


12 Speech acts

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“Sorry about that!” may serve as an adequate apology in some situations. In others it may be perceived as a rude, even arrogant, nonapology. In yet other situations, it may not even be intended as an apology in the first place. Hence, it has become increasingly clear that the teaching of second language words and phrases isolated from their sociocultural context may lead to the production of linguistic curiosities which do not achieve their communicative purposes. Given this reality, second language teachers may well find that an understanding of speech act theory and practice will improve their ability to prepare their learners to meet the challenge of producing more contextually appropriate speech in the target language.

Speech act behavior constitutes an area of continual concern for language learners since they are repeatedly faced with the need to utilize speech acts such as complaints, apologies, requests, and refusals, each of which can be realized by means of a host of potential strategies. Although no course of instruction could possibly furnish all the insights that a foreign language learner would need in order to successfully fine-tune each and every speech act utterance, there is some evidence that furnishing learners with selected insights regarding the comprehension and production of speech acts may provide them with valuable information that they would probably not acquire on their own.

This chapter will first define speech acts and provide a brief overview of how this field of discourse has been applied to second language acquisition (SLA). Next, research methodologies used in studying speech acts will be examined, and selected empirical studies that have appeared in recent years will be considered. Finally, the available studies on the teaching of speech act behavior to nonnative speakers will be reviewed, and the pedagogical implications of the findings to date will be described.

I gratefully acknowledge Nancy Hornberger, Sandra McKay, and three anonymous reviewers, as well as Elaine Tarone and Leslie Beebe, for their helpful input at various stages. A special thanks is due to Lee Searles for substantive and editorial assistance in preparing the final draft.
A definition of speech act and a brief historical overview

A speech act is a functional unit in communication. According to Austin’s theory of speech acts (1962), utterances have three kinds of meaning. The first kind is the propositional or locutionary meaning, namely, the literal meaning of the utterance. If a pupil says to a teacher or sends a note, “It is hot in here,” the locutionary meaning would concern the warm temperature of the classroom. The second kind of meaning is illocutionary, namely, the social function that the utterance or written text has. The illocutionary meaning or function of “It’s hot in here” may be a request to turn down the heat. If the utterance is expressed emphatically or if it is repeated, perhaps it would also function as a complaint. Austin adds the notion of perlocutionary force, that is, the result or effect that is produced by the utterance in that given context. Thus, if the utterance leads to the action of turning down the thermostat in the room, the perlocutionary force of that utterance would be greater than if the request were ignored.

Although such definitions may make theoretical sense, assigning functions to sentences is actually somewhat problematic in that the apparent sentence meaning does not necessarily coincide with the speaker’s pragmatic intention, as when a person utters an apology sarcastically, or when a speech act is indirect, as in the request “It’s hot in here”. Despite problems in interpreting the true intentions of the speaker, efforts have been made to assign functions to speech acts according to a series of categories delineated by philosophers such as Austin (1962) and Searle (1969). Speech acts have been classified according to five categories: representatives (assertions, claims, reports), directives (suggestion, request, command), expressives (apology, complaint, thanks), commissives (promise, threat), and declaratives (decrees, declaration).

Although the process of defining and identifying speech acts has been going on since the 1960s, the last 15 years have marked a shift from an intuitively based anecdotal approach to speech act description to an empirical one. Such empirically based research, encompassing both quantitative and qualitative approaches, has focused on the perception and production of speech acts by learners of a second or foreign language (in most cases, English as a second or foreign language, i.e., ESL and EFL) at varying stages of language proficiency and in different social interactions. This work has included efforts to establish both cross-language and language-specific norms of speech act behavior, norms without which it would be impossible to understand and evaluate interlanguage behavior.

Early empirical research on speech act sets (e.g., Cohen & Olshtain, 1981) was in part prompted by a realization that although transfer occurs at the sociocultural level, few if any contrastive studies were systematically undertaken in order to characterize such phenomena (Loveday, 1982; Riley, 1981; Schmidt & Richards, 1981). Research in second language acquisition (SLA) has helped to provide empirical descriptions of speech acts such as requests, compliments, apologies, complaints, refusals, and expressions of gratitude (see Wolfson, 1989; Wolfson & Judd, 1983). Empirical studies concerning the nature of various speech acts in a variety of languages and cultures have been steadily accumulating over the last few years. As a result, there is a growing source of empirical data on the strategies for performing these acts.

Empirical validation of speech act sets

Given a speech act such as apologizing, requesting, complimenting, or complaining, the first concern of SLA researchers has been to arrive at the set of realization patterns typically used by native speakers of the target language, any one of which would be recognized as the speech act in question, when uttered in the appropriate context. This set of strategies is referred to as the speech act set of the specific speech act (Olshtain & Cohen, 1983). It has become increasingly clear to researchers that learners of a language may lack even partial mastery of such

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1 This would also make the statement an implicit performative, in which the request is made by nonverbal features, for example, context and voice modulation (Austin, 1962, in Levinson, 1983, 231–233).
2 A more detailed summary of Austin’s theory of speech acts, including the concepts presented here, appears in Levinson (1983, Chap. 5). Levinson also discusses a problem in making the distinction between illocutionary and perlocutionary force.
3 See Hatch (1992) for more on the possible lack of fit between presumed utterance meaning and the speaker’s intention. Rundquist (1991) also notes the ironic uses of indirect apologies, particularly on a gender-differentiated basis. When speech acts are taught to native speakers, the focus usually is on learners’ comprehension of the explicit, literal significance of a given speech act and not on the more complicated nuances of ironic intention.
4 This chapter will not elaborate on the directness or indirectness of speech acts. For those interested in a detailed treatment of indirect speech acts, one good source is the recent book by Boxer (1993) on indirect complaints. Suffice it to say that numerous speech acts are indirect, in order to mitigate or soften the act somewhat. For example, the imperative is rarely used to issue requests in English; instead, sentences that only indirectly do requesting are usually used (Levinson, 1983).
5 These categories are further elaborated in Hatch (1992, Chap. 4).
6 See also Chick (this volume) on miscommunication due to transfer, in particular, when there are cultural differences in selecting among the potential strategies for realizing a given speech act.
speech act sets and that this lack of mastery may hinder or even cause breakdowns in communication.

