

Pragmatic and Discourse Markedness Hypothesis

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1. Introduction

This paper arose from my curiosity about the contradictions in the literature on pragmatic and discourse transfer. While pragmatic and discourse transfer was found in learners of a second language (L2) from certain first language (L1) backgrounds, it was not found in those from others. Learners of an L2 from the same L1 background may exhibit pragmatic and discourse transfer in a certain communicative act, but not in others. As studies showing these contradictory instances in the literature were reviewed, some patterns were found to take shape. From such observations, I will propose the “Pragmatic and Discourse Markedness Hypothesis”. Pragmatic and discourse markedness will be illustrated with suggested marked and unmarked pragmatic and discourse features in communicative act performance.

Pragmatic and discourse transfer refers to the learners’ carrying over their L1 sociocultural and linguistic norms of politeness and/or appropriateness into their L2 performance of communicative acts. As often used by researchers in the field (Beebe et al. 1990), the term “pragmatic and discourse transfer” herein implies negative pragmatic and discourse transfer.

The literature on pragmatic and discourse transfer is contradictory as to whether or not transfer governs the production of communicative acts by non-native speakers (NNSs) or L2 learners. Pragmatic and discourse transfer as expressed in strategy selection, ie the strategy one chooses to realize a certain communicative act, will be discussed. Examples of strategy selection are: choosing to be direct or indirect in the communicative act of complaining, requesting or refusing; and selecting the strategy type of denying or accepting a compliment.

2. Pragmatic and discourse transfer of direct and indirect strategies

2.1. The contradiction in complaining

2.1.1. Transfer

In the communicative act of complaining, the speaker expresses disapproval, negative feeling, censure or annoyance towards a past or ongoing action whose consequences are perceived to be the hearer’s responsibility (Boxer 1993, Olshtain and Weinbach 1993). The terms “direct” and “indirect” refer to the explicit expression of dissatisfaction or annoyance, and the implicit expression of it respectively.

In terms of directness versus indirectness in complaining strategy selection, German native speakers (NSs) were often found to be more direct than English NSs (Hinkel 1996). DeCapua (1989) found that when complaining in English, German learners of English exhibited L1 pragmatic and discourse transfer with reference to the degree of directness of their complaints. German learners' complaints in English were found to be noticeably more direct than those by English NSs.

In another form of complaining- chastising, pragmatic and discourse transfer was also found in the interlanguage of Turkish learners of English (Dogancay-Aktuna and Kamisli 1997). In their native culture, Turks exhibited the selection of the overtly direct strategies of criticizing and warning the lower status person whereas Americans were less directly critical in chastising and showed more tolerance towards the wrongdoing. When Turkish learners of English chastised a lower status person in English, they also selected the overtly direct criticizing strategy, which made their chastisements different from the target language ones and exemplified a case of negative pragmatic and discourse transfer.

These studies showed evidence of pragmatic and discourse transfer of the direct strategies in complaining.

2.1.2. Non-transfer

As opposed to the above studies, other studies (Murphy and Neu 1996, Tokano 1997) about NNSs' complaints in their L2 did not show pragmatic and discourse transfer. Murphy and Neu (1996) studied complaints in English made by Korean NSs. It is generally believed that like in other Asian cultures, eg Chinese in which "people in general avoid face-to-face complaints unless absolutely necessary" (Du 1995: 168), Korean speakers are also indirect and tend to avoid confrontation such as in complaining. Korean speakers of English were thus expected to complain less directly than Americans. But contrary to expectation, data in Murphy and New's (1990) study indicated that Korean speakers of English complained more directly than Americans, and their complaints even sounded like criticism.

Complaints were also studied in the case of Japanese learners of English (Tokano 1997). Japanese culture apparently shows a tendency to avoid complaining (Cohen 1996). According to Cohen (1997: 156), "a Japanese speaker would avoid performing the speech act of complaining" or do so indirectly. However, Tokano (1997) found that Japanese learners of English complained directly in English and even demanded immediate redress whereas Americans tended to revoke the hearer's willingness to provide redress.

These studies did not provide evidence of pragmatic and discourse transfer of indirectness in the communicative act of complaining.

