

## A Study into Methodological Issues in Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Research

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**Abstract:** *The methodological issues are one of the areas of pragmatics which have gained considerable attention recently. The foundation of basic instruments in speech act research can be placed in a two-polar continuum. At one end, there are the perception/comprehension methods and at the other end production methods are placed. Each level then has its own specific instruments. As for the perception/comprehension methods, instruments such as rating, multiple choice, and interview tasks can be utilized. In production methods, instruments such as discourse completion, closed role play, open role play, and observation of authentic discourse are placed (Kasper & Dahl, 1991). Furthermore, methods can be categorized according to an elicited/observational continuum. In the elicited end, methods such as rating, multiple choice, interview tasks, discourse completion, closed role play, and open role play are placed. In the observational end, observation of authentic discourse is used. This study is useful for those novice researchers who are interested in conducting pragmatic studies and may not be familiar which instrument they should use in particular situation.*

**Keywords:** *Pragmatics, Methodological Issues, Instrument, Speech Act Theory*

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### 1. Theoretical Background

In the past, on the basis of Grammar Translation Method (GTM), language was taught as a string of linguistic structures, grammatical rules, translation exercises and list of words to memorize (Richards & Rogers, 2001). Although grammatical and lexical meaning of a sentence is taken into consideration in GTM, it has not been accounted for the way in which language is used in daily communications. Later on, with the emergence of Communicative Language Teaching, however, learners were engaged in the pragmatic, authentic and functional use of language for meaningful purposes (Brown, 2007). Pragmatics rising to prominence occurred with the emphasis put on the meaning and communicative aspect of language.

Pragmatics does not have a clear-cut definition (Ellis, 2008), however, according to Verschueren (1999, p. 1), pragmatics is "the study of linguistic phenomenon from the point of view of their usage properties and processes." Richards and Schmidt (2002) defined pragmatics as "the study of the use of language in communication, particularly the relationships between sentences and the contexts and situations in which they are used" (p. 412). Clearly, pragmatics is simply the study of language which is used in daily communication. It is usually seen in the pertinent literature that a learner's full knowledge about the grammar of the target language does not guarantee that that person is pragmatically competent too (Bardovi-Harlig, 1996; Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998; Kasper & Rose, 1999). They can produce grammatically correct but pragmatically inappropriate utterances. Therefore, it is no exaggeration to say that pragmatic aspects of utterances are of paramount importance.

As mentioned by Verschueren (1999, p. 18), one of the subsets lies in pragmatic is speech act. The theory of speech acts describes how one can use language to do things (Fromkin, Rodman & Hymes, 2003). Typically, a speech act is usually defined as a functional unit which plays an important role in communication. Moreover, it was reported that linguistic elements could be interpreted on the basis of speech acts (Verschueren, 1999). In dealing with speech acts, one thing that deserves special attention is that there are different ways for individuals to express their intention, requests, and apologizing. To make it clearer, one should consider which type of speech act is appropriate for which situation. For instance, is the act of



The concern of most methodological discussions is to what extent the instrument is capable to approximate authentic performance (Kasper & Dahl, 1991; Billmyer & Varghese, 2000). In the same vein, Manes and Wolfson (1981) argued that the most authentic information comes from sociolinguistic research which emphasizes ethnographic observation. However, Manes and Wolfson's utopia was not appreciated by researchers and many criticisms were documented on the use of ethnographic observation (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989; Aston, 1995). Since observation did not satisfy the researchers, another instrument referred to as discourse completion test (DCT) was employed to analyze pragmatic knowledge. As it is cited in Kasper and Dahl (1991), "Discourse Completion Tasks have been a much used and a much beleaguered elicitation format in cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics." Discourse completion tasks (or tests) are some prompts based on various situations in which individuals are required to write their reactions in each episode. Levenston and Blum (1978) were the first researchers who developed DCTs to study lexical simplification, and Blum-Kulka (1982) adapted it to investigate speech act. After these pioneering studies, a body of research accompanied the newly-developed DCT instrument for the realization of different speech acts (Blum-Kulka, 1982; Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1986; Faerch & Kasper, 1989; House & Kasper, 1987; Kasper, 1989; Olshtain & Weinbach, 1987).

