

Interlanguage Pragmatics and Second Language Acquisition

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1. Scope and orientation of interlanguage pragmatics (ILP)

ILP, the study of the use and development of linguistic action competence by nonnative speakers (NNS), is a bit of an oddball in second language research. Unlike other areas of second language study, which are primarily concerned with acquisitional patterns of interlanguage knowledge over time, the great majority of studies in ILP has not been developmental. Rather, focus is given to the ways NNS' pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge differs from that of native speakers (NS) and among learners with different linguistic and cultural background. To date, ILP has thus been a study of second language use rather than second language learning.

The main reason for the concern with language use over development derives from the disciplines with which ILP has predominantly aligned itself. ILP's main field of reference has not been second language acquisition research but empirical pragmatics, especially cross-cultural pragmatics. The research issues examined in ILP have thus essentially been the same as those studied in cross-cultural pragmatics (cf. Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper, 1989): What are the strategies and linguistic means by which particular speech acts are realized? Are such strategies universally available? What are the contextual factors that determine speakers' choices from 'speech act sets'? What is the contextual distribution of realization patterns? How does contextual variation differ cross-culturally?

These questions are precisely the ones that have been asked in cross-cultural pragmatics. A further concern, however, which has been recurrently raised in ILP, is the influence of learners' native language and culture on their production and comprehension of L2 speech acts. To date, the role of pragmatic transfer has been the only issue specific to interlanguage studies that has received sustained attention in ILP, and which thus aligns ILP with mainstream second language acquisition research (see below).

2. Existing studies with a focus on acquisition

A. Cross-sectional studies

Developmental studies using pseudo-longitudinal designs have examined the use of speech act realization strategies by learners at different proficiency levels. A consistent result of these studies is that learners have access to the same range of realization strategies as NS,

irrespective of proficiency level. This is documented in studies of request realization by Japanese learners of English (S. Takahashi & DuFon, 1989) and second language learners of Norwegian with a variety of L1 backgrounds (Svanes 1989), the refusal strategies used by Japanese learners of English (Takahashi & Beebe, 1987; Robinson, 1992), and the performance of apology by Danish learners of EFL (Trosborg, 1987) and Japanese ESL learners (Maeshiba, Yoshinaga, Kasper, & Ross, in press).

Proficiency effects were found for the frequency and contextual distribution of realization strategies. Thus Takahashi and DuFon (1989) report that with increasing proficiency, their Japanese learners moved from a preference for more indirect requestive strategies to more direct, target-like realizations. A similar development is reported by Olshtain and Blum-Kulka (1985), who looked at the perception of directness and positive politeness by NNS of Hebrew. However, in their study, it is not learners' L2 proficiency but length of residence in the target community that accounts for increasingly target-like perceptions of directness and positive politeness. In another study, Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1986) noted that learners' use of supportive moves in request performance followed a bell-shaped developmental pattern, starting out with an underuse of supportive moves, followed by over-suppliance, and finally approximating target-like distribution. This pattern was reflective of increasing L2 proficiency. In their apology performance, advanced Japanese learners of English were found to approximate target use more closely than their intermediate colleagues (Maeshiba et al., in press). In her study of assertiveness and supportiveness in NNS trouble talk, Kerekes (1992) found that proficiency influenced learners' perceptions of qualifiers (I think, sort of): with increasing proficiency, the learners' perceptions became more native-like. Proficiency interacted with gender, however: as a group, female but not male subjects perceived qualifiers in the same way as NS and high-proficiency learners.

Finally, Scarcella (1979) and Trosborg (1987) noted that learners' repertoire of pragmatic routines and other linguistic means of speech act realization expands as their proficiency increases. It is not clear though whether the greater variety of linguistic material is simply a reflection of expanded vocabulary and syntactic structures, or whether the more advanced learners have developed a better command of the pragmalinguistic potential of lexical and syntactic devices. Detailed form-function and function-form analysis is needed to throw light on this problem.

One drawback in the design of the pseudo-longitudinal studies is that none of them involves subjects at the very first stages of interlanguage development. Some studies include only intermediate and advanced learners, and studies in which the lowest proficiency group is labelled 'beginners' refer to learners whose command of the target language is good enough to fill in a discourse completion questionnaire or engage in a role play. Thus, if there are any early developmental patterns in IL pragmatic knowledge, the employed methods of data collection have not allowed them to show up.