2.2. The contradiction in requesting

2.2.1. Transfer

The same kind of contradiction was found in requesting. When studying requests by Zulu speaking learners of English in South Africa, Kasanga (1998) found that learners' performance diverged from NSs' because learners made too direct requests compared to those by NSs. Such use of overtly direct requests was attributed to L1 pragmatic and

discourse transfer. Not only in requesting but also in refusals to requests, pragmatic and discourse transfer of the L1 sociocultural norms of directness was found. Ramos (1991) studied refusals to requests, invitations and offers made by Puerto Rican teenagers speaking English and found that Spanish speakers transferred their direct communicative behaviour into English. As a result, their English refusals appeared to be more direct than NSs'.

2.2.2. Non-transfer

However, also in requesting, Beebe and Takahashi (1989: 120) found that Japanese learners of English in America "did not conform to prevalent stereotypes about their indirectness and their inexplicitness". The Japanese learners did not transfer their L1 indirectness into their L2 performance.

2.3. An observed pattern

The above contradiction in the overview of pragmatic and discourse transfer in communicative acts like complaining and requesting by NNSs revealed a pattern. It seemed that when the NNSs' native language and culture were oriented to the direct strategies, and their target language and culture were more indirect in terms of strategy selection, they tended to transfer their L1 directness to their L2 performance, for example in the cases of German speakers of English (DeCapua 1989), Turkish learners of English (Dogancay-Aktuna and Kamisli 1997), Zulu speaking learners of English (Kasanga 1998). However, when the NNSs' native language and culture showed a preference for the indirect strategies, and the target language and culture were more direct as regards strategy selection, they tended not to transfer their L1 indirectness into their L2 performance, for instance in the cases of Korean speakers of English (Murphy and Neu 1996), Japanese learners of English (Beebe and Takahashi 1989, Tokano 1997).

So it appears that direct strategies are more likely to be transferred than indirect ones. With reference to transferability, simply defined as the likelihood of transfer (Takahashi 1993, 1996), it could be said that direct strategies are more transferable than indirect ones. Before attempting an explanation for this, it is worthwhile to consider another contradiction in the literature of pragmatic and discourse transfer in the communicative act of responding to compliments.

3. Pragmatic and discourse transfer of denying and accepting strategies in responding to compliments

3.1. The contradiction

The literature on pragmatic and discourse transfer in compliment responses (CRs) is contradictory as to whether or not pragmatic and discourse transfer plays a major role in governing NNSs' L2 CRs. Below is a table summarizing a number of studies to be reviewed and later cited in the explanation.

Summary of studies about pragmatic and discourse transfer in CRs

Study	Informants' L1 and L2	Results
Liu (1995)	L1: Chinese L2: English	Pragmatic and discourse transfer of the denying strategies
Jeon (1996)	L1: Korea L2: English	
Yu (1999)	L1: Chinese L2: English	
Saito and Beecken (1997)	L1: Am English L2: Japanese	Pragmatic and discourse non-transfer of the accepting strategies
Baba (1999)	L1: Am English L2: Japanese	

3.1.1. Transfer of the denying strategies in CRs

With reference to responding to compliments, in English, a simple CR- “thank you”- is preferred as described in Johnson’s etiquette book (1979). The preference for a simple “thank you” in replying to compliments was demonstrated in American English (Knapp et al., 1984; Barnlund and Araki 1985, Herbert, 1986, 1989, Saito and Beecken 1997), and in Australian English (Soenarso 1988). Herbert (1989) made a generalization about CRs by all English NSs as follows.

Virtually all speakers of English, when questioned on this matter in general (e.g. “What does one say after being complimented?”) or particular (e.g. “What would you say if someone admired your shirt?”) terms, agree that the correct response is thank you (Herbert 1989: 5).

In Chinese culture, however, people often deny a compliment with *Not really*’ (Liu 1995) or *I’m not*’ (Yu 1999). Evidence of pragmatic and discourse transfer was found in CRs by Chinese learners of English (Liu 1995, Yu 1999). Liu (1995) found that Chinese learners of English transferred their L1 strategies of denial in responding to compliments in English and chose to say for example ‘*Not really*’ instead of ‘*Thank you*’. Yu’s (1999) study showed that when responding to compliments in English, Chinese learners of English behaved like Chinese NSs and rejected more often than accepted compliments in their CRs. They used routinized denials, eg ‘*I’m not*’, rather than appreciation tokens, eg ‘*Thank you*’. According to Yu (1999), such routinized denials might be considered impolite or even rude from the Western viewpoint.