In order to determine what constitutes a speech act set, it is necessary to define the preconditions and interactional goals of the speech act in question and to identify performative and semantic prerequisites for the realization of these goals. If the act of apologizing is considered, for example, one could stipulate that an apology is called for when there is some behavior that violates social norms. When an action or an utterance (or the lack of either) results in one or more persons perceiving themselves as deserving an apology, the culpable person(s) is (are) expected to apologize. According to Searle (1969, p. 4), a person who apologizes for doing A expresses regret at having done A. Thus, the apology act takes place only if the speaker believes that some act A has been performed prior to the time of speaking and that this precondition has resulted in an infraction which affected another person who is now deserving of an apology. Furthermore, the apologizer believes that he or she was at least partly responsible for the offense (Fraser, 1980) and has, as an interactional goal, to make amends.

In the case of the apology, it is necessary to separate the performative verbs (i.e., verbs which name the speech act or illocutionary force of the sentence, e.g., “I apologize” or “I’m sorry”) from other semantic formulas that could result in acceptable apology realizations, such as an explanation and justification for the offense (e.g., “The bus was late and so I couldn’t possibly get here on time”) or an offer of repair (e.g., “I’ll do it tomorrow”). The speech act set of apologizing has been found to consist of at least the following main strategies or semantic formulas (Cohen, Olshtain, & Rosenstein, 1986):

1. An expression of an apology, whereby the speaker uses a word, expression, or sentence which contains a relevant performative verb such as apologize, forgive, excuse, be sorry.
2. An explanation or account of the situation which indirectly caused the apologizer to commit the offense and which is used by the speaker as an indirect speech act of apologizing.
3. Acknowledgment of responsibility, whereby the offender recognizes his or her fault in causing the infraction.
4. An offer of repair, whereby the apologizer makes a bid to carry out an action or provide payment for some kind of damage which resulted from the infraction.

5. A promise of nonrecurrence, whereby the apologizer commits himself or herself not to have the offense happen again.

In order to investigate the speech act of requesting, it has been necessary to validate empirically a scale of imposition — from the most direct and imposing request to the least indirect and least imposing one (Blum-Kulka, 1989; Olshtain & Blum-Kulka, 1984; Weizman, 1989). An early empirical study on requests involved having native and nonnative speakers of English assign a rank to the degree of politeness of a series of request strategies in the context of making a purchase (Carrell & Konneker, 1981). The ranking of the request strategies came from a theoretical claim that, when requests are made, imperatives are less polite than declaratives, which are in turn less polite than questions (Lakoff, 1977, p. 100). For the native speakers, five levels of politeness were empirically validated, from the elliptical imperative (“Steak and fries”) and the imperative (“Give me steak and fries”), on the lower or least polite end, to the interrogative modal (“Could you give me steak and fries?”), on the upper or most polite end. The nonnative speakers generally agreed with these rankings, although they reversed the order of two lower-level requests (the native speakers ranked the declarative with no modal “I want steak and fries” lower than the declarative using a modal, “I’ll have steak and fries,” whereas the nonnative speakers reversed this ordering).

Two important developments in speech act research are worthy of note at this point. First, one of the most comprehensive empirical studies of speech act behavior, for both its breadth and its depth, has been that of the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Research Project (CCSARP) (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989), which compared speech act behavior of native speakers of a number of different languages with the behavior of learners of those languages. The CCSARP project has also produced useful instruments for data collection and a coding scheme that has been widely replicated in other speech act studies. Second, several excellent surveys of the research literature have appeared which help to define and shape the field of investigation with respect to speech act research (e.g., Kasper & Dahl, 1991; Wolfson, 1989).

As more quantitative investigation on apologies is conducted, suggestions are being made as to the addition of main strategies for the speech act set. Whereas Cohen, Olshtain, and Rosenstein (1986) categorized comments such as “How could I?” and “Are you OK?” as modifications of apology strategies, Frescura (1993) would include these with a main strategy which she labels appeals. There are problems with this categorization, such as whether an appeal standing alone would constitute an apology. The point here is that empirical work keeps adding refinements to the categorizations in use.
Sociocultural and sociolinguistic abilities

What has emerged from the large-scale empirical studies and from the comprehensive reviews of the literature is that successful planning and production of speech act utterances depend on certain sociocultural and sociolinguistic abilities. Sociocultural ability refers to the respondents' skill at selecting speech act strategies which are appropriate given (1) the culture involved, (2) the age and sex of the speakers, (3) their social class and occupations, and (4) their roles and status in the interaction. For example, in some cultures (e.g., in the United States) it may be appropriate for speakers who have missed a meeting with their boss through their own negligence to use a repair strategy by suggesting to the boss when to reschedule the meeting. In other cultures (such as Israel), however, such a repair strategy might be considered out of place in that it would most likely be the boss who determines what happens next. Thus, sociocultural knowledge is called for in determining whether a speech act set is appropriate to use and, if so, which members of the set are selected for us.

