

IN SEARCH OF RELIABLE METHODS FOR DATA COLLECTION IN INTERLANGUAGE PRAGMATICS RESEARCH

Marija Kusevska, Biljana Ivanovska

Goce Delchev University, Shtip (MACEDONIA)

Abstract

The goal of this paper is to discuss several methods of data collection for interlanguage pragmatics studies. The paper was motivated by the process of data collection for the project “The role of explicit instruction in developing pragmatic competence in learning English and German as foreign languages” carried out at Goce Delchev University, Stip, Republic of Macedonia. Data for the project were collected by Discourse completion tasks (DCTs) and role plays, supplemented by verbal reports. DCTs and role plays are considered the most common means for data collection in interlanguage pragmatics. The advantages of these instruments are that different variables can be controlled and that a considerable amount of data can be easily collected. However, their validity and reliability have often been investigated, evaluated and compared to naturalistic data.

In this paper we examine the similarities and differences between the data collected through DCTs and role plays. In particular, we focus on the speech act of complaining. The research questions that we pose are as follows:

- 1 How is the learner speech act production in DCT responses different from role plays?
- 2 What are the differences due to?
- 3 How can we collect naturalistic data for interlanguage pragmatics?

In our paper we first review some studies on data collection instruments in interlanguage pragmatics. Then we describe our instruments, compare the results obtained by them and discuss the benefits of each instrument. In the end we explore some possibilities for collecting naturalistic data, such as use of language corpora and technology, naturalistic observation in class, inclusion of native speakers, and so on.

Keywords: Interlanguage pragmatics, complaints, DCT, role play, naturalistic data.

1 INTRODUCTION

The present study was motivated by the limitations that the foreign language environment imposes on data collection for interlanguage pragmatics research. The data that we use here was drawn from the data collected during the project “The role of explicit instruction in developing pragmatic competence in learning English and German as foreign languages” carried out at Goce Delchev University, Stip, Republic of Macedonia. In the initial stage of the project students’ pragmatic competence was investigated on the basis of their realization of the speech acts of requesting, apologizing and complaining in the language they were learning (English or German). The aim of the project was to pinpoint learners’ failures in the speech act realization so that their performance could be improved. Data were collected by Discourse completion tasks (DCTs) and role plays, supplemented by verbal reports. The main instruments that we used have often been subject to criticism and evaluation, mainly because they provide responses that are not spontaneous. In search of more reliable methods for data collection in interlanguage pragmatics, many researchers look today for more naturalistic data collection methods. Therefore, our aim for this paper is to investigate the advantages and disadvantages of DCTs and role plays in interlanguage pragmatics research and to review some attempts leaning towards more natural data collection.

Discourse completion tasks (DCTs) and role plays are the two instruments most often used for collecting data in interlanguage and cross-cultural pragmatics. DCTs are the most criticised, but the most frequently used type of instrument for measuring pragmatic competence. They were originally used to investigate speech act realization cross-culturally by Blum-Kulka [1] and rapidly gained popularity after the publication of the *Cross Cultural Speech Act Research Project* (CCSARP) by Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper in 1989 [2]. They have been modified since then in many ways.

Another attempt of using technology for creating an environment that would elicit more spontaneous speech is [26]. In her study she presents *Croquelandia* which is a synthetic immersive environment (SIE) (i.e., an MUVE, multiuser virtual environments). It is a collaborative simulation of visiting another culture and using another language (Spanish). "Learners are able to interact with a variety of characters, contexts, and pragmatic systems in an attempt to experiment with different pragmatic behaviors" [26]. Subject of study are apologies and players must know how to apologize to a friend for being late and a professor for missing an exam. They also encounter in-game non-player characters (NPCs) with distinct language varieties and pragmatic preferences, making it necessary to select from a variety of semantic formulae in order to apologize successfully.

All these methods have limitations in what can be studied. In the NRP it was possible to have a conductor and to study compliment responses because these responses are reactive and are the second part of the adjacency pair. It would be more difficult, however, to elicit speech acts that are the first part of the adjacency pair, such as requests, apologies, invitations or complaints unless the participants are somehow directed to produce them. In [25], the subject of study were closings, which are natural to this type of conversation. This method can be useful for studying conversation management, but it would be difficult to elicit a specific speech act. And Sykes's synthetic immersive environment in [26] was specifically made for apologies and requests. For other speech acts or other issues, different SIEs will need to be created.

6 CONCLUSION

The present study compared Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs) and role plays as data elicitation methods across the speech act of complaining. It has shown that there are no big differences in how complaints are formulated in DCT responses and in role plays and that their structure and their content is more influenced by the context than by the method. However, there could be some differences within the responses to the same scenario. These may be explained as a result of structural complexity, learners' views of what is appropriate to say in the relevant context and language transfer. Role plays are more conversational and they have the capacity to reflect more accurately what actually happens in conversation.

However, we do not argue in favour of any of these methods. What we advocate for is the use of more methods, including natural data. Natural data may be good in that they represent spontaneous natural speech, but it is extremely difficult to be collected for interlanguage pragmatics research. The many efforts described in this paper are convincing enough to persuade us that we must not give up. In the course of the project described above, we became fully aware that "[i]ndependent of the research goals of any project, it is important that the researcher make constant attempts to refine the instrument and to consider the possibility of examining speech act data in naturalistic settings" [13].

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