However, the heydays of DCTs do not last for a long time. Some criticisms were leveled at DCTs too. Among the criticisms of DCTs, inability to gather authentic information and inconsistency with the state-of-the-art literature were more picturesque. As an attempt to improve the quality of DCTs, Billmyer and Varghese (2000) conducted a study on request speech act based on a modified DCT in which the improved situational prompts were given to native and non-native speakers of English. The modification included enhancing the situational prompts and more elaborated requests in native and non-native groups.

Hinkel (1997) tried to validate multiple choice and DCT instruments through a study done on Chinese speakers. In another similar study, Golato (2003) studied the differences among compliment response types with respect to two instruments. Golato used conversation analytic methodology and a discourse completion task to elicit data. After analyzing the data, Golato figured out that "these data collection procedures do not always yield data that speak equally well to given research questions" (p. 90). He further argued that naturally occurring talk is useful to reveal the organization of language but DCTs are beneficial to show prior experience with language. Johnston, Kasper, and Ross (1998) studied the effect of different types of rejoinders such as positive, negative, and absent on native and non-native informant choices of complaints, requests, and apologies. They advocated that there is a relationship between the type of rejoinder and the choice of strategies. Their study was mainly conducted to validate different data elicitation procedures—naturally occurring and production instruments.

Rose (1992) with emphasis on more cross-cultural studies on speech act, investigated two forms of DCTs based on the inclusion and exclusion of hearer response. Rose found out that "although responses on the non-hearer response (NoHR) DCT tended to be slightly longer and used slightly more supportive moves and downgraders, inclusion of hearer response did not have a significant effect on requests elicited" (p. 49).

Role play is another instrument used in pragmatic studies. Walters (1980) investigated children interlanguage speech act based on role play. He observed children while they were playing and interacting with puppets. He came to this realization that grammar and pragmatic knowledge are not related to each other; in other words, children were able to use the language with appropriate politeness but they were not able to produce grammatically sound sentences. Scarcella (1979) used videotaped open role plays to investigate developmental patterns of politeness. Kasper (1981) conducted a study on 48 dyads of German learners of English and recorded their role plays carried out on various speech acts such as requests, suggestions, offers, invitations, and complaints.

The findings of Kasper study show that the speech act pattern of participants were related to neither L1 nor L2. This means that the participants' interlanguage were systematic and independent in performing speech act. However, the study is limited to two cultures. More studies are needed to investigate the interlanguage pragmatics. Tanaka (1988) was another author who employed role play in studying speech act.

Tanaka analyzed the request speech act of Japanese learners while they were interacting with friends or lecturers. The interactions were videotaped. The findings revealed that nonnative students used more direct strategies to perform requests. Trosborg's (1987) study deals with Danish apology speech act with different proficiency levels while they were interacting with native speakers of English. Trosborg mentioned that politeness varies with respect to participants' proficiency level.

Some studies have used observations to collect data on particular speech acts. Wolfson's (1989) study which last about 2 years and examined compliment and compliment responses dealt with "ethnographic data collected through observation and recording of naturally occurring speech in everyday interactions in a wide variety of situations" (Wolfson, p. 227). In another study based on observation, Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1990) found that nonnative speakers offered fewer suggestions with respect to native speakers.