Sociolinguistic ability refers to the respondents' skill at selecting appropriate linguistic forms in order to express the particular strategy used to realize the speech act (e.g., expression of regret in an apology, registration of a grievance in a complaint, specification of the objective of a request, or refusal of an invitation). Sociolinguistic ability constitutes the speakers' control over the actual language forms used to realize the speech act (e.g., "sorry" vs. "excuse me," "really sorry" vs. "very sorry"). as well as their control over register of formality of the utterance, from most intimate to most formal language. For example, if a student is asked to dinner by his or her professor and cannot accept the invitation, although it may well be socioculturally appropriate to decline the invitation, the reply "No way!" would probably constitute an inappropriate choice of form for realizing the speech act set of refusal. The problem is that, sociolinguistically, this phrase would be interpreted as rude and insulting, unless the student had an especially close relationship with the professor and the utterance was made in jest. A more appropriate response might be: "I would love to, but I have a prior engagement I can't get out of."

Selecting the appropriate speech act strategy and the forms for realizing it

The process of selecting the socioculturally appropriate strategy and the appropriate sociolinguistic forms for that strategy is complex since it is conditioned by the social, cultural, situational, and personal factors described earlier. Strategy selection and selection of forms often depend on the social status of the speaker and the hearer since, in most societies, deference toward higher status, for instance, is realized via linguistic features (e.g., using vous rather than tu in French) or via modification of the main speech act strategies (e.g., adding intensity to the apology or purposely refraining from cursing). Thus, a person arriving late for a meeting might offer a more intensified and possibly invertebrate-free apology when the apologizer is the boss, rather than a friend. Other factors such as age and social distance are part of the social set of factors that might play a significant role in strategy selection.

It has been found that situational factors also play an important role in strategy selection. Some situations generalize across cultures and hence will elicit similar strategies in different languages, and other situations are more culture-specific and are likely to provoke cross-cultural clashes. In one situation that was used in the CCSARP project for apologies, a waiter brought the customer the wrong order. In all the investigated languages, the native respondents in the role of waiter avoided the expression of personal responsibility, perhaps because admitting such a mistake might cost them their job. In contrast, a cross-cultural study of complaints showed that noise made by neighbors is perceived in some cultures as a serious offense which deserves a complaint but is viewed in other cultures as a less significant offense.

Methods for collecting speech act data

We will now turn to the various research methods that have been used to investigate speech acts. Later in the chapter, we will review some of the findings obtained from using one or more of these research methods. With regard to the production of speech acts, investigators have used observation of naturally occurring data, role play, discourse completion tasks, and verbal report interviews. With regard to the perception of speech acts, recent research has looked at group reactions to videotaped role play or screen play (from TV series) using questionnaires and verbal report interviews based on review of naturally occurring data. The complexity of speech act realization and of strategy selection re-
quires careful development of research methods for describing speech act production. In the field of language assessment, there is a current emphasis on the multimethod approach. The consensus is that any one method would not assess the entirety of the behavior in question. In speech act investigations, the challenge is to find some means of combining different approaches to the description of the same speech act among both native and nonnative speakers of a language. The ideal cycle of data collection has been perceived as one which encompasses several collection techniques (Olshtain & Blum-Kulka, 1985).

Investigators might start with the generation of initial hypotheses based on observation of naturally occurring data in L1 and L2, whether those data were collected initially in L1 or simultaneously in both languages. Then one could elicit simulated speech (e.g., through using role plays) which can serve to test the initial hypotheses. For example:

This is not the first time your neighbor has played loud music late at night, and you have to get up early the next morning. Role-play the part of the irate person who knocks on the door of the noisemaker. I will play the role of the neighbor, an avid music lover who is also partly deaf.

Next, a discourse completion task, consisting of a prompt and space for a response, might be used, for example:

You promised to return a textbook to your classmate within a day or two, after photocopying a chapter. You kept it for almost 2 weeks.

Classmate: I'm really upset about the book because I needed it to prepare for last week's class.

You:

Or, a prompt, a space for a reply, and then one or more rejoinders which the respondent needs to take into consideration might be used (Blum-Kulka, 1982):

You arranged to meet a friend in order to study together for an exam. You arrive half an hour late for the meeting.

Friend (annoyed): I've been waiting at least half an hour for you!

You:

Friend: Well, I was standing here waiting. I could have been doing something else.

You:

Friend: Still, it's pretty annoying. Try to come on time next time.

Such tasks allow investigators to focus on specific speech act realizations and manipulate the social and situational variables. Then, if the concern is with the perlocutionary aspect of speech acts, questionnaires might be used to record perceptions of videotaped speech act interactions. Finally, to follow up, an interview might take place in order to provide further insights regarding the production or perception of naturally occurring, role-play, or discourse completion data (see Table 1).

Discussions of the relative strengths and weaknesses of each of these research methods have already begun to appear in the research literature (Beebe & Takahashi, 1989a; Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989; Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1992; Kasper & Dahl, 1991; Wolfson, Marmor, & Jones, 1989). In one of the first extensive literature reviews regarding speech act research methodology, for example, Kasper and Dahl (1991) reviewed the methods of data collection employed in thirty-nine studies of interlanguage pragmatics10 and the acquisition of second language speech act knowledge. Data collection instruments were distinguished according to (1) the degree to which they constrain the informants' responses and (2) whether they tap speech act comprehension or production. The authors questioned the validity of each type of data collection method in terms of its adequacy in approximating authentic performance of linguistic ability.

