TRADITIONS AND TRANSITIONS

Volume Two

St. Kliment Ohridski University Press

TRADITIONS AND TRANSITIONS

VOLUME TWO

Сборникът се издава по проект на Фонд „Научни изследвания“:
Проект № 8010-1010/2018 за том I.
Проект № 8010-11/2019 за том II.

ISBN 978-954-07-4956-3 (твърда подвързия)
ISBN 978-954-07-5002-6 (pdf)

TRADITIONS AND TRANSITIONS

VOLUME TWO

Selected papers from the conference held
at St. Kliment Ohridski University of Sofia, September 2018

2019
St. Kliment Ohridski University Press

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Marija Kusevska
Goce Delchev University, Shtip, Republic of Macedonia

Abstract: *Globalization has intensified communication among people with different first languages and of different cultures. As a result, misunderstandings and communication breakdowns mark many intercultural encounters as participants rely on the norms of their mother tongue and native culture to interpret and create meaning. Raising intercultural awareness through research in pragmatics can help people overcome misunderstandings and maintain communication. This paper contributes to that trend of enhancing cross-cultural, intercultural and interlanguage pragmatics research. It focuses on the speech act of complaining as it is formulated by American native speakers and by Macedonian learners of English with respect to complaint strategies, complaint frames and speech act modification. The analysis is based on the responses of 48 American native speakers of English and 52 Macedonian learners of English. Data are collected through a Discourse completion test consisting of six scenarios with different contextual parameters. The participants' responses are analysed according to the classification of complaint strategies proposed by Trosborg (1995) and other researchers. The results are obtained though statistical and comparative methods. The main aim is to identify those linguistic units that may cause breakdowns in communication so that they could be incorporated in language education and syllabus design.*

Key terms: *complaints, frames, interlanguage pragmatics, modification, strategies*

1. Introduction

In the process of communicating in a foreign/second language, learners need to be able to successfully navigate through a language and culture that are new to them. Developing pragmatic competence is therefore of enormous importance for their becoming successful communicators in the second/foreign language. Pragmatic competence is closely related to communicative competence (Hymes 1972), which includes both grammar competence and appropriate use of the linguistic means in compliance with the socio-cultural norms. Similarly, Gumprez (in Stalker 1989, 184) defines communicative competence as "the knowledge of linguistic and related communicative conventions that speakers have to create and sustain conversational cooperation, and thus involves both grammar and contextualization." Accordingly, people accommodate linguistic features both consciously and unconsciously in order to adjust the social distance between the producer and the receiver (Stalker, 1989, 182). Kecskes (2014, 62) notes that "[g]rammatical competence is about correctness, while pragmatic competence is more about appropriateness."

In defining pragmatic competence we also find Leech's distinction between sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic knowledge particularly useful. Leech (1983, 10) defines sociopragmatic knowledge as knowledge of the context, recognition and production of illocutionary meaning, distribution of politeness strategies, the speaker-hearer relationship, formality of the situation, social values and cultural beliefs. He describes pragmalinguistic knowledge as "the particular linguistic resources which a given language provides for conveying particular illocutions" (Leech 1983, 10). Thus pragmatic competence means knowledge of socially appropriate language use with respect to the sociopragmatic variables.

The language learner's pragmatic competence according to Kasper and Blum-Kulka (1993, 3) is seen as "a non-native speaker's use and acquisition of linguistic action patterns in a second language." Because sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic rules are not obvious, it often happens in communication that learners do not understand or misunderstand what native speakers say. It is important for us to understand the complexity of this side of language knowledge

if we want to be able to analyse the language use of participants in intercultural communication (Kecskes 2014). The above discussion, therefore, raises the question of what abilities language learners have to acquire to become pragmatically competent. Most of the studies that we have consulted have focused on speech acts (Beebe et al. 1990; Blum-Kulka 1982; Kasper 1989; Liu 2004; Olshtain and Weinbach 1993; Roever 2005; Trosborg 1995; etc.). Other studies have investigated routines, implicature, the ability to perform politeness functions, the ability to perform discourse functions, and the ability to use cultural knowledge. We would like to point out here that research in pragmatics is not a pure linguistic endeavour without any practical application. It is very important for all those who need to communicate with members of other cultural communities when visiting conferences, seminars, business meetings and diplomatic gatherings. It is also important for language education, syllabus design and devising methods appropriate for acquiring pragmatic competences.