B. Longitudinal studies

To date, only a few studies have traced the development of adult NNS' pragmatic competence through longitudinal data: Schmidt (1983), Billmyer (1990), Wildner-Bassett (1984), Bouton (1992), Ellis (1992), Sawyer (1992), and Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1993). Of these, Schmidt's, Ellis', and Sawyer's studies report about early pragmatic development, and will therefore be briefly summarized here. Schmidt (1983) observed an adult Japanese learner of English (Wes) over a period of three years. Apart from rudimentary classroom learning in Japan, Wes acquired English through sustained and expanding communicative interaction in an English-speaking environment, without formal instruction. Ellis (1992) observed two boys, aged ten and eleven, who had arrived in London from Portugal and Pakistan, respectively, shortly before the beginning of the study. They did not speak any English at the onset of the observation period. Both learners received instruction in English and were observed during school lessons. The Portuguese boy was observed for one year and three months, the Pakistani for two years. Both Schmidt's and Ellis' studies focus on the development of directives in their learners' interlanguage.

Wes expressed his early directives through a limited number of conventionalized routines (shall we go, can I have x), which were not fully analyzed. He identified -ing incorrectly with requestive force ('sitting' for 'let's sit'), relied on lexical cues such as 'please' and 'maybe', and transferred Japanese norms of contextual appropriateness both in the choice and strategic realization of particular speech acts. By the end of the observation period, he used imperatives frequently, the incorrect -ing had disappeared, routines were used productively, and his directives were generally much more elaborated. However, some interlanguage-specific features remained, such as a limited number of alternative formulae, and the overextension of formulaic expressions such as 'can I', which sometimes resulted in incorrect use ('can I bring cigarette' for 'please bring me').

The directives produced by Ellis' boys were initially characterized by propositional incompleteness (e.g., 'me no', a little later 'me no blue' as requests for a blue crayon). Propositionally complete directives started out as formulaic (Leave it. Give me.) but were soon used productively. Incomplete directives diminished drastically over time though they still occurred at the end of the observation period. Modification (mitigation or aggravation) occurred infrequently, external modification through supportive moves even less than internal modification. The internal downgrader was invariably 'please'; upgrading was achieved by repeating or paraphrasing the request. The only supportive move used was the grounder (justifying the request).

Request strategies at different levels of directness appeared in a distinct order, similar for both learners. Direct requests (imperatives) came first and made up 1/2 to 3/4 of all the directives in the corpus. Conventionally indirect requests appeared soon after the direct ones, expressed almost exclusively by 'can (I)' and occasionally by a 'want' statement or suggestory

formula. Non-conventional indirectness (hinting) was hardly used at all. Because of the preponderance of directness in the early stages, the request perspective was initially hearer-related ([you] do x). The speaker's perspective was expressed more frequently when conventionally indirect strategies emerged. A developmental pattern was apparent in the learners' requests for goods, as shown in the following examples:

me no (blue)
give me (a paper)

can I have a rubber?
you got a rubber?
miss I want (i.e., the stapler)
Tasleem, have you got glue?

can I take book with me
can you pass me my pencil
can I borrow your pen sir (Ellis 1992, p. 16f).

'Can' is thus used in analyzed form at the later stage. The more polite variety 'could' does not show up at all in requests for goods.

Schmidt (1983) and Ellis (1992) emphasize the potential impact of the social contexts in which their informants acquire English, as well as the contexts and purposes of data collection, on the observed developmental patterns. As Ellis cautions, while it is clear that his two informants do not make use of the full range of request strategies by the end of the observation period, it is not apparent (a) whether NS peers in fact employ a wider range of strategies under the same contextual conditions, and (b) whether the learners perhaps use other request patterns outside the classroom.

Rather than tracing the interlanguage development of a particular speech act, Sawyer (1992) examined the acquisition of the Japanese sentence-final particle 'ne' by eleven adult learners of Japanese. His informants had a variety of L1 backgrounds and were enrolled in a JSL class. Data were collected through four interview sessions over a one year period. Relative to the general development of vocabulary and grammatical particles, 'ne' developed considerably more slowly in these learners' interlanguage. Adopting the interviewers' use of particles as a baseline, it was found that the learners used grammatical particles somewhat more frequently than the NS, whereas the interviewer used 'ne' four times as often as the learners. Initially, 'ne' hardly showed up in the learners' production at all. It first emerged in formulaic utterances which are highly frequent and salient in the input (e.g., 'soo desu ne' as a backchanneling signal), and was only slowly extended to a limited number of more productive uses. Learners varied considerably in their use and development of 'ne'.

It is evident from the studies by Schmidt (1983), Ellis (1992) and Sawyer (1992) that at the present stage of ignorance about acquisitional regularities, longitudinal designs have the greatest potential to uncover developmental patterns in learners' acquisition of pragmatic

competence. A solid number of such studies is surely needed in order to tease out stable developmental patterns and variation due to contexts of L2 learning and use, and to individual differences. Moreover, it is hoped that such studies will provide information about a number of central issues in SLA research at large.