Naturally occurring data

The case has been made repeatedly for the collection of naturally occurring data. It is pointed out that a broader range of respondents can be studied than is usually the case with studies using predetermined respondents. Furthermore, in principle, one can obtain a sense of the frequency with which particular types of speech acts occur. Other advantages that have been noted include the following (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1993b):

1. The data are spontaneous
2. The data reflect what the speakers say rather than what they think they would say

10 Here the term is defined narrowly as the investigation of nonnative speakers' comprehension and production of speech acts.
3. The speakers are reacting to a natural situation rather than to a contrived and possibly unfamiliar situation.
4. The communicative event has real-world consequences.
5. The event may be a source of rich pragmatic structures.

The following difficulties of data collection have also been noted:
1. The speech act being studied may not occur naturally very often.
2. Proficiency and gender may be difficult to control.
3. Collecting and analyzing the data are time-consuming.
4. The data may not yield enough or any examples of target items.
5. The use of recording equipment may be intrusive.
6. The use of note taking as a complement to or in lieu of taping relies on memory.

Hence, there are problems with the collection of natural data. Holmes (1989), for example, collected a corpus of 183 remedial interactions, that is, apologies and apology responses. The research assistants in this study reported difficulty in obtaining the data. Another study attempted to capture on videotape a series of induced apology situations, but the investigators encountered numerous difficulties (Murillo, Aguilar, & Meditz, 1991). In this study, students crouched just outside faculty members' doors; when the professors emerged from their office, they would inadvertently bump into the student and would need to apologize. The method was time-consuming because it could not be predicted when the targeted faculty members would emerge from their offices, and too often there was either no audible apology or a mumbled apology that was not captured on the videotape.

**Naturally occurring data versus discourse completion data**

Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig (1992) compared naturally occurring data from native-speaker and nonnative-speaker rejections of advice collected from spontaneous conversation in thirty-nine academic advising sessions (eighteen with native speakers and twenty-one with nonnative speakers) with data collected from a discourse completion task (thirteen native speakers and eleven nonnative speakers). They found that the discourse completion task elicited a narrower range of semantic formulas, fewer status-preserving strategies, and none of the extended negotiations found in the natural data. Their explanation was that the discourse completion task did not promote the turn-taking and negotiation strategies found in natural conversations. Furthermore, the discourse completion task allowed the students to be less polite (i.e., to use fewer status-preserving strategies) and to employ more outlandish statements than did the natural situation because of the absence of face-to-face interaction and despite the respondents' lower status in the discourse task. Finally, the respondents were able to opt out with the discourse completion task, which was not the case in the natural situation.

On the positive side, however, the discourse completion task allowed the testing of hypotheses derived from instances when there were insufficient data from the natural conversations (e.g., testing of the hypothesis that nonnative speakers made a greater use of unacceptable content in their rejections). It was found that the discourse completion task provided data to help explain and interpret the natural data. The more difficult the situation to negotiate in real life (e.g., “You dropped a required course last semester and find out now that it won't be offered until after you graduate”), the greater the difference between natural and elicited data. The researchers concluded that, although there was a need for more observational data, the discourse completion task had an important role to play.

Beebe and Takahashi (1989b) have also pointed out the limitations of using naturally occurring data. They conducted a study assessing American and Japanese performance on two face-threatening acts — disagreement and giving embarrassing information — and combined an ethnographic approach (i.e., keeping a notebook of naturally occurring instances of face-threatening acts) with discourse completion tasks on a written role-play questionnaire (twelve situations, allowing the fifteen American and fifteen Japanese respondents to opt out). They found that the naturally occurring notebook data were biased toward the linguistic preferences of friends, relatives, and associates — since these were the people with whom they tended to interact. They also found a bias in favor of short exchanges because the investigators were not able to record long exchanges in their notebook. Finally, the researchers tended to record utterances with atypical or nonnative-sounding elements because these stood out from more routine utterances.

In another study which, among other things, compared refusals in spontaneous speech and in written discourse completion tasks, Beebe and Cumming (in press) found that the written discourse completion

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11 That is, structures as they are used in communicative functions in the real world.
12 Unless stated otherwise, the terms *native speaker* and *nonnative speaker* are used in this chapter in reference to the English language, and American refers to citizens and residents of the United States.
13 Sometimes in real life, respondents may actually be able to opt out more easily. In fact, Bonikowska (1988) sees instructions in tasks such as discourse completion as a potential hindrance because they force subjects to perform linguistically, whereas in real life they might choose to opt out — for example, in a highly face-threatening act.
Multiple comparisons of data collection methods

Research has also been conducted comparing the open-ended discourse completion task with the version which includes a rejoinder so as to close or structure the response. A study by Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1993b) compared the influence of the two forms of discourse completion tasks on the elicitation of rejections of advice. Responses from nineteen native and thirteen nonnative speakers to an open questionnaire which provided scenarios alone were compared with those from a classic dialogue completion task in which a conversational turn was provided. The dialogue completion task was based on authentic language from earlier pilot tests. The researchers concluded that in the case of reactive speech acts (i.e., those which never stand alone) such as rejections, the inclusion of conversational turns is the preferred format. The specificity of the dialogue completion task vis-à-vis the open questionnaire was found to be particularly helpful for the nonnative respondents. It seemed that the native speakers were more adept at imagining a plausible conversational turn in a given scenario than the nonnative speakers, and so for them the inclusion of a written conversational rejoinder made less difference.

