Sources of Pragmatic Failure by
Japanese EFL Learners
——A Discussion of Greetings and Leave-Taking——

Meredith Stephens
(Received on May 9, 2003)

Introduction

In a familiar context it is relatively straightforward to convey one's meaning in an acceptable manner. In an unfamiliar context this becomes increasingly complex because the rules of what constitutes acceptable behaviour may be at variance with the rules that the speaker is familiar with (Yule, 1996, p. 5). These differences exist between all languages and even between the different subcultures within a particular speech community, according to the region, ethnicity, political affiliations and class (Thomas, 1983, p. 91). Clearly, differences between Japanese and English discourse are considerable. Barnlund argues,

> This contrast in personality structure, reflecting cultural assumptions and values, should cause members of the two societies to talk differently, about different topics, in different ways, to different people, with different consequences. (1975, p. 39)

The development of pragmatic competence, the ability to convey meaning appropriately, has often been neglected in traditional classrooms at the expense of the study of the form and structure of language. The miscommunication that occurs when pragmatic competence has not been developed is pragmatic failure. Thomas defines pragmatic failure as "the

inability to understand what is meant by what is said" (1983, p. 91). Given that the topics, the manner, the interlocutors and the consequences of discourse differ so significantly between English and Japanese, it is not surprising that pragmatic failure between members of the two cultures occurs. The present study is an attempt to examine and classify pragmatic failure by Japanese learners of English in the spheres of greetings and leave-taking.

Sources of Pragmatic Failure

The issues to be discussed here are some of the kinds of pragmatic failures that occur and their sources. The potential sources of pragmatic failure discussed below are pragmatic transfer, lack of proficiency, speech accommodation and teaching-induced errors (see Stephens and Blight, 2001).

Transfer is suggested as an important source of pragmatic failure. In the absence of a knowledge of the conventions of the second language the speaker may draw on knowledge of the conventions of the first language. If the conventions of the respective languages are markedly different pragmatic failure becomes increasingly likely. Studies which lend support to pragmatic transfer from Japanese to English include Code and Anderson's (2001) study of requests, Takahashi and Beebe's (1993) study of discourse patterns and style-shifting and Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz's (1990) study of refusals.

The grammar-translation method that has traditionally been in favour in Japanese schools has implicitly conveyed to students that firstly, grammar is of prime importance, and secondly, that equivalents across languages do in fact exist. Because the range of English formulae and original expressions have not been presented adequately, many learners search for English equivalents of expressions in their native language. Given the

striking differences between Japanese and English language discourse outlined above, a search for translation equivalents would certainly appear to be futile. Translation as a teaching tool misrepresents the nature of speaking a foreign language, because of the inherent assumption that equivalents exist. The use of translation in the classroom has the undesirable consequence of promoting the transfer of equivalents of both vocabulary and pragmatic usage. Because of the wide gulf that exists between customs in Japanese and English-speaking cultures second language learners of the respective languages sometimes employ speech acts for which no translation equivalent exists. Given the extent of cultural differences and the lack of opportunity for Japanese speakers in Japan to acquire native speaker norms, it is hypothesized that this gap is an important source of pragmatic transfer.

Lack of Proficiency is one of the explanations postulated for pragmatic errors. Beebe and Takahashi (1989) in their contrastive study of Japanese and American face-threatening acts, attribute the sometimes too direct manner of their Japanese EFL subjects to a lack of native-like competence. Odlin (1989) argues that lack of proficiency may lead to over-generalization, in which a single formulaic utterance is used to cover a range of situations in which a native speaker would display a greater range. The present study includes a discussion of whether certain expressions are overused or used inappropriately.

Speech accommodation theory (see Ellis, 1994) is an attempt to explain competence or the lack of it in terms of the learner's efforts to converge with or diverge from the target culture. Divergence from pragmatic norms may not necessarily be attributable to transfer or lack of proficiency but rather constitute a means of preserving the NNS cultural identity, or "pragmatic distinctiveness" (Kasper and Schmidt, 1996, p. 156). Alternatively, in

more extreme cases, a learner's "pragmatic incorrectness" might be attributed to a desire to buck societal conventions (Siegal, 1996, p. 374).