Hinkel points out that *discourse completion tests* (DCTs) have been largely used as a means of comparing native speakers and non-native speakers' socio-pragmatic behaviors. She came to this realization that "DCTs may not be the best elicitation instrument for L1 and L2 data pertaining to ambiguous and situationally constrained pragmalinguistic acts" (p. 1). Hinkel further emphasized that:

The ideal data for speech act analysis would consist of a large number of carefully recorded observations of particular speech acts by representative subjects and control group subjects in similar natural situations when the subjects are unaware of the observation. (p. 2)

Huth and Taleghani-Nikazm (2006) came to this realization that the information obtained through conversation-analysis-based studies is strikingly different from the same data gathered through DCTs. They argued that when required to complete the DCTs, "native speakers *overwhelmingly* stated that they would accept compliments with 'Danke' which was in stark contrast to their actual interactional behaviour, where no 'thank you's' could be found at all" (p. 63). Rose (1992) studied the construction of DCTs in which two forms of a DCT were investigated. One form was gathered through hearer response and the other did not. The data gathered by the two forms were identical and the use of hearer response did not have significant effect on the elicited requests.

Billmyer and Varghese (2000) tried to find out the effect of systematic modification to the DCT for eliciting requests produced by native and non-native speakers of English. The findings of their study revealed the importance of external modification of production speech act.

Many other researchers tried to investigate speech acts based on a combination of different instruments some of which were mentioned before. For instance, many studies used combined production and metapragmatic assessment data (Einstein & Bodman, 1986; Fraser, Rintell, & Walters, 1980; Garcia, 1989; House, 1988; Olshtain & Cohen, 1983; Rintell, 1981; Takahashi & Dufon, 1989) while some employed different types of production data in their approach toward speech act investigation (Beebe & Cummings, 1985; Rintell & Mitchell, 1989). Hinkel (1997) investigated the responses of Chinese speakers to multiple choice questionnaires and discourse completion tests with regard to appropriateness of advice in both common and observed situations.

Turnbull (2001) investigated the appropriateness of pragmatic elicitation techniques in both free and controlled situations and came to this realization that role play and experimental technique provide more natural data. Golato (2003) compared two data analysis through conversation analytic (CA) methodology and a discourse completion task (DCT). The results of the study showed that there is no difference between the DCT and naturally occurring data. Johnston, Kasper, and Ross (1998) conducted a study to validate the data collection of interlanguage pragmatics. The research emphasized the validation of production questionnaire (PQ) on non-native and native informants' choices of complaints, requests, and apologies. The findings revealed that different PQ formats cannot be compared and further validation is needed.

Therefore, the foundation of basic instruments in speech act research can be placed in a two-polar continuum. At one end, there are the perception/comprehension methods and at the other end production methods are placed. As for the perception/comprehension methods, instruments such as rating, multiple choice, and interview tasks can be utilized. In production methods, instruments such as discourse

completion, closed role play, open role play, and observation of authentic discourse are placed (Kasper & Dahl, 1991). Furthermore, methods can be categorized according to an elicited/observational continuum. In the elicited end, methods such as rating, multiple choice, interview tasks, discourse completion, closed role play, and open role play are placed. In the observational end, observation of authentic discourse is used.

Bardovi-Harlig (1999) criticized that the nature of interlanguage is ignored in studies on interlanguage pragmatics. The main motive behind his research on interlanguage in interlanguage pragmatics was the study conducted by Kasper and Schmidt (1996) which stated that the main focus of interlanguage pragmatics is cross-cultural pragmatics. What Bardovi-Harlig tried to emphasize was the way individuals acquire pragmatics and mentioned that there is a great need for longitudinal research on acquisitional aspects of interlanguage pragmatics. His discontent of comparative nature of pragmatic studies and his interest in the idea of acquisitional pragmatics lay in the idea that “many articles from 1979 to 1996—with the exception of the explicitly acquisitional studies with cross-sectional and longitudinal designs—identify non-native speakers as ‘non-native speakers’ rather than learners, and they are described only by their first language” (p. 680). Maybe one of the concerns of Bardovi-Harlig is that scholars should pay attention to the procedure of gaining proficiency in pragmatics not just resorting to comparative studies. His concern is in line with the nature of second language acquisition studies in which the process of acquisition is of key importance.