A study by Bodman and Eisenstein (1988) used three methodologies to collect data on expressions of gratitude. Speakers of various languages provided written open-ended discourse tasks. Then the researchers collected role-play data from thirty-four native-speaking pairs, forty nonnative-speaking pairs, and twenty-four sets of nonnative speakers paired with native speakers. They also tape-recorded naturally occurring conversations containing expressions of gratitude. Their finding was that all three methods produced similar results in terms of the words and expressions used. The written questionnaires were found to be representative but limited with regard to the quantity and range of response, a finding similar to that of Beebe and Cumming (in press) with regard to refusals. Role play was also found to be somewhat artificial. Bodman and Eisenstein's recommendation was that all three methodological approaches be integrated into the same study.

Verbal report interviews

The production of speech acts

The use of verbal report interviews is a relatively new means of collecting data on speech act behavior and has potential for providing insights into the production and perception of speech acts. There have been only a few studies of speech act production to date that have used verbal report. Perhaps the earliest study was by Motti (1987); it involved ten intermediate EFL university students in Brazil. After filling out a discourse completion task calling for apologies in English, the students were asked to provide a retrospective verbal report in Portuguese with regard to a series of variables, including their depth of analysis of the situation before response and the extent to which they thought through their response in the foreign language (English) or in Portuguese (their native language) while preparing and writing their responses.

In another study, Robinson (1991) asked twelve native Japanese-speaking women to respond to six written discourse completion items calling for refusals of requests and invitations in English. The respondents were asked to think aloud as they filled out the items, and their verbal reports were tape-recorded. Immediately after completing the task, the researcher interviewed the subjects individually for 20 to 30 minutes regarding the content of their utterances from the think-aloud session, playing back the tape recording to remind the respondents of specific thoughts.

Another study which called for role playing and then verbal report after all the tasks had been completed was that of Frescura (1993). Role-play data on apologies were tape-recorded from native Italian speakers in Italy, native English speakers in Canada, Italians residing in Canada, and English-Canadian learners of Italian (a total of 83 respondents). After being tape-recorded in six role-play interactions, the respondents were asked to listen to all six recordings and to provide a retrospective verbal report on (1) how close to real life they felt their performance to be, (2) how dominant they felt their interlocutor was, (3) how sensitive they were to the severity of the offense and to the tone of the complaint, and (4) for Italians in Canada and learners of Italian, what their linguistic difficulties were.

14 For example, there were four times fewer words and sentences in the written task than over the phone.
15 That is, there were fewer in written discourse.
A study by Cohen and Olshtain (1993) sought to describe ways in which nonnative speakers plan and execute speech act utterances. The fifteen advanced foreign language learners of English who served as subjects in the study were given six speech act situations in which they played a role with a native speaker. The interactions were videotaped, and after each set of two situations of the same type, the tape was played back and the respondents were asked both fixed questions and open-ended probes regarding the factors contributing to the production of their response to that situation.

In the administration of the role-play interview, the interlocutor gave the respondents an opportunity to read the descriptions of two brief role-play situations at a time (two apologies, two complaints, and two requests in all). Then she read each situation slowly out loud, gave the respondent time to think of a response, gave her opener, and had the respondent role-play with her. The interaction was videotaped and audiotaped as well. The probing interviews conducted after each set of two speech act situations had the intent of employing retrospective self-observation in order to obtain verbal report data about the cognitive processes that went into the production of speech act realizations. The interviewer’s probes were conducted in what was the native language for eleven of the respondents and a language of greater proficiency than English for the other four respondents.

Effort was made to have the respondents be precise and to give examples where possible. The subjects were interviewed in three sessions — after the apology, complaint, and request situations, respectively — instead of waiting until after all six speech act situations, in order to obtain more accurate retrospective reports of behavior. It was feared that the delaying of the verbal report would reduce the reliability of the retrospective data, even though the videotape was used as a memory aid. When the respondents were not sure about what they did and why, the interviewers played the relevant portion of the videotaped session a second or even a third time. This usually helped to jog the respondent’s memory.

**The Perception of Speech Acts**

With regard to the perception of speech acts, Benander (1990) underscored the value of direct interview data as a complement for data obtained through discourse completion tasks. She pointed out that the interviewer needs to ask the right kinds of questions, but that a well-designed interview has the potential of eliciting explanations from the respondents regarding their interpretation of the prompt and the reasons for what they say or do not say. In her study on the interpretation of speech acts, Benander gave the example of obtaining from eight native speakers of American English and from eight native Japanese speakers their respective interpretations of compliments in English. The following dialogue was used to illustrate differences in interpretation between native and nonnative speakers of English:

A: What school are you in?
B: Wharton.
A: Oh, you’re really smart.
B: Thank you. That is a really tough school.

Interview data showed that the Japanese respondents judged this conversation to be acceptable if it were between friends. If it were between acquaintances, they believed that B would be rude for being too proud but A would be fine. The Americans judged both speakers very harshly even if they were friends, describing A as “stupid” or “an airhead” and B as “arrogant,” “conceited,” or “a jerk” (Benander 1990, p. 27).

In another study which used verbal report interviews to elucidate findings based on naturally occurring data, Creese (1991) interviewed eight American and four British respondents in order to elicit their perceptions concerning speech act differences between the two cultures. All the Americans either had been to Britain or had had extensive contact with British people outside of the United States, and the British respondents had been living in the United States for various periods of time. The respondents were given a list of speech acts and asked whether they observed any differences in the way the speech acts were expressed in the two cultures. With regard to requests, the Americans perceived the English as being more polite and generally more indirect than Americans. With respect to complimenting, seven of the respondents believed that Americans complimented more than British people. Of these, one believed that Americans used much stronger adjectives (e.g., great).