Despite the great activity in this field, there is a lack of valid data on the communicative competences of Macedonian learners of English. Motivated by this, we started 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-Shtip, Republic of Macedonia. The aims of the project were to investigate Macedonian foreign language learners' pragmatic competence and to pinpoint their failures in speech act realization, so that their performance could be improved. In this paper we refer to complaining in English.[1]

The speech act of complaining is an expressive speech act. This category includes moral judgements which express the speaker's approval, as well as disapproval, of the behaviour mentioned in the judgement (Trosborg, 1995: 311). It has been established that nonnative speech act behavior can deviate from native behavior in strategy selection, in utterance length, in perception of the seriousness of the offence, and in varying the degree of external and internal modification (Olshtain and Weinbach 1993). It is these categories that we focus on in our research.

[1] A more detailed study of this was published in the European Journal of English Language Teaching 4 (4), 2019, pp. 70–92.

2. Research methodology

The study presented in this paper was based on the following research questions: 1. Do Macedonian learners of English use the same complaint strategies as native speakers of English? 2. Do Macedonian learners of English modify their complaints in an appropriate way? 3. How do native speakers view the complaints produced by Macedonian learners of English?

The corpus of complaints subject to our analysis consists of 233 responses produced by American speakers (AS) and 211 responses produced by Macedonian learners of English (MLE) collected through a Discourse Completion Test (DCT) consisting of five tasks triggering complaints: 1. Unfair grade, 2. Noisy party, 3. Cut in line, 4. Late pick-up, and 5. Damaged car. The scenarios were selected from previous research on complaints (Trosborg 1995). The Macedonian participants were students of English in their second and third year of study, aged between 19 and 24. They were asked to sit the Quick Placement Test designed by Oxford University Press and University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate and their level of proficiency in English was determined. In this study, we further work with the responses of the students who achieved the B2 level as the main participants of the study. The native speakers were students at Arizona State University, USA, who voluntarily agreed to do the DCT. Also, 10 native speakers were invited to comment on some of the responses of MLE. They were asked to mark the acceptable answers and to comment on some of the unacceptable ones.

In coding the speech act, we relied on taxonomies from other research (Aijmer 1996; Brown and Levinson 1987; Koshik 2005; Trosborg 1995). The following complaint strategies were identified: hints (*I was wondering … do you know what time it is?*), expressions of disapproval and annoyance (*Excuse me, sir, can I go over this exam with you? I don't agree with the grade.*), accusations (*You dented my car. Fix it.*) and blames (*Why didn't you tell me about the dent?*). Because complaints are face-threatening and are often seen as non-polite, they are often modified internally and externally. Internal modification includes lexical (*just, a little bit, kind of, sort of, perhaps, I think*) and syntactic downgraders (questions, past tense, negative constructions, hypothetical constructions). External modification includes supportive

moves that justify the complaint such as initiators (greetings, address terms, apologies), preparators (*I'm your next door neighbour*), disarmers (*I understand that it means a lot to you*), grounders (*I have class tomorrow and I'm trying to study*), requests for repair (*Can we go over my exam?Please turn down the music?*) and threats (*Otherwise you'll be hearing from my attorney*).

3. Results and discussion

In what follows, we look at the complaint strategies, modifications of complaints, and length of utterances in MLE and AS complaints. We also draw some conclusions on the basis of their comparison and refer to some comments made by the native speakers.

Complaint strategies

Our research showed that AS and MLE formulated their complaints using the same strategies and that these strategies were distributed in a similar way. For both groups, disapproval/annoyance was by far the most frequently used strategy. The second most common strategy for both groups was the accusation strategy. AS produced more blames than MLE. Hints had the smallest number of occurrence for both groups.

(1) Could you tell me why I got this grade? (AS disapproval)

(2) I would like to see my test. I've studied hard for this exam and I think there must be some mistake. (MLE disapproval)

(3) What did you hit? Are you an idiot? (AS accusation)

(4) What's the problem? What did you do to my car? I told you to drive slowly and carefully. You are not fair. I am not believing you anymore. (MLE accusation)

(5) You're unreliable. Now I'm late for my class. (AS blame)

(6) You are not fair. I missed the school because of you. Next time be more responsible. (MLE blame)

Internal modification

The amount of internal modification in both groups was very small. The number of downgraders observed in AS complaints is somewhat

higher than in MLE, while the number of upgraders is somewhat higher in MLE complaints.