Demeter (2007) stated that methodology and instrument used in gathering pragmatic knowledge of individuals are of key importance which can influence the outcome of the study. He further reveals that most of the studies conducted on pragmatics use “discourse completion tests, interviews, questionnaires, corpus linguistics, or natural interactions” (p. 83). Emphasizing the use of role plays in pragmatic studies, he compared two sets of results obtained through role play and a discourse completion test and came to this understanding that “although DCTs are more appropriate for studying the main types of strategies in speech act production, role-plays seem a better choice when the interaction between the speaker and hearer is also important for the study” (p. 88).

Grotjahn and Kasper (1991) investigated various methodologies used in second language acquisition in which speech act theory is also considered. Bonikowska (1988) brought a new perspective into the field of pragmatic study in that in this study the speaker’s decision not to perform a speech act is taken into consideration. Bonikowska came to this realization that it is not only the pragmatic choice that matters but opting out choice is important too.

In summary, some of the methodological issues regarding gathering results are mentioned below (Martinez-Flor, 2005; Martinez-Flor, 2006; Martinez-Flor & Fukuya, 2005; Martinez-Flor & Soler, 2004):

- **Hinkel (1997):**
  - ❖ DCTs may not be the best elicitation instrument for investigating pragmatic knowledge.
- **Bardovi-Harlig (1999):**
  - ❖ Lack of longitudinal research on pragmatics.
  - ❖ A need for more studies on acquisitional aspects of pragmatics.
  - ❖ Current studies on pragmatics have ignored the nature of interlanguage.
  - ❖ DCTs are not a good device to gauge interlanguage pragmatics of learners at all levels.
- **Golato (2003):**
  - ❖ Manifold advantages of DCTs.
  - ❖ The results obtained from DCTs are very different from naturalistically collected data.
  - ❖ In interactions, individuals use strategies different from what is obtained through DCTs.
- **Huth and Taleghani-Nikazm (2006):**
  - ❖ Conversation-analysis-based materials provide learners with socio-pragmatically appropriate verbal behavior.
  - ❖ The information obtained from DCTs is strikingly different from the same information gathered by conversation-analysis-based studies.

- Demeter (2007):

- ❖ DCTs are appropriate for studying various strategies in speech acts and role-plays are good instruments to find out the nature of interactions between learner and speaker.
- ❖ Responses provided through DCTs are much longer than the ones provided by role-plays.

Therefore, it can be concluded that every social context may impose some limitations on the choice of words and sentences which is different across cultures. Another factor which renders the research on pragmatics cumbersome is the instrument itself. As it is mentioned by Kasper and Dahl (1991), the purpose of the study influences the choice of instruments. According to Kasper and Dahl (1991):

In pragmatics, we are dealing with a double layer of variability: (a) variability that reflects the social properties of the speech event, and the strategic, actional, and linguistic choices by which interlocutors attempt to reach their communicative goals; and (b) the variability induced by different instruments of data collection. (p. 215)

### 3. Conclusion

In this review article, it was tried to have an overview of various instruments in the realm of pragmatics. As it was discussed, each instrument has its own advantages as well as its flaws. To have a clear picture of current methodological issues and to provide novice researchers a general picture of what is going on in data elicitation and data gathering phase of pragmatic studies, which is one of the main concerns in pragmatic research, this review article is of great help. Most of the researchers who are going to conduct studies on pragmatics and speech act verbs are not familiar with different instruments in the field and they may have difficulties choosing a suitable instrument which best represent their purpose. The matter of validity is under question if the instrument fails to represent what the researcher tried to investigate. In this sense, we suggest that the researcher use different instruments and compare the results. Although this trend is time consuming and impractical, if conducted carefully, it can provide researchers with reassuring data since the utilization of various instruments will surely reduce the validity problems.

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