Finally, several recent studies have used videotaped material as a stimulus for obtaining speech act perceptions through questionnaire response. Zuskin (1993) looked at the perception of speech acts by investigating the interpretation of videotaped role plays in twelve vignettes involving apologies, requests, refusals, and complaints. Using a somewhat similar methodology, Edmundson (1992) examined the ways that the semantic formulas in apologies from TV dramas are interpreted and the processes used in arriving at the interpretations. (Details of these two studies are presented later in this chapter.)

**A review of some recent empirical studies**

This section will provide a brief review of some of the recent empirical studies of second language speech act behavior. For an earlier and
much more extensive review, see Wolfson (1989), which deals with the sociolinguistic behavior of English speakers and, especially, with forms of address, apologies, requests, disapproval, refusals, and the expression of gratitude. The book serves as a compendium for what had and had not been studied by the late 1980s.

**Apologies**

With regard to more recent studies on the speech act of apology, three studies described in this section involved the production of apologies, and two the perception of apologies. With respect to production, an extensive study by Holmes (1989) presented the range of strategies serving as apologies in a New Zealand corpus of 183 naturally occurring remedial exchanges and the linguistic formulas used in these exchanges. The distribution of apologies was analyzed according to the type of offense needing remedy, the gender of the subjects, and the social relationship between the participants. Holmes found a number of differences based on gender; for example, women used apologies more than men overall, women apologized to other women more than to men, and men apologized to women more than to other men. Men’s apologies often alluded to the offender, and women’s apologies focused more on the offended person. Other gender differences were found with respect to seriousness of the offense, status difference, social distance, and frequency of acceptance of apologies by the offended party.

Another apology production study, already mentioned earlier, was that of Frescura (1993). Data from role plays were coded according to a taxonomy comprising seven semantic formulas in two categories: *hearer-supportive* formulas and *self-supportive* formulas. The hearer-supportive formulas were used when complainees chose to support the face of the complainer by admitting their own guilt, by recognizing the complainer’s rights, or by offering compensation. The self-supportive formulas were used when complainees chose to support their own face by denying guilt, by appealing to the complainer’s leniency, or by providing an explanation for the offense. Performance was measured according to the total output of formulas, the types of formulas used, and the intensity of the formulas produced.

Frescura found that native speakers of Italian in Italy preferred the self-supportive formulas overall, whereas native speakers of English preferred the hearer-supportive ones. Learners of Italian did not indicate any preference, whereas native Italian speakers in Canada appeared to maintain some native Italian formulas.

In the final study of production treated here, Linnell, Porter, Stone, and Chen (1992) used the verbal discourse completion situations designed by Cohen and Olshtain (1981) in assessing oral apologies among twenty native and twenty nonnative speakers of English. No significant differences were found between the two groups in six of the eight situations which included situations such as forgetting a meeting with a boss, forgetting a meeting with a friend, and bumping into an elderly lady in a department store. However, the explicit expression of an apology, acknowledgment of responsibility, and intensification of the expression of apology were used significantly less by nonnative speakers in two of the situations. Nonnative speakers also used an explicit apology and an intensifier in an unintentional insult situation significantly less than native speakers and undersupplied an acknowledgment of responsibility for forgetting a meeting with a boss. In addition, performance on the speech act task was not found to correlate significantly with TOEFL scores.

With regard to the perception of apologies, Edmundson (1992) looked specifically at the perception of the semantic formulas in apologies. The study attempted to determine (1) the ways in which semantic formulas are interpreted by native speakers, (2) the cues that subjects use to interpret the sincerity of an apology and the likelihood that it would be accepted, and (3) the rules needed to account for variety in interpretations of semantic formulas. Her study demonstrated one problematic aspect of research which examines strategies in realizing a speech act — namely, that often, one element can be placed in more than one category. In her study, 161 native speakers of English from Introduction to Language classes at Indiana University were asked to view one of two videos containing six apologies from several popular TV programs and to answer several questions concerning each apology.

There were some general patterns of interpretation but much variation in the responses. Subjects used mostly prosodic cues (i.e., intonation and word stress) to judge the sincerity of an apology. Women relied on lexical cues to judge the acceptability of an apology, and men (one-third of the sample) relied on lexical, paralinguistic (nonverbal), and prosodic cues equally. Two interpretations of what accepting an apology means were found. Some thought that it means “acknowledging the offense and forgiving the offender.” Others thought that it means “acknowledging that the social balance was fine” (either because the social balance had been restored or because, according to their perception of the situation, there had never been anything wrong in the first place). The appropriateness of an apology was rated according to its level of sincerity. Edmundson also found that the semantic formula justification, explanation, or excuse, which she had posited as one category, was interpreted by the subjects as two or three different categories. Hence, her research paradigm allowed for a validation of the semantic formulas themselves.

Zuskin (1993) supplemented a discourse completion task with audio-
visual prompts that were given via video as a means for assessing second language sociocultural and sociolinguistic knowledge. In this study, 103 nonnative and 63 native speakers of American English were asked to interpret the messages contained in twelve vignettes involving apologies, requests, refusals, and complaints. Subjects rated each vignette according to three criteria: (1) the degree of status inequality between the two main characters in the scene, (2) the degree of formality designated by the situation, and (3) the degree of imposition on the interlocutor who was expected to produce a specific speech act. The study examined the overlap between grammatical and sociolinguistic proficiency and the extent to which male-female subcultural norms influenced perceptions about politeness.