Tarone and Yule (1989) invoke speech accommodation theory to explain persistent errors of non-native speakers as an attempt to maintain allegiance to their native culture rather than identify with the second language culture. It is possible that the pragmatic errors made by the NNS speakers in this study are representative of Japanese speakers of L2 English who do not wish to conform to the norms of English-speaking cultures. They may wish to retain their own cultural norms while speaking English.

Teaching-induced errors are a commonly described as a source of pragmatic failure (Riley, 1989; Thomas, 1983; Beebe and Takahashi, 1989; Takahashi, 1996). The foreign language classroom is not necessarily the source of the error but teaching may sometimes provide a poorer guide to pragmatic norms than the second language environment. Bardovi-Harlig et al. (1991) contrast the simple and even abbreviated examples of leave-taking provided in EFL textbooks with the complex leave-taking evident in natural discourse. Pragmatic norms may thus sometimes be better acquired by exposure to a rich source of naturally occurring speech (for a contrary view, see Thomas, 1983; Scarcella, 1983). In less than ideal conditions foreign language classrooms and textbooks provide a limited sample of language that does not accurately reflect NS norms.

Alternatively teaching-induced errors may originate from the methodology of the foreign language classroom, in which students are presented with vocabulary lists and not made aware of the dangers of assuming that an exact equivalent exists. Takahashi observes in her study of request forms: "instructional effects seemed to foster a high degree of L1-L2 equivalence perception and thus a high degree of transferability perception" (1996, p. 212).

Teaching-induced errors may take the form of a stereotype-induced error (Beebe and Takahashi, 1989). Japanese learners may be urged by their teachers to 'be direct' when speaking English, a generalization which clearly should not be applied indiscriminately. The ability to make a judicious choice of when it is appropriate to be direct is probably best acquired by immersion in the target culture (Kasper and Dahl, 1991) or competent instruction (Thomas, 1983).

Methodology

The above issues have been explored by means of a Discourse Completion Task (DCT), a survey in which respondents were given a prompt and required to complete the discourse structure. The advantages and limitations of the DCT in relation to this project have been discussed previously (see Stephens and Blight, 2001). A more detailed critique of the DCT methodology has also been provided in Kasper and Dahl (1991), Hill et al. (1986), Beebe and Takahashi (1989), and Harlow (1990).

The prompts required an open-ended rather than a closed response. A multiple-choice format was avoided in order not to prejudice the answers. The DCT consisted of a total of thirty questions written specifically for the present project. The questions related to three broad areas: greetings and leave-taking, asking for personal information, and status and indebtedness. The present study is an analysis of the seven questions on the topic of greetings and leave-taking. Thus the original DCT consisted of a greater range of questions from which three categories have been selected and analyzed here. Findings related to the topics of asking for personal information (Stephens and Blight, 2001) and status and indebtedness (Blight and Stephens, 2002) have been reported previously. The questions were written in Japanese, and the respondents were requested to

reply in English with the option of providing additional information about non-verbal responses in either English or Japanese.

Respondents: the respondents were twelve native Japanese speakers living in Japan, of whom seven were English teachers. The other five had studied English for periods ranging from seven to twenty years, and thus all could be classified as between upper intermediate and advanced. The DCT was also completed by three NS controls, two of whom had been residing in Japan for one year and the other for three years. Two were male and one was female. Two were teaching English in Japanese high schools. All were Australians in their mid-thirties.

Research Study

The topics to be analyzed are: *greetings used at specific times of the day and year*, expressions used for *leave-taking*, and *idiomatic expressions used as greetings*. It is hypothesized that the differences in formulaic expressions between English and Japanese may be the source of error by Japanese learners of EFL.

One source of pragmatic error may be the differing levels of formality required in English-speaking and Japanese societies. Beebe et al. describe the pragmatic errors demonstrated by Japanese learners of ESL in refusals that they classify as overly formal. The responses included the use of idiomatic expressions, such as: "I am honoured", and statements of principle and philosophy, such as: "I never yield to temptation (1990, p. 66–67). Richards and Sukwiwat (1983) similarly attribute pragmatic transfer by Asian speakers of ESL to the relatively formal nature of Asian cultures.

It is arguable that a society which stresses the value of the appropriate degree of formality would also stress the expression of greetings at the

appropriate time; there may be a relationship between the relatively larger number of situations in everyday life which require a stereotypical piece of linguistic behaviour in Japanese society and the importance attached to greetings and formulaic expressions for leave-taking. In contrast, many English expressions for greetings and leave-taking (e.g., Hello, Hi, Goodbye, See you) indicate no sensitivity to the time of day.