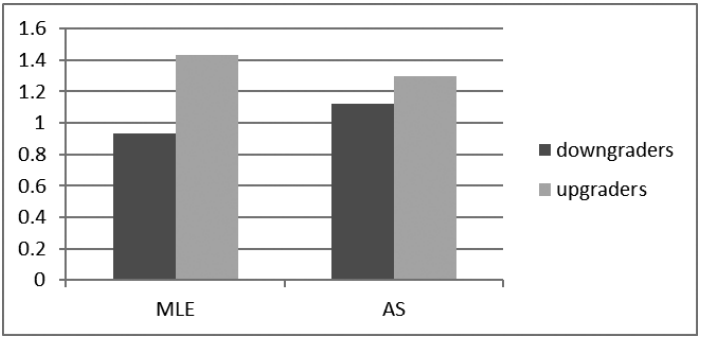

Figure 1 Distribution of downgraders and upgraders per group

The most common modifier in both groups was *please*. There were also examples with *just, a little/a bit* and *I (don't) think*. In addition to these, AS used hedges (*somewhat, anyway*) and the subjectivizer *I (don't) feel*. For grammatical modification, both groups used hypothetical constructions (*I appreciate you picking me up, but if you can't be here on time, I need to make other arrangements*). AS also used negative constructions (*I am not sure why I got this grade*) and past tense (*Why is my grade so low? I thought I did well*). Most common upgraders in both groups were *so* and *just*. MLE also used *really* and *very*, which were identified as two examples of each in the AS complaints.

External modification

As we pointed out in the previous section, the amount of internal modification in both groups was very small. Their preferred way of making their complaints more convincing was by applying external modification, i.e. producing supportive moves. Most commonly, native speaker responses consisted of one or two moves, whereas MLE used three or more moves. Figure 2 shows that in both groups most of the supportive moves were grounders, followed by initiators, and requests for repair. The percentage of preparators, disarmers and threats was very small.

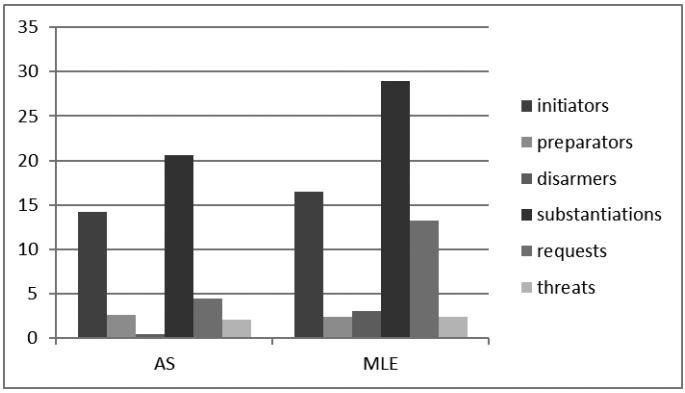

Figure 2 Distribution of external modifiers per group

Our findings showed that both groups formulated their complaints in a similar way. However, some of the complaints produced by MLE were found inappropriate by the native speakers. We would like to draw attention to some of the reasons that led to this.

Cultural perception

In spite of all the similarity, we found out that the contents of the responses of the two groups were significantly different in the Late pick-up and the Damaged car scenarios. In the late pick-up scenario, the AS used sarcasm, insulting words (*incompetent, unreliable, dumb ass, asshole, dam*), and idiomatic expressions (*what the hell, what the heck, dude*). In contrast, in many of the responses of the MLE, the expression of disapproval was followed by reconciliation (*Five minutes is not a big deal; You're a little late, but it doesn't matter. We'll be on time*). The complaint perspective was also different. While most of the AS responses were formulated from the *I*-perspective, those of the MLE were formulated from the *we*-perspective (*I'm really gonna be late* vs. *We're gonna be late*). In the Damaged car scenario, MLE showed more concern about the physical and mental state of their interlocutor (*What was the problem? Is everything OK? Did you have a car accident? Are you OK? Because you left the car and didn't say anything.*) A possible explanation may be that these two situations are viewed differently in the two cultures. Namely, unpunctuality is more tolerable in Macedonia than in western cultures. And the well-being of a friend is

very important even if s/he has damaged the car. The syllabus should, therefore, include discussions on how native speakers view different situations and put them in contrast with how these situations are viewed in the learners' culture. Having in mind the wide use of English as lingua franca, it may be necessary to discuss how certain situations are viewed not only by the native speakers and the learners but also by members of other cultures.