Zuskin found few general differences either between native English and linguistically heterogeneous nonnative interpretations of the vignettes or between the interpretations made by the various subgroups of nonnative speakers. However, for three of the twelve vignettes, the gender of the subject was a significant factor in interpreting the speech acts, contributing more to the variance than either subjects' proficiency level or the interaction between gender and proficiency level. The more grammatically skilled foreign language subjects did not prove to be more sociolinguistically skilled.

Refusals

A refusal study conducted in 1985 (Beebe and Cumming, in press) compared refusals in spontaneous speech and written discourse completion tasks. Twenty-two female native English-speaking ESL teachers were asked whether they could assist the local team in organizing an upcoming national TESOL conference, eleven by questionnaire and eleven by phone. As noted in the preceding discussion of research methodology, the findings demonstrated that the discourse completion task worked well for gathering a large amount of data quickly in order to create an initial classification of semantic formulas and to ascertain the structure of refusals. In only five of twenty-seven semantic formulas or subformulas was there a difference of three or more tokens between the oral and written data. However, the discourse completion task did not elicit the actual wording, the full range of formulas and strategies, the length of responses, or the number of turns necessary to fulfill a function, all of which normally occur in natural speech.

In a follow-up study, Takahashi and Beebe (1987) investigated writ-

17 The scale which was the most sensitive to differences between the native and nonnative groups was that of degree of imposition on the interlocutor.

18 Tokens are realizations of the given semantic formula.

ten refusals by native speakers of English, native speakers of Japanese, Japanese ESL students in the United States, and Japanese EFL students in Japan (twenty in each group). They found evidence that transfer existed in both the EFL and ESL contexts and that at both lower and higher proficiency levels, with native language influence generally stronger in the EFL context and with negative transfer of native language speech act behavior occurring more at the more advanced levels of ESL (but not EFL). The interpretation that the researchers gave for this negative transfer was that the greater facility of the advanced students at speaking English allowed them to express notions that seemed typically Japanese (e.g., being "deeply honored") to receive a simple invitation.

In another follow-up study, Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz (1990) asked subjects to fill out a discourse completion task; there were twenty subjects in each category: Japanese L1, English L1, and Japanese ESL. Twelve situations and four types of refusals (required because of the rejoinder) comprised the discourse completion task: three requests, three invitations, three offers, and three suggestions — one of each type to persons of higher, equal, and lower status. They found that pragmatic transfer influenced the English of Japanese speakers in the United States in terms of order, frequency, and intrinsic content (or tone) of the semantic formulas they selected for their refusals. Although excuses were common for subjects from both languages, native Japanese excuses in Japanese were less specific than American ones in English (e.g., in refusing an invitation, they just said that they were busy, whereas Americans specified what prevented them from accepting). Also, native Japanese speakers' responses in Japanese sounded more formal than the Americans' English responses.

In Robinson's multmethod study (1991), described earlier, twelve native Japanese-speaking women responded to a written discourse completion task that called for refusals of requests and invitations in English. The respondents were asked to think aloud as they completed the task, and their verbal reports were tape-recorded. Although given the option of responding in Japanese, all respondents reported in English, which the investigator attributed to her inability to speak Japanese. The use of verbal report in this case helped to reveal a sociocultural problem which these respondents had with the refusal task. Since Japanese women are brought up to say yes, or at least not to say no, the task of refusing was difficult for them to perform.

A final refusal study looked at pragmatic transfer in ESL refusals by Japanese speakers and provided material for cross-cultural programs which train American businesspeople to deal more effectively with Japanese clients (Tickle, 1991). The subjects were thirty-one Japanese men who had a minimum of 5 years of business experience, all in the United States for about a year. The results of a discourse completion task
showed that turf (the customer’s vs. the businessperson’s), relationship (positive or negative), status (higher or lower), and function (i.e., a refusal to an invitation vs. a refusal to a request) affected the frequency, content, and order of semantic formulas used in Japanese L1 refusals. Directness was used more often in refusals on a customer’s turf but also with more gratitude and regret. There was also more directness in refusals when no prior relationship existed between the interlocutors. More regret was expressed from the lower-status interlocutor to the higher-status one, as it was in refusals to invitations (e.g., to go drinking). More negative willingness/ability (e.g., “I can’t”) and empathy (rather than regret) occurred in refusals to requests (e.g., of co-workers).

Rejections

Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford conducted a series of studies investigating refusals used by native and proficient nonnative speakers of English during audiotaped academic advising sessions (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1991, 1993a). They found that, whereas native speakers are able to reject an adviser’s suggestion while maintaining the status balance, nonnative speakers are less predictably able to do so.

The Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig study (1992) discussed in detail earlier compared data on refusals of advice by native and nonnative English speakers from naturally occurring conversations in academic advising sessions with data collected from a discourse completion task. It was found that nonnative speakers used more semantic formulas to realize each rejection and made more rejections altogether than did native speakers, and native speakers made suggestions more than twice as often as they rejected advice. Three semantic formulas predominated in the speech act of rejection: explanations, alternatives, and rejections. Also, numerous less common semantic formulas were found in the data.