Kasper and Schmidt allude to "non-universal speech acts" which are tied to "culture-specific settings" (1996, p. 154) and this applies to speech acts that exist in Japanese but not in English, and vice-versa. An example of this is the importance attached to formal greetings in Japan, while formal greetings are considered less important in English:

> *Greetings* — please give your child to the care of the teacher after the child has said *ohayo gozaimasu*. Our care of your child begins from the moment we have said *ohayo gozaimasu*. This greeting confirms the fact that we will look after your child to the best of our ability all day long, and thus we regard the morning greeting as important (St. Paul's Nursery, Japan: writer's translation).

The DCT also featured questions on greetings that relate to specific circumstances, such as New Year's Greetings. The Japanese New Year is the most important festivity of the year and is a time for families to reunite and for professional acquaintances to exchange formal greetings. The period during which greetings are exchanged extends for approximately fifteen days, and businesses are closed for three days. In contrast New Year in English speaking societies is a relatively minor festivity that tends to be celebrated informally and for a short duration. The greetings exchanged at New Year in Japanese and English reflect these cultural differences. In Japanese the greeting used up to the 31st December (*ii otoshi o*) differs from the one used on and after 1st January (*akemashite omedeto*

gozaimasu). In English there are several possible formulaic greetings (e.g. "Happy New Year", "All the best for 2002", "Did you have a good Christmas?") and a range of original expressions which may be exchanged before or after January 1st. The Japanese greetings are obligatory and invariably refer to the New Year. The English language greetings are optional and may even refer back to the more significant event for them of Christmas. These cultural differences create potential for pragmatic failure; the invariable reference to the New Year for an extended period by the NNS speaker may surprise the NS listener.

Richards and Sukwiwat (1983) distinguish between the way routines and novel utterances are generated; routines possess the unique function of being programmed. They highlight the potential for transfer in the expressions used to perform routines, which is attributable to cultural differences. Examples of routines that constitute "non-universal speech acts" (Kasper and Dahl 1991) are Japanese expressions used in leave-taking. When excusing oneself from the office to one's equals or superior, the following adjacency pair is commonly used:

A (person leaving):   *osaki ni shitsureishimasu*
                        (Excuse me for leaving before you.)
B (person remaining):   *otsukaresamadeshita*
                        (Thank you for your hard work.)

Clearly there are no parallel situations and thus expressions in English. However Japanese students are not necessarily taught that there are no English equivalents for these adjacency pairs and may thus assume that these expressions are universal.

Blight and Stephens (2002) examine the extent of transfer of the first line of the above adjacency pair, *osaki ni shitsureishimasu*, in a DCT given to Japanese university students. This study explores relative notions of defer-

ence by native English and native Japanese speakers. This analysis evidences transfer of this formulaic expression by the EFL learners, particularly in relation to the deference which must be expressed to someone of higher status when leaving the workplace.

Another hypothesized area of transfer in the sphere of greetings is the use of idiomatic expressions used to greet people in Japanese. Like the English greeting "How are you?" the Japanese equivalents *odekake desu ka* ("Are you going out?"), *kaimono desu ka* ("Are you going shopping") or *dochira made desu ka* (Where are you going?), are not requests for information and do not require a direct answer. Loveday (1983) alludes to the annoyance sometimes experienced by Westerners in Japan when posed the question *odekake desu ka*, which he attributes to their literal interpretation of this idiomatic expression. In the present study it is hypothesized that such expressions would be transferred into English by the NNS respondents.

Discussion of Results

The various types of responses are categorized into daily greetings, New Year's Greetings and expressions used for leave-taking. The responses which are considered most significant are discussed below.

Daily Greetings

The issues explored here are whether the NNS transfer the greater sensitivity to time evident in Japanese in their choice of an English greeting, and whether other idiomatic expressions used in Japanese when greeting are transferred. There is some support for the hypothesis that NNS demonstrate a greater sensitivity to the time of day or year in the choice of a greeting. Such time-specific responses are indeed acceptable, but they are

not typical of NS responses.   Nine of the NS responses but none of the NS responses to Question 1 contained the expression Good Morning:

1. *What do you say when you meet your friend at 10 am?*

NNS Responses:
1. Good Morning, how are you? (x 3)
2. Good Morning.   (x 3)
3. Good Morning, how about your feeling?
4. Good Morning.   Hi, how are you?
5. Good Morning Taro, and so on.