In the next section, fifteen such questions will be listed, and it will be examined what answers the ILP literature has to offer to these questions. In this way, we will be able to identify some initial progress and many gaps in our knowledge about ILP development.

3. 15 basic questions of second language acquisition and what we know about the answers with respect to ILP

1. Are there universals of language underlying cross-linguistic variation?

Adult NS and NNS are able to infer indirectly conveyed pragmatic intent, to realize linguistic action indirectly, and to vary their choices of linguistic action patterns according to contextual constraints (Blum-Kulka, 1991). The speech acts examined in ILP to date (e.g., requests, suggestions, invitations, refusals, apologies, complaints, complimenting, thanking) have been shown to be available in the studied populations, and so have many (but not all) of the conventions of means ('speech act sets') by which these speech acts are regularly performed. The contextual variables influencing politeness investment in Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory - social power, social distance, degree of imposition - act as universal constraints on linguistic action; their absolute and relative impact is culturally mediated (cf. Kasper, 1992).

2. How can approximation to target language norms be measured?

Off-line pragmatic comprehension, attribution of illocutionary force and politeness values to utterances, and the assessment of contextual factors have been measured by means of rating and ranking tests, multiple choice, or paired comparison (Kasper & Dahl, 1991, for review). On-line pragmatic comprehension has been examined by means of latency measurement (Takahashi & Roitblat, in press). NNS subjects' performance is measured against a NS norm.

Production of linguistic action can be assessed by comparing NNS to NS in their performance on production questionnaires (discourse completion), role plays, and in (semi-) authentic settings. Of these three options, some version of production questionnaire has been by far the most frequently chosen (Kasper & Dahl, 1991).

3. Does the L1 influence the learning of a second language?

The global answer in ILP is the same as in interlanguage phonology or syntax: it does indeed, but differentially so. All ILP studies using L1 and L2 baseline data find some transfer effects. Studies have not always been clear about what is transferred: learners' assessments of the social situation and the contextual variables in it, their assessment whether it is appropriate to carry out a certain speech act, the strategies by which a linguistic act can be realized, or the

linguistic forms by which such strategies can be implemented. While positive and negative transfer has been shown to occur at the levels of sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic knowledge (Kasper, 1992), little is known about the conditions under which learners are likely to transfer or not to transfer. Transferability of L1 pragmatic knowledge was initially investigated by Olshtain (1983) and has more recently been examined in much detail by Takahashi (1992).

4. Is learning a second language like learning a first language?

Since there is little research on early pragmatic development in adult L2 learners (see section 2), comparison to acquisition of pragmatic competence in L1 is difficult. A study comparing pragmatic development in L1 and L2 acquiring children (Ervin-Tripp, Strage, Lampert, & Bell, 1987) suggests that children rely more on contextual cues than on linguistic form in understanding requests, both in L1 and L2. In a theoretical account of pragmatic development, Bialystok (1993) proposes that children's primary learning task is to develop analyzed representations of symbolic knowledge, whereas adult L2 learners' task is mainly to develop executive control over already available knowledge representations. This proposal has not yet been empirically tested.

5. Is there a natural route of development, as evidenced by difficulty, accuracy, or acquisition orders or discrete stages of development?

Evidence is too scarce to make any claims about natural routes of pragmatic development. Yet the studies by Schmidt (1983), Ellis (1992) and Sawyer (1992) suggest that as in naturalistic second language development generally, pragmatic competence seems to evolve through initial reliance on a few unanalyzed routines which are later decomposed and available for productive use in more complex utterances. While learners need to understand and produce novel utterances in order to interpret and express nonconventionalized speaker meanings, they also have to develop an increasing repertoire of prepatterned routines, conventionalized for specific pragmatic functions in the target community. How the development of creative pragmatic ability and pragmatic routine evolves over time is altogether unclear.

6. Do children enjoy an advantage over adults in learning a second language?

There are no comparative studies informing about speed of pragmatic development, how soon child and adult learners can do what kinds of things with words, or about ultimate attainment. The problem is not just lack of empirical studies but limits of comparability of adults and children in an area of communicative competence which is closely tied to cognitive ability and social experience. With regard to ultimate attainment, it has been shown that highly proficient bilinguals differ in their linguistic action patterns from those of monolingual NS (e.g., Yoon, 1991). Rather than attributing such differences to lack of pragmatic competence, they have been understood as acts of divergence in the interest of identity maintenance, as features of an intercultural style which sets its speakers apart from both their native and target community (Blum-Kulka, 1991).