Utterance length

A difference between AS and MLE which is immediately apparent from the results is the length of responses. In all tasks, MLE produced more strategies than AS, 2.7 moves and 1.4 moves, respectively. Most of the supportive moves, however, were reasons for the complaints. Although Macedonian learners use a larger number of strategies per response, this does not make them more efficient. On the contrary, they sound more argumentative and aggressive.

(7) Excuse me, professor! Could you explain my results from the final examination? Because I'm really sure that I deserve a higher mark. I know all the questions and I know I answered them correctly.

(8) Can you turn off your music? I don't think this's an appropriate time for a party since you are living in a building with neighbours. I'm trying to study, I have a test tomorrow. I politely asked you and if you don't turn it off I will call the police.

Complaint modification

MLE failed to appropriately modify their complaints due to the following:

You-perspective: MLE produced more hearer oriented requests with *can* than the AS: *Can you explain my grade, please?* Some of the native speakers who checked our answers commented on this use of *can* and corrected it to *could*. And even noted that those responses imply that the professor was wrong and would put him/her on the defensive. Their preferred responses were formulated with *can/could we* (*Can we go over this? Can we please discuss my grade?*).

Embedding: This research has also pointed out that the MLE have problems embedding their requests and their questions using past tense and interrogative forms (*I was wondering; I just wanted to ask if; do you think; is there any way*), as well as expressions used in conversational style (*we better*).

Negative constructions: Also, MLE do not use negative constructions in the same way that AS use them. In many cases in which AS prefer negative constructions, MLE use positive constructions, often modified with intensifiers: *I don't think you graded me fairly* (AS) vs. *I really think I deserve a higher mark* (MLE); *I'm not sure why I got this grade* (AS) vs. *I'm really sure that I deserve a higher grade* (MLE). MLE lack the knowledge of how to apply negation in a way that makes complaints milder and more diplomatic.

Modal verbs: It is also possible to notice some differences in how MLE formulated their *want/need* statements and how they used modal verbs. We were able to notice that MLE preferred making *want* statements, whereas AS showed preference for *need* statements. *Want*-statements express the speaker's wishes directly. *I want to talk about this dent in my car* (MLE) is direct and assertive. They are normally impolite in their unmodified form (Trosborg 1995, 202) and may be softened by *please*, past tense and other mitigating device. A more tentative correspondence is *I'd like to*: *I'd like to discuss my grade*. *Need* is also used for directly expressing the speaker's needs, but is not as forceful as *want*: *You need to pay for damages* (AS). In general, MLE used stronger modal verbs than AS, including the verb *must*.

I think: I think can be both a mitigating and an intensifying device. In examples in which it is accompanied by intensifying devices such as strong or medium modal verbs or supportive acts giving reason or evidence, *I think* sounds strong and assertive and indicates that the speaker does not intend to soften the complaint. Such were the utterances produced by AS in the Cut-in line tasks: *Excuse me, I've been waiting for an hour. I don't think it's fair for you to cut in*. *I think* sounds more

tentative when used in the past tense (*I thought you were coming at 8.30*) or with modal verbs (*I think there may have been a mistake on my grade; I think there might be a mistake*). However, in all complaints of MLE *I think* was used with strong or medium modal verbs and other intensifiers (*I think there must be some mistake; I really think that I should have a higher mark*), or with statements expressing reasons or other arguments (*Professor I really think I deserve a higher mark for this final. I`ve studied so hard and I`m pretty sure I do not have that much mistakes*).

Vagueness against precision: This is perhaps the most striking difference between the utterances of the two groups of speakers. This difference is expressed by all the features mentioned above, but also by the choice of lexis. This is supported by the presence of *try*, *feel* and *guess* in the native data and their absence from the non-native data: *Can you please try to keep the noise down; You're late, now I will be late for my class. Try to be on time.; I don't feel right about it. Try* and *feel* are not used in this context with their literal meanings. Rather, they are used in line with negative politeness – not to force or impose.

