Future Directions in Pragmatics Assessment

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While the discussion of the importance of pragmatic ability arguably begins with Lado (1961), the idea of sociolinguistic or pragmatic competence has been widely recognized as one of four vital communicative competencies since Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983) first introduced their seminal paper on communicative competence over three decades ago. Since then, language testers such as Bachman (1990), Bachman and Palmer (1996), and Purpura (2004) have proposed subsequent models of communicative language ability (CLA) where pragmatic knowledge is featured prominently, but interestingly, the assessment of pragmatic knowledge and ability is still relatively nascent in terms of its research and development. One reason for this is because the measurement of pragmatic knowledge is inherently complex, especially since "one utterance can simultaneously encode multiple pragmatic meanings, and many times, without asking the speaker[s], it is difficult to determine which meanings were implied…[and] which meanings were actually understood" (Purpura, 2004, p. 77). As a result, most pragmatic research has tended to focus on a narrow but more quantifiable band of functional pragmatic topics such as polite and impolite speech, complimenting, use of discourse markers (Rose & Kasper, 2001), and other pragmatic tasks such as apologizing, complaining, giving advice, and inviting that are common in many ESL/EFL textbooks (Vellenga, 2004). But actual "tests of pragmatic ability are few and far between" (Kasper & Rose, 2001, p. 9), with many of the above studies employing written response formats that fail to capture the richness and unplanned nature of authentic discourse. Advances in technology, however, may possibly bridge some of the limitations that have been observed in the pragmatics testing literature thus far.

The first major foray into pragmatics assessment began with the development of six different instruments to measure the cross-cultural pragmatic ability of Japanese ESL learners by Hudson, Detmer, and Brown (1992, 1995). Two of them were paper-and-pencil indirect measures, a multiple choice, cued discourse completion test (DCT) and an open-ended free response written DCT, with a situation description preceding each response field. The next two were oral semi-direct measures, with one cued by tape-recorded audio descriptions and the other by videotaped role play situations. The final two measures were self-assessments that asked the participants to evaluate the performances recorded from each of the oral semi-direct methods. In terms of findings, the multiple choice, cued response DCT instrument was found to be ineffective and unreliable while both self-assessment measures were similarly found to not "be particularly useful" (Hudson, 2001b, p. 68). The results of the final three measures, the written DCT, the DCT tape recording, and video role plays, were noticeably affected by order and practice effects, but overall the role play "performed differently from the other two [DCT] methods" (Hudson, 2001a, p. 295) and rated the highest. While other problems were noted, these initial studies clearly showed that many unresolved issues remained in regards to creating valid and reliable pragmatics assessments, but it is noteworthy that the one methodology that seemed to hold the most promise utilized role play stimuli in the form of video-recorded prompts. Fast-forward to the present day, today's computer-assisted language testing (CALT) technology could allow us to incorporate rich and authentic input "in the form of full motion video, text, sound,

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and color graphics" to "potentially enhanc[e] the authenticity of both input and response" (Chapelle & Douglas, 2006, p. 9), giving the field a great opportunity to further test and validate Hudson, Detmer, and Brown's pioneering video role play work. Using a variety of video input stimuli may be the most effective and efficient way of moving beyond testing Bachman and Palmer's (1996) knowledge of manipulative pragmatic functions (e.g., requests, commands, suggestions) and interpersonal functions (e.g., greetings, compliments, insults, and apologies), and move into the unexplored areas of pragmatic ability such as the knowledge of heuristic functions (e.g., the language we use to teach, learn, and problem-solve) and imaginative functions (e.g., humor, aesthetic purposes such as poetry, and use of figurative speech).

Based on the results of subsequent pragmatics assessment studies (Billmyer & Varghese, 2000; Brown, 2003; Yamashita, 1996; Yoshitake, 1997), McNamara and Roever (2006) determined that effective tests of pragmatic ability must be highly contextualized, ideally simulating real-world situations, but yet should still be scored by human raters, which would, however, have the negative effect of increasing costs and making them less practical. But given the above criteria, interactive role play tasks may be the most effective way to assess pragmatic knowledge and ability as other studies have shown. Utilizing classical-theory reliability and G-theory dependability analyses, Brown and Ahn (2011) found that of the four types of L2 pragmatics test instruments they examined, written discourse completion tasks (WDCT), oral discourse completion tasks (ODCT), discourse role-play tasks (DRPT), and role-play self-assessments (RPSA), they found that the latter two role play tasks appeared to be the best tests overall.

Consequently, Roever (2011) believes that the future of pragmatics tests lies in the use of interactive role plays as they "elicit interactive, extended discourse, combine external and discourse-internal context, and allow some degree of standardization through the design of the role play situation" (p. 473). And to address the complicated nature of scoring co-constructed interaction using expensive human raters, he suggests possibly establishing 'role play call centers' where test takers can connect with live examiners via voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) software platforms such as Skype. Such tests of second language pragmatics would "include monologic and dialogic extended discourse to allow inferences as to learners' ability to use language in real time" (p. 475), providing richer content, input, response output, background information, and the needed contextualization that has sorely been lacking, and thus reconciling many of the difficulties and limitations pragmatics testers have encountered in the recent past.

In closing, as far back as 1964, Robert Lado prophetically recommended using motion pictures and other visual aids such as color slides, pictures, and audio recordings as a powerful means of exposing our students to many aspects of the target culture. Although pragmatic knowledge and ability is indeed a complex phenomenon, CALT technology now finally provides us with the means to create rich recreations of real-world pragmatic situations and interactions that can also be simultaneously recorded for formal analysis later. Given these significant advances, pragmatics assessment research has a bright future indeed.

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