CRs by Korean learners of English also showed the same type of pragmatic and discourse transfer (Jeon 1996). Jeon found that unlike Americans English NSs, Korean NSs often denied a compliment rather than accept it; and they transferred the L1 denying strategies into English when performing the communicative act of responding to compliments in English.

Studies like those by Liu (1995), Jeon (1996) and Yu (1999) exemplified pragmatic and discourse transfer of the denying strategies in CRs.

3.1.2. Non-transfer of accepting strategies in CRs

By contrast, other studies did not show pragmatic and discourse transfer of the accepting strategies in CRs. The results of Saito and Beecken's study (1997) indicated that American learners of Japanese did not transfer their L1 use of accepting strategies, eg *'Thank you'*, into their L2 CRs. In Baba's (1999) study about CRs, American learners of Japanese were also found not to transfer their L1 accepting strategies in responding to compliments about self. Instead, they adopted the Japanese formal CRs of refusals and even overused them.

These studies show examples of pragmatic and discourse non-transfer of the accepting strategies in CRs.

3.2. Another observed pattern

It was observed that while studies of CRs in English by Asian learners of English (Liu 1995, Yu 1999- Chinese, Jeon 1996- Korean) showed pragmatic and discourse transfer of the denying strategies, studies of CRs in Japanese by American learners of Japanese (Saito and Beecken 1997, Baba 1999) did not show evidence of transfer of the accepting strategies. It seemed that when the learners' native culture showed a preference for the denying strategies and the target culture was oriented to the accepting strategies in responding to compliments, they tended to transfer their L1 denying strategies into their L2 CRs. However, when the learners' native culture was associated with the accepting strategies and the target culture featured the frequent use of the denying strategies in responding to compliments, their L2 CRs did not show pragmatic and discourse transfer of their L1 accepting strategies.

The denying strategies thus appear to be more likely to be transferred than the accepting strategies in the communicative act of responding to compliments. In other words, as regards transferability, the denying CR strategies may be more transferable than the accepting CR strategies.

4. Initial explanations for the contradictions

Initial attempts at explaining the observed patterns suggested that they might be attributed to methodology of data collection or transfer of training. With reference to methodology, research into communicative act performance such as the above cited studies have been based on the data collected through questionnaires, role-plays or real-life observation. Each of these methods of data collection has been subject to criticism. Questionnaire data, which have been used in most studies in this research area, are written and thus cannot be automatically equated with actual production data. Role-play data may not be naturalistic enough. Natural data collected through observation of communication in real life do not

allow the control of social variables. Therefore, the contradictions in research findings discussed above may in part be explained by the different methods of data collection applied across studies and by the disadvantages of these methods. However, the contradictions observed were found to fall into noticeable patterns as presented, and each of these patterns was not formed on only studies based on questionnaires, role-plays or observation. Moreover, these methods also have their advantages. For example, questionnaire data yield the generalization of semantic formulae of communicative act data and strategies in communicative act performance (Beebe and Cummings 1996). According to Blum-Kulka et al. (1989: 13), “using written elicitation techniques enables us to obtain more stereotyped responses”, and “it is precisely this more stereotyped aspect of speech behavior that we need for cross-cultural comparability”. Spoken role-play data approach naturalistic data and are generally viewed to be a better candidate than questionnaire data in this research area (Kasper and Dahl 1991). So methodology in the studies cited does not appear to be the sole explanation for the contradictions presented and is not the justified account for the observed patterns found.