NS responses:
1. Hi! Hi John.
2. How'z it going?   How ya doing?
3. Hello, how are you?

Similarly, seven of the twelve NNS respondents but none of the NS gave a time specific response to Question 4.

4. *What do you say when you meet your friend at 7 pm?*

NNS responses:
1. Good evening (x 6)
2. Good evening.   Where are you going?

NS responses:
1. Hi, Hi . . .   Hello . . .
2. How are you?
3. Hi there.

Thomas (1983) defines pragmatic difficulties as failures rather than errors.   Thus the responses "Good Morning" to Question 1 or "Good Evening" to Question 4 are correct in terms of the time frame but possibly

overly formal between friends. In the NS responses these time-specific greetings are in evidence but are used more infrequently than the NNS responses.

Two thirds of the NNS used "Good Morning" to greet the child in Question 2 whereas only one of the NS respondents did. Hence this greeting is indeed possible but it should not be the invariable response.

The hypothesis that Japanese idiomatic expressions used to greet people would be transferred into English was not confirmed in this study. Only one respondent (NNS: Question 4) asked "Where are you going?" upon meeting someone, a common question in Japanese (*dochira made desuka*), the English equivalent being much less likely. Most NNS respondents used the pragmatically appropriate "How are you?", a usage consistent with NS controls.

New Year's Greetings

Greetings used at a particular time of year are similar to those used at a particular time of day in that they are formulaic expressions which must be expressed at a specific time. For example the Japanese greeting *akemashite omedeto gozaimasu* may be used for the first fifteen days of January. In response to Question 6 eleven of the twelve NNS respondents answered "Happy New Year". The NS responses were as follows:

6. *What do you say when you meet someone on January 5th?*

    1. Happy New Year (if first time) — Hi - Hello, etc
    2. How are you?
    3. I hope you have a great New Year

The NS thus demonstrate a greater variety of responses and less reliance on a single formula. Other formulaic expressions such as "How are you?"

are used by the NS and not necessarily the time-specific greeting "Happy New Year". The NS responses demonstrate that it is perfectly acceptable NOT to refer to the event whereas the NNS responses suggest that it is extraordinary not to refer to it.

The NNS responses in all spheres consist of a much smaller range than the NS's. This could be due to lack of competence, not being able to use some of the more atypical greetings or forms of leave-taking, (such as "Hiya" or "Ciao") for which they may possess receptive skills only, or to a reliance on translation equivalents and thus pragmatic transfer. The latter would be a product of transferring the more rigid time-scale and formality of Japanese greetings to English.

The smaller range of greetings evidenced in this study is consistent with Hill et al.'s study in which they demonstrate that "the Japanese responses are more highly clustered than those of the American subjects" (1986, p. 359). Interestingly, Hill et al. conclude that "there are fewer prototypes for our American subjects" (1986, p. 361). This tendency of L1 Japanese speakers to prefer formulaic expressions is also noted by Matsumoto (1988), who contrasts the English speaker's preference for originality with the Japanese speaker's preference for formulaic expression; both demonstrate sincerity in each culture respectively. Such radically diverging norms create potential for pragmatic failure.

Leave-taking

There is widespread agreement concerning the importance of formulaic expression in Japanese, which suggests the possibility of transfer of formulae by Japanese speakers of EFL. Coulmas (1981) indicates that the range of formulaic expressions available to the Japanese speaker is limited, and notes the lack of the requirement for originality. Siegal (1996) stresses

that formulaic speech is an important feature of skilled Japanese conversation. Hill et al. identify an important difference in L1 English speakers' and L1 Japanese speakers' behaviour; in Japanese "the selection of an appropriate linguistic form and/or appropriate behaviour is essentially automatic" 1986, p. 348.

The situation in the DCT in which an employee takes leave from the office was constructed with this possibility in mind. In this situation a particular adjacency pair would automatically be chosen in Japanese. It is hypothesized that the first part of the Japanese adjacency pair used to take leave from one's superior or colleagues from the workplace would be transferred into English:

A: *osaki ni shitsureishimasu*   (Excuse me for leaving before you.)
B: *otsukaresamadeshita*   (Thank you for your hard work.)