4. Native speakers' perceptions

The most common remark that native speakers made about some of the complaints made by the MLE was that they are impolite, offensive or harsh. Even if they are grammatically accurately formulated, they often sound aggressive. One of the reasons for this is the unusual length of the responses. Their complaints become wordy and repetitive, appear less efficient and more prone to argumentation, which often threatens the face of the hearer. Unlike them, native speakers tend to be specific, efficient and polite.

Many of the answers marked as inappropriate were formulated with the modal verbs *could* and *would*. The native speakers often corrected *could* into *would*. So *Could you stop talking?; Could you please be quiet?* were corrected into *Would you stop talking?; Would you please be quiet?* In some of the complaints the word *please* was taken out while in others it was added. This proves that it is difficult to generalize and that the use of language means is context dependent.

Other comments referred to the following:

– *You have made a mistake* is direct and places the guilt on the professor, thus putting him/her on the offensive. Native speakers suggested change of focus*: Excuse me, there may have been a mistake in my grade*.

– *Will you be kind* is both grammatically and pragmatically wrong; even if *will* is changed into *would,* it would sound inappropriate and awkward;

– *Don't want to trouble you, but I believe you have made a mistake here* also sounds rude. First, the apology at the beginning sounds insincere; second, the speaker is again focusing on the interlocutor.

– Some MLE used the expressions *keep quiet for a while*, *keep your voice down*, which the native speakers identified as expressions appropriate to be used in the classroom.

– Terms of address also seem to cause problems for the learners. They sound inappropriate when addressing a professor, a stranger, etc. So when a professor is addressed with *Excuse me*, it should be followed by his/her second name, e.g. *Excuse me, Dr. Adams*. Also, *Mr.* and *Mrs.* are always used with the second name of the person, e.g. *Mr./Mrs. Adams*. When addressing a stranger, *Sir* and *Madam* are more appropriate.

5. Materials design

The information obtained through the research in the first phase of our project will be further used for designing e-learning modules for addressing the deficiencies described in the first stage of the project. The instruction will follow a form of an e-course posted on the e-learning platform of Goce Delcev University, Shtip. It will consist of self-study lessons created for the purpose of improving learners' awareness and production of the speech act of complaining.

The modules will include two types of activities: activities for raising learners' awareness of the pragmatic meanings conveyed by specific linguistic means which native speakers use, and hands-on activities that enable learners to apply the acquired knowledge. Thus, the instruction will comprise the following components:

– Awareness-raising through note taking, model dialogues, video analysis, summary writing, discussions of concepts and situations, speech act analysis;

– Metapragmatic explanations and quizzes on sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic aspects of making complaints; metapragmatic judgment tasks to evaluate appropriateness of the utterances;

– Practice exercises including substitutions, reformulations, fill-in exercises;

– Production activities such as responding in situations with different social parameters.

The following norms are to be mentioned:

1. Each speech act, including the act of complaining, is realized in a situation that is specific for the culture of the target language; it depends how the society views the offence: in the USA, for example, cutting the line is very offensive; in Macedonia, it happens quite often and people are less prone to react to it;

2. Complaints vary according to the age, sex and social status of the hearer and speaker as well as their relationship; they also vary depending on how serious the offence is (if someone damaged your old computer that you were trying to get rid of anyway, or your new camera that you were very proud of);

3. Complaints need to be specific and effective; speakers are usually relatively straightforward, not vague;

4. The dominant negative politeness in English (Brown and Levinson 1987; Ogiermann 2009; Fink and Félix-Brasdefer 2015) often requires complainers to mitigate their complaints by framing them as questions or requests and by modifying them externally and internally; it also requires avoidance of the you-perspective which openly places the guilt on the hearer; however, if speakers find it necessary they can also make their complaints stronger;

5. Complaints should not be oververbose: the goal needs to be achieved with the right amount of speech, not more and not less than it is necessary; complaints should not be formulated as long streams of words that can be trapped into criticism or evaluation of someone's behaviour.

6. Conclusion

A great part of foreign language teaching and learning today is directed towards preparing students for taking international examinations.