The observed patterns may also be attributed to transfer of training. Transfer of training refers to elements of the interlanguage that may result from the training process in the L2 teaching (Selinker 1972). Transfer of training may also account for the overgeneralization of the L2 norms, eg Asian learners’ overgeneralization of American directness (Murphy and New 1996, Tokano 1997) and American learners’ overgeneralization of Japanese refusal to compliments (Saito and Beecken 1997, Baba, 1999). Transfer of training appears to be a plausible explanation. However, it can be argued that if Asian learners of English could adopt the target language direct strategies and did not transfer their L1 indirectness in communicative acts such as complaining and requesting (Beebe and Takahashi 1989, Murphy and Neu 1996, Tokano 1997), why learners of English from the L1 backgrounds which show a preference for more direct strategies compared to the L2, ie English, could not (DeCapua 1989, Ramos 1991, Dogancay-Aktuna and Kamisli 1997, Kasanga 1998). It can also be questioned that if American learners of Japanese could adopt their Japanese appropriate CRs and refrain from transferring their L1 pragmatics and discourse in replying to compliments (Saito and Beecken 1997, Baba 1999), why Chinese and Korean learners of English could not (Liu 1995, Jeon 1996, Yu 1999). Moreover, it is worth noticing that Asian learners of English, eg those from the Chinese or Korean L1 background showed pragmatic and discourse transfer of the denying strategies in the communicative act of responding to compliments (Liu 1995, Jeon 1996, Yu, 1999), but little pragmatic and discourse transfer of the indirect strategies in other communicative acts, eg complaining, requesting (Beebe and Takahashi 1989, Murphy and Neu 1996, Tokano 1997). Thus the explanation based solely on training does not seem to be a satisfactory account for the observed patterns. A more plausible explanation can be the pragmatic and discourse markedness of strategies in performing communicative acts.

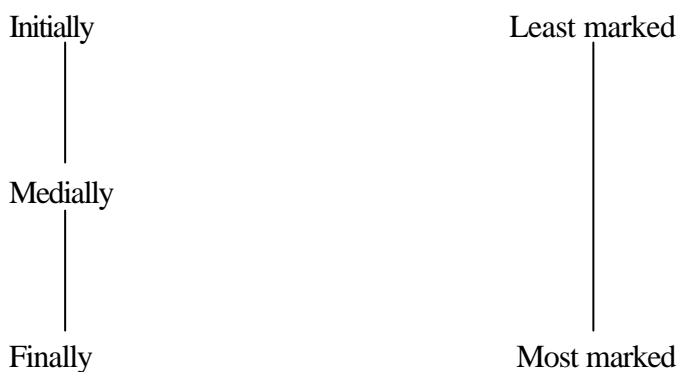
5. Definition of markedness

Universal typological markedness was first introduced into the acquisition of L2 linguistics by Eckman (1977, 1985). According to Eckman (1977),

A phenomenon A in some languages is more marked than B if the presence of A in a language implies the presence of B; but the presence of B does *not* imply the presence of A (Eckman 1977: 320)

The typology of languages (Eckman 1977) such as English, Arabic, Swedish, German, Polish, Japanese, Catalan, Corsican, Korean, etc., showed that the presence of a contrast between voiced and voiceless obstruents in the word-final position implied such a contrast in the word-medial position, which, in turn, implied such a contrast in the word-initially position, but not the other way around. So according to Eckman (1977), the presence of the voice contrast word-finally is more marked than that word-medially, which is more marked than that word-initially. This is illustrated in the following diagram.

Voice Contrast Hierarchy



(Eckmann 1977: 322)

Based on the notion of markedness, the Markedness Differential Hypothesis (Eckmann 1977) states that the areas of the L2 which differ from the L1 and are more marked than the L1 will be difficult; the relative degree of difficulty corresponds to the relative degree of markedness; and the areas of the L1 which are different from the L1 but are not more marked than the L1 will not be difficult.

6. Definition of pragmatic and discourse markedness

Markedness in pragmatics and discourse may not be the same as what it is in other areas of linguistics such as phonology, morphology and syntax as defined above. It is because in pragmatics and discourse, there may not be a clear-cut boundary between phenomena in order to establish that the presence of one implies the presence of the other. In phonology, the voiced and voiceless obstruents are “as different as chalk and cheese”. But in pragmatics, there is no fixed criteria to separate direct and indirect strategies in performing communicative acts. There may be a general agreement in a speech community, culture or society as to what is considered direct or indirect. However, the boundary between directness and indirectness is subjective and varies from culture to culture, even from person to person. For example, we might agree that a request such as *‘Please close the window’* or *‘Would you answer the door please?’* is more direct than *‘It’s cold in here’* or *‘The doorbell is ringing. And I’m on the phone’*. However, in a certain context and to certain people, the statement *‘It’s cold in here’* is likely to be perceived as a sufficiently direct request.

