Pragmatic Development in Request Performance by
English-speaking Learners of Chinese

以英语为母语的汉语学习者请求言语行为的语用发展

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Abstract

Requests have been one of the most frequently examined speech acts in Interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) (Schauer, 2009). The early research on the ILP of requests focused on first language pragmatic transfer, comparisons between NSs and NNSs, and cross-cultural contrastive analysis (Blum-Kulka, 1982; Blum-Kulka & Levenston, 1987; Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984; Faerch & Kasper, 1989; House, 1989; House & Kasper, 1987). This tradition continues today (e.g., Puetz & Neff van Aertselaer, 2008). In comparison, pragmatic development has been a much less researched area (Kasper and Schmidt, 1996; Rose, 2000). In addition, most of the studies on ILP have focused on English as a second language (L2). Studies on the acquisition of ILP with Chinese as a second/foreign language are few. The present study is an attempt to address the shortage of developmental pragmatics research and the scarcity of research on Chinese as a foreign language (CFL).

The present study draws upon Brown & Levinson's (1987) politeness theory to examine CFL learners' requests under different sociopragmatic situations. Politeness is the most basic notion of pragmatic function. Although this notion is shared by people across all cultures, different cultures may have different principles for politeness. Accordingly, different languages may use different politeness strategies in making requests. Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper (1989) categorized request strategies in terms of degrees of directness. They also developed the coding manual that contains a scheme for internal and external modifications. This study uses the schemes of Blum-Kulka et al.'s (1989) and Zhang (1995).

The two research questions are: 1) How do intermediate and advanced CFL learners develop accuracy and appropriateness in acquisition of the speech act of request? 2) How do learners at different proficiency levels use request strategies in different situations (social distance, power relation, and the degree of imposition)?

28 non-heritage CFL learners at two levels and fourteen NSs participated in the study. The instrument was a questionnaire in two parts: the background information and a DCT: Discourse Completion Test. The DCT consisted of 4 request scenarios embedded with two sociopragmatic variables: social power and the degree of imposition. The questionnaires were administrated in class. The author and her colleague coded a half of the questionnaire independently. The two raters eliminated the remaining coding disagreements, and reached a consensus.

To address the first research question:
1) CFL learners at the two levels differed significantly on language accuracy and appropriateness in language meaning and function, and 2) The grammatical accuracy of intermediate learners in making requests seemed to develop prior to pragmatic appropriateness. This phenomenon was not obvious among advanced learners.

To address the second research question:

1) CFL learners' requests appear to be more appropriate in less imposing situations than in highly imposing situations. 2) Advanced CFL learners seem to be more aware that the use of speech act strategies (internal and external modifications) largely depends on socio-pragmatic factors in a particular situation. 3) Learners underused downgraders, overused upgraders, and misused the question-tag, suggesting that they have difficulties in mapping language forms and functions, and that they lack pragmalinguistic and/or socio-pragmatic knowledge. 4) Learners acquire the basic form and function first; specifically, those that provide certain correspondences to their first language, with concrete meaning, and more transparent form-meaning mapping.