More time is devoted to teaching and learning exam strategies than to learning communication strategies and social contents. The aim of this project is to look beyond this format of language learning and to investigate MLE pragmatic competence and their readiness for real life communication. Students' pragmatic competence was analysed on the basis of their realization of the speech acts of complaining. The findings of the research revealed certain gaps in the performance of B2 learners and will be used as guidelines for designing a syllabus and learning modules to address those gaps. Pragmatic competence is not static; it is constantly developing and changing. Language learners would certainly benefit from exposure in the second language environment. But this is not always possible. We believe that meaningful classroom activities may raise L2 pragmatic awareness and provide learners with necessary information and choices to help them become more competent users of the target language.

This paper is a modest attempt to expand the interests, contents and EFL methodology in the Republic of Macedonia. We are aware that our resources were limited, our data collection instruments have some serious constraints, and the number of participants should be larger. Also, our research is limited to comparing MLE language behaviour with only one variety of English. Should we compare it to other native speakers (British, Australian, Canadian, etc.) the results might be different. In spite of all its limitations, we hope that this study will be a motivation for further research focusing on speech acts, politeness, formulaic expressions, implicatures and conversational and discourse analysis. It is also necessary to recognize and clearly acknowledge the connection between research findings and their practical applications for syllabus design, material development, and intercultural communication guidelines.

On the whole, much more work needs to be done to raise the awareness of the importance of introducing pragmatics in language teaching and learning. Not only is it important to enlarge the pool of studies and thus enlarge the knowledge of pragmatics but also to introduce the study of pragmatics in foreign language teachers' education. This is especially important for non-native teachers, who themselves may not be aware of the principles guiding the language behaviour in the culture whose language they teach.

References:

Aijmer, Karin. 1996. *Conversational routines in English: Convention and creativity.* New York, NY: Addison Wesley Longman Limited.

Beebe, L. M., T. Takahashi, and R Uliss-Weltz. 1990. "Pragmatic transfer in ESL refusals." In *On the development of communicative competence in a second language*, edited by R. Scarcella, E. Anderson and S. D Krashen, 55–73. New York: Newbury House.

Blum-Kulka, Shoshana. 1982. "Learning how to say what you mean in a second language: A study of speech act performance of learners of Hebrew as a second language." *Applied Linguistics* 3, no. 1: 29-59.

Brown, Penelope, and Stephen Levinson. 1987. *Politeness. Some universals in language usage.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fink , Lisa N., and César J. Félix-Brasdefer. 2015. Pragmalinguistic Variation and Barista Perceptions in US Café Service Encounters. In *Researching sociopragmatic variability*, by Kate Beeching and Helen Woodfield, 19–48. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Hymes, Dell H. 1972. "On Communicative Competence." In *Sociolinguistics*, edited by John B. Pride & Jennet Holmes, 269-293. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Kasper, Gabriele. 1989. "Variation in interlanguage speech act realization." In *Variation in second language acquisition: Discourse and pragmatics*, by Susan Gas, Carolyn Madden, Denis Preston and Larry Selinker, 37–58. Clevedon & Philadelphia: Multilingual Matters.

Kasper, Gabriele, and Shoshana Blum-Kulka. 1993. *Interlanguage pragmatics.* New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Koshik, Irene. 2005. *Beyond rhetorical questions: Assertive questions in everyday interaction.* Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Leech, Geoffrey. 1983. *Principles of pragmatics.* London: Longman.

Liu, Jianda. 2004. "Measuring interlanguage pragmatic knowledge of Chinese EFL learners." PhD dissertation. City University of Hong Kong.

Ogiermann, E. 2009. *On apologising in negative and positive politeness cultures.* Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Olshtain, Elite, and Liora Weinbach. 1993. "Interlanguage features of the speech act of complaining." In *Interlanguage pragmatics*, edited by Gabriele Kasper and Shoshana Blum-Kulka, 108–122. New York: Oxford University Press,.

Roever, Carsten. 2005. ""That's not fair!" Fairness, bias, and differential item functioning in language testing." Retrieved August 18, 2016, from the Uni-

versity of Hawai'i System Web site: http://www2.hawaii.edu/~roever/brownbag.pdf.
Stalker, James C. 1989. "Communicative competence, pragmatic functions and accommodation." *Applied Linguistics* 10(2): 183–193.
Trosborg, Anna. 1995. *Interlanguage Pragmatics: Requests, Complaints, and Apologies.* Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co.