Trained to look for translation equivalents, it is hypothesized that the NNS would transfer this formulaic expression, despite no equivalent formula existing in English. The NS controls use expressions that could apply to leave-taking from a range of possible situations such as "Goodbye. See you tomorrow." In contrast six of the NNS apologize. The first five use expressions which could be considered examples of transfer of the above Japanese expression:

7. *You are a secretary. What do you say to your boss when you leave the office?*

    1. I'm sorry to stop the work earlier than you.
    2. Sorry, I have to leave.
    3. Sorry for leaving the office earlier than you.
    4. Excuse me for leaving earlier.

5. I'm sorry. I'm leaving.
6. I'm sorry I have something to do today.

These responses concur with those reported by Blight and Stephens (2002), in which fourteen (41%) of the Japanese students apologize when leaving the workplace, in contrast to only one (9%) native speaker.

Concluding Remarks

Pragmatic failure suggested in this study could be due to a combination or interplay of the elements of transfer, lack of proficiency, the effects of speech accommodation or teaching-induced errors. Many examples of failure can be variously explained in terms of each of these sources. For example, the case of the adjacency pair used in leave-taking being rendered into English is arguably be due to transfer, given the commonalities between the wording in each of the languages. It may also be due to lack of proficiency because the speaker is unaware of the range of expressions available to take leave. It could be explicable in terms of speech accommodation in that the Japanese speaker chooses to use an expression that accurately expresses his or her sense of the requirements of a situation despite its non-existence in English. It may be teaching-induced in that the speaker has been trained to look for translation equivalents in the EFL classroom.

Of these four sources of error the three that must be addressed by the teacher or learner are transfer, lack of proficiency and teaching-induced errors. Pragmatic failure must be addressed by the teacher because of the danger of creating misunderstanding. If the speaker's intent is not communicated accurately and misunderstanding may ensue: "Pragmatic failure is rarely recognized as such by non-linguists" (Thomas, 1983, p. 96).

However pragmatic failure may be unavoidable if it is attributable to the

effects of speech accommodation. As Thomas (1983) indicates, the NNS should not be obliged to conform to NS norms in these areas, but should at least have the option of doing so. The NNS may choose to affirm his/her distinctiveness by not conforming to NS norms. It is preferable that a divergence from NS norms occurs because of choice to ignorance. Hence the importance of instruction; cultural norms should be included in the language curriculum so that the learner has the option of conforming to them. Ideally, pragmatic failure due to transfer, lack of proficiency or teaching-induced errors can thus be addressed and minimized. That which occurs as a result of the learner's choice remains.

An alternative or complementary explanation to speech accommodation theory is thus pragmatic fossilization. Speech accommodation theory assumes choice is available to the learner but developing pragmatic competence may not be possible due to critical period effects. The learners in this study are advanced speakers of English in Japan, and the existence of possible pragmatic failure could be due to cultural norms with which the speakers closely identify: "highly proficient L2 learners never completely overcome their discourse accent in an L2. This points to the possibility of widespread fossilization at the discourse level" (Scarcella, 1983, p. 319). Further study is needed to determine the extent to which divergence from pragmatic norms is due to choice or to fossilization.

The pedagogical implications of this study are the importance of presenting EFL learners with the pragmatic norms of English-speaking cultures, the possible misunderstanding caused by not conforming to these norms, the validity of the choice of whether to conform and the possibility that the learner cannot acquire a comprehensive pragmatic competence.

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Appendix

The English version of the DCT appears below. Responses to the above questions by both native and non-native speaking respondents may be obtained from the author.

Discourse Completion Task

Please respond to the following questions in English. If you would say nothing at all in response to a particular item, please say so. If you would respond non-verbally, please indicate how you would respond.

1. What do you say when you meet your friend at 10 am?
2. What do you say to a primary school child who you pick up to take to school at 8 am?
3. What do you say when you meet your friend at 2 pm?
4. What do you say when you meet your friend at 7 pm?
5. What do you say when you part with your friend at 11 pm?
6. What do you say when you meet someone on January 5th?
7. You are a secretary. What do you say to your boss when you leave the office?