.00	5	.03	34	.20	8	.04	9	.05	16	.09
2b NNS	69	.56	0	.00	1	.00	13	.10	13	.10	20	.16	7	.05

DISCUSSION

First, both the NNS and the NSS voice a very high frequency of comprehension confirmations (category 8), ($n=89$, and $n=69$). Yet when these scores are correlated with the speech of the NS interviewer, it can be seen that the NS is obliged to make only 1 negation statement (category 6) in discourse with the NSS, whereas 15 are called for in discourse with the NNS. In other words, the NNS seemed to be giving the appearance of comprehending, when this was in fact not the case, e.g.:

NS: "...Soko ni, oba-san."

NNS: "Hai."

NS: "Oba-san no hidari-gawa ni..."

NNS: "Hidari, hai."

NS: "*Ie, ie, hantai gawa desu.*"

NNS: "Hai, hidari ne."

NS: "Nnn...*hantai gawa desu.*"

Whereas the affirmative 'Hai' was seen to be a reliable indicator of correct comprehension in the speech of the NSS, this was not so in the speech of the NNS. It seems that the benefits to the NNS which result from giving the appearances of comprehension, benefits such as the 'positive presentation of self', and the self esteem associated with the maintenance of 'positive face' outweigh the disadvantages of comprehension loss, operationalized in the present study in terms of ability to proceed with the task of reconstructing a drawing. Thus, in spite of inherent appeal to common sense, the comprehension assertion criteria (category 8) of the NNS in this study is clearly a very inadequate discourse category, or yardstick, for assessing the speech 'level' of the NNS.

Second, the NNS demonstrates a high frequency (n=34) of the use of vertical structure (category 11) compared with the NSS (n=13), as in the following example:

NS: "Reizoko no ue ni, *denki gama ga* arimasu."

NNS: "*De...denki gama desu ka?*"

NS: "*Denki gama.*"

NNS: "*Denki gama...*"

NS: "Suihan-ki!"

NNS: "*Denki desu ka?*"

Here, the NNS avoids making a non-comprehension statement, preferring instead to elicit more information from the NS interviewer by means of vertical structure repetitions, more than twice as many times as the NSS. Thus, the frequency of occurrence of vertical structure might be considered an indicative 'yardstick' or measure of discourse competence, in this study.

Third, as shown by the relatively low occurrence of statements (category 12) (n=8), and questions (category 13) (n=9) in the speech of the NNS, less than half as many as those which occur in the speech of the NSS, the less communicatively competent NNS is seen to adopt a more passive role than the NSS. The frequency of occurrence of both these categories seems, therefore, to be an index or yardstick of a level of discourse competence.

The advantage to the ESL instructor, or the therapist, of being able to 'read' the responses of the subject, and his or her own speech, is that the instructor or therapist could be 'cued' by macro features of pragmatic discourse, such as a selected, workable number of discourse categories, to monitor communicative breakdowns, even when the NNS tries to evade such an admission by responding with speech which he thinks is expected of him by the NS. Such referential 'cues' could help the alert instructor or therapist to realign the learner so as to stave off the loss of communicative meaning.

CONCLUSION

The present study addresses a matter of concern to all SLA instructors: how to monitor changes in the L2 performance of large numbers of students in a classroom context. Instruments such as Madsen's 'Oral Proficiency Interview' (Madsen, 1983), Crystal's 'Profile Analysis' (Crystal, 1982) and Pienemann's 'Computational Analysis of Language Acquisition Data' (Pienemann and Johnston, 1986) are a sampling of the kind of 'yardsticks' which are already available. It seems to the present writer, however, that while the needs of SLA *researchers* are being addressed, those of SLA *instructors* remain overlooked. Field methods which are grounded in current SLA theory, to be sure, but which are practical and 'user friendly' for multiple applications with large numbers of students, under classroom working conditions, remain to be developed.

The present action based case study - a preliminary probe - arising from a felt need, as discussed above, has constructed and trialed the elements of a framework within which such a field method could be developed for ongoing evaluations of a learner's discourse proficiency. the case study reported here draws attention to two discourse analysis instruments being used in Japan, in the discipline of Speech Therapy: INREAL and NAUDS. It has shown that the range and frequency of occurrence of selected pragmatic speech categories can, when compared with those of native speakers, provide instructors and therapists with an assessment component for evaluating a learner's discourse ability. The development of a battery

of tasks, using established base-line data from native speakers for the same tasks, could provide the instructor with a selected range of speech categories, the frequency of occurrence of which could serve as a diagnostic instrument for reviewing and establishing teaching priorities.

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