Therefore, Eckman’s (1977) definition of markedness may not be applicable in pragmatics, discourse, as well as interlanguage pragmatics. In these areas of research, one way to

define markedness is that an unmarked form may be more common or usual (and is thus more likely to be transferred) whereas a marked form may be less common or usual (and is therefore less likely to be transferred). This definition is illustrated with the following suggested marked and unmarked pragmatic and discourse features.

7. Suggested marked and unmarked pragmatic and discourse features

My speculation is that the indirect strategies in communicative acts such as complaining and requesting are more marked than the direct ones. This speculation finds support in previous research showing that indirectness is acquired later than directness both in first language acquisition (Ervin-Tripp 1977) and in second language acquisition (Preston 1989). An interpretation of such findings is that directness is easier to be acquired and probably more common or usual across languages and cultures. It is thus more unmarked.

I would also speculate that the accepting strategies in CRs such as “Thank you” are more marked than the denying strategies in CRs such as “No, no, I’m not”. The denying CR strategies appear to be generally preferred and more common or usual than the accepting CR strategies across languages and cultures (Pomerantz 1978, Pomerantz 1984, Davidson 1984, Davidson 1990, Liu 1995, Jeon 1996, Yu 1999, Baba 1999). Therefore, in light of the above definition of pragmatic and discourse markedness, the denying CR strategies are more unmarked.

In brief, it is suggested that the indirect strategies in communicative acts such as complaining and requesting may be more marked than the direct ones, and that the accepting CR strategy appears to be more marked than the denying ones. This does not mean that the accepting CR strategy is more indirect than the denying strategy.

8. Pragmatic and Discourse Markedness Hypothesis

Based on the observed patterns, the redefined notion of pragmatics and discourse markedness, and the suggested marked as well as unmarked pragmatic and discourse features presented above, the Pragmatic and Discourse Markedness Hypothesis is proposed as follows.

- When the socio-cultural norms in the native language/culture and the target language/culture differ with reference to a certain preferred strategy in performing a certain communicative act, and when the strategy considered as the appropriate norm in the target culture/society is more marked than that in the native culture/society, the language learners will have more difficulty in adopting the L2 norm and are more likely to transfer their L1 less marked strategy in performing that communicative act.
- When the socio-cultural norms in the native language/culture and the target language/culture differ with reference to a certain preferred strategy in performing a certain communicative act, and when the strategy considered as the appropriate norm in the target culture/society is less marked than that in the native culture/society, the language learners will have less difficulty in adopting the L2 norm and are less likely to transfer their L1 more marked strategy in performing that communicative act.

Specifically, pragmatic and discourse transfer is more likely when the L1 language/culture is oriented to the indirect strategies in communicative acts such as complaining and requesting, or the accepting strategies in CRs, and the L2 language/culture shows a preference for the direct strategies in these acts, or the denying strategies in CRs respectively.

9. Conclusion and implications

In conclusion, the purpose of this paper has been to propose the Pragmatic and Discourse Markedness Hypothesis, and the marked and unmarked pragmatic and discourse features. This hypothesis contributes to the explanation of the contradictions in the literature on pragmatic and discourse transfer. Although the proposed hypothesis is based on a limited number of examples, it is characterized by observed patterns whose existence is ordered enough to be worth researchers' attention.

In second language acquisition research, the Pragmatic and Discourse Markedness Hypothesis implies the practical interpretation that more attention should be drawn to the learning and teaching of L2 strategies which are more marked than the L1 counterparts in realizing the same communicative acts. It may also help predict the areas of difficulty in acquiring L2 pragmatics and discourse as well as prevent possible negative pragmatic and discourse transfer. Another implication of the hypothesis is that L2 learners may follow a universal developmental sequence in acquiring L2 pragmatics and discourse, in which the unmarked pragmatic and discourse features are likely to be acquired before the marked ones.

In cross-cultural pragmatics and discourse, it is hoped that the hypothesis as well as suggested marked and unmarked pragmatic and discourse features may initiate an exploration into the world languages to formulate the typology of marked and unmarked features among socio-cultural norms across languages and cultures.

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