Compliments

In the second of two studies, Creese (1991) collected naturally occurring compliments from a teachers’ lounge at the University of Pennsylvania and from a teachers’ lounge at a school in London. Her in-depth analysis of this cross-cultural data looked at lexical predictability, compliment response, syntactic categories, and compliment topic. She found overall similarity between the two groups in the first two areas, although the British speakers tended to deflect compliments slightly more. However, with regard to syntactic preference, British speakers preferred the syntactic pattern NP looks (intensification) ADJ (40 percent of the cases) (e.g., “That shirt looks really neat”), while Americans preferred I (intensification) like love NP (42 percent of the cases) (e.g., “I really like your shirt”). Although Americans used the preferred British pattern 34 percent of the time, the British used the Americans’ preferred pattern only 12 percent of the time. With respect to compliment topic, Americans complimented more on someone’s appearance than on their ability (66 percent vs. 33 percent), but for the British speakers this was reversed (54 percent for ability vs. 39 percent for appearance).

Benander’s study of speech act perception (1990), discussed in detail earlier, used ten short dialogue situations in which six respondents (three Japanese and three Americans) described the nature of each situation in writing and stated whether what people said to each other was “nice.” Another ten subjects (five Japanese and five Americans) responded through oral interview. Benander found that native speakers were more likely to identify inappropriate compliment behavior, as in “fishing for a compliment” or in showing conceit in response to a compliment. On the other hand, native speakers were more likely to justify being rude if the compliment was not interpreted as a positive assessment but rather as a joke or a come-on. Native speakers tended to point out how apparent compliments could be interpreted as either inappropriate or unpleasant.

Finally, Olshain and Weinbach (1988) looked at 330 Israeli and 330 American responses to compliments through the use of a discourse completion task and found five forms of response: reinforcing the compliment, simply thanking the complimenter, agreeing with it, justifying it, or expressing surprise. They concluded that Israelis accepted a compliment with greater difficulty than Americans. Although the American subjects were likely to say “thank-you,” Israelis tended to apologize, to justify the compliment, or to be surprised.

Complaints

A study by Piotrowska (1987) used a discourse completion task to collect written complaints from two groups: EFL respondents in their final year in the English department of the English-medium University of Hong Kong and native English speakers. She used categories from Schaefer (1982): an opener, an orientation statement, an act statement, a justification of the speaker or addressee, a remedy or threat, a closing.

19 This observation about native speakers suggests the difficulties faced by second language teachers in providing a “complete” understanding of all the communicative functions of a given speech act. Ironies — such as facetiousness and sarcasm — tend to complicate the burden of teaching considerably. One study of speech acts, that of Rundquist (1991), has examined how apologies are used differently by men and women in regard to implied intent. The problem is that, if nonnative speakers are to acquire communicative competence, they may need to master such alternative meanings. It would be difficult, to say the least, to set up realistic classroom situations that imitate the natural settings in which speech acts are ironically performed.
and a valuation statement about the addressee or the wrong committed. She also added eight categories: societal justification, a request for an explanation, blame, resignation, conciliation, persuasion, indirect disagreement, and a request for agreement. The original categories from Schaefer accounted for 94 percent of native realizations and 86 percent of nonnative-speaker data. The study also elicited several other strategies — an expression of gratitude, an appeal for understanding, an apology, a counter to denial by the complainer, and a request for an opinion.

In another study using discourse completion, DeCapua (1988) looked at complaints in English by fifty native speakers of German (American Field Service students in the United States for a year of high school) and fifty American college students. The semantic formulas used repeatedly by the German respondents were a statement of the problem (the act statement) and a request or demand for repair. Threats were also used for more serious problems. Female respondents made more requests for repairs than males, and there were also more requests for repair in German than in English. Transfer errors from German into English sometimes produced overly adamant complaints, as in “You must pay for a new one” (a translation of missen from German) rather than should.

In order to examine responses to complaints, Boxer (1989) conducted a participant observation study of naturally occurring data involving university personnel in 70 complaint sequences. Six types of responses to the complaints emerged from the data: (1) zero response or change of topic — a response to chronic complainers, (2) a request for an elaboration of the complaint — possibly a delaying tactic, (3) a response in the form of joking or teasing, (4) a contradiction or explanation, (5) advice or a lecture, and (6) commiseration. The last type appeared in 52 percent of the cases, and most of these cases were in the “bulge” (Wolfson, 1989), that is, occurred among status equals who were neither at minimal nor at maximal social distance (thus excluding both intimates and strangers). The other types appeared in fewer than 15 percent of the cases.

Boxer (1993) conducted a study of indirect complaints, involving 295 interlocutors producing 533 such complaints. She defined an indirect complaint as a negative evaluation wherein the addressee is not held responsible for the perceived offense (i.e., griping) — the expression of dissatisfaction to an interlocutor about a speaker himself/herself or someone or something not present. She found that indirect complaints were frequently employed in an attempt to establish rapport or solidarity between interlocutors. She also identified six types of responses to them: none or a topic switch, a question, a contradiction, a joke or teasing, advice or a lecture, or commiseration. She found that the native speaker’s reaction to complaints was often that of commiserating and indicated that nonnative speakers need to know this if they wish to build solidarity with the speaker. With respect to gender differences, women were mostly found to commiserate with indirect complaints, and men were more prone to contradict them or to give advice.

Requests

Fukushima and Iwata (1987) compared strategies used in requesting and offering among eighteen native Japanese and fourteen native English speakers in the United States and among fourteen native English speakers in Japan. The study found that the sequence of semantic formulas in request utterances was generally similar in Japanese and English: apology → reason → request, address term → request → reason, or address term and/or apology → reason (where the reason functioned as a request). In addition, similar strategies were used in the two languages with regard to understaters, grounders (the reason for the request), cost minimization, and address terms (attention getters). However, Japanese respondents made distinctions between sociocultural strategies and sociolinguistic expressions depending on the