7. Does type of input make a difference?

Japanese ESL learners approximated NS norms better than EFL learners in their production of refusals (Takahashi & Beebe, 1987) and perceptions of politeness in requests (Kitao, 1990). Since pragmatic knowledge, per definition, is highly context-sensitive, one would expect input which is richer in qualitative and quantitative terms to result in better learning outcomes. A second language environment is more likely to provide learners with the diverse and frequent input they need for pragmatic development than a foreign language learning context, especially if the instruction is pre-communicative.

8. Does instruction make a difference?

Little research has been done into the teachability of pragmatic knowledge, but the few existing studies are encouraging. A clear advantage was found for ESL students who were instructed in complimenting and responding to compliments (Billmyer, 1990) and in understanding different types of implicature (Bouton, 1994). While some features of complimenting and implicature were more amenable to teaching than others, focusing on aspects of pragmatic knowledge through consciousness-raising activities and communicative practice seems highly facilitative. In a classroom (pseudo-) experiment, Wildner-Bassett (1984) examined whether EFL learners acquired gambits (routines for conversational management and modification of illocutionary force) differentially successful, depending on instructional approach. She found that learners' use of gambits improved significantly, qualitatively and quantitatively, regardless of teaching approach. However, learners taught according to a vaguely communicative approach were even more successful than their colleagues who had been exposed to a version of suggestopedia.

9. Do motivation and attitudes make a difference in level of acquisition?

10. Does personality play a role?

There are no studies which explicitly address these questions with a view to pragmatic development. But the profile established by Schmidt (1983) of his subject Wes suggests that the combination of socio-affective variables characteristic of Wes were facilitative for his acquisition of pragmatic competence. Wes displayed an integrative motivation and positive attitude towards the target community. He is described as extrovert and friendly, presents low anxiety and is a risk-taker in his communicative interaction. It stands to reason that this kind of socio-affective profile is particularly helpful in the area of pragmatics because such people are more likely to expose themselves frequently to a variety of social situations and engage actively in communication with different interlocutors. They thereby create more opportunities for themselves to obtain pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic input, test hypotheses and practice their communicative skill. But since no studies have been done on less gregarious learners, no conclusions may be drawn on the impact of socio-affective style on pragmatic development at this time.

11. Does learners' gender play a role?

Two studies report contrasting results. Rintell (1984) found no effect for gender on learners' perception of expressions of emotion by L2 speakers. On the other hand, Kerekcs (1992) noted a distinct gender difference in NNS' perception of sympathy and support, female subjects responding more native-like than male subjects.

12. Is there a knack for language learning?

A special aptitude for acquiring pragmatic competence has not been reported.

13. Does (must) perception/comprehension precede production in acquisition?

No studies have examined this issue. It is conceivable, however, that already available linguistic knowledge may be used for pragmalinguistic purposes in the production of linguistic action without prior comprehension of such pragmalinguistic functions. Likewise, decisions about sociopragmatic appropriateness may be made on the basis of L1 (or prior L2) experience which is then transferred (L1) or generalized (L2) to new contexts. However, this is what learners may do; whether and how much they actually produce linguistic action without prior comprehension is unclear.

14. Does chunk learning (formulaic speech) play a role in acquisition?

As Schmidt (1983), Ellis (1992) and Sawyer (1992) suggest, there appears to be an important role for prefabricated speech in pragmatic development. But formulaic speech does not just represent an initial learning stage, a stepping stone towards the higher realms of creative language use. Routine formulae constitute a substantial part of adult NS pragmatic competence. Learners need to acquire a seizable repertoire of routines in order to cope efficiently with recurrent social situations and discourse requirements (Coulmas, 1981). Therefore, how pragmatic routines are acquired has to be addressed as a research issue in its own right (Wildner-Bassett, 1984).

15. What mechanisms drive development from stage to stage?

Presumably, the same mechanisms as those identified for the acquisition of other cognitive skills will also propel pragmatic development. A number of theoretical proposals are discussed by Schmidt (1992). None of them has been empirically tested for its potential to explain pragmatic development.

4. A direction for future Research

Two proposals have been made to account for pragmatic development from a processing perspective. Bialystok (1993) applied her two-dimensional model of language use and learning to pragmatics, suggesting that adult NNS' learning task is primarily to achieve increasingly higher levels of executive control over their representations of pragmatic knowledge. Schmidt (1993) extended his noticing hypothesis to the intake of pragmatic information. He argues that for pragmatic information to be noticed and thereby made available for further processing, it has to be attended to, or stored in short-term memory. While attention is thus required for converting

available input into intake, intention and understanding are not, although they can be facilitative. Data-based studies are needed to examine Bialystok's and Schmidt's proposals.

In addition to the proposed processing perspectives, focus should be given to possible changes in learners' socio-cultural perceptions over time, and the impact of such altered perceptions on their strategies of linguistic action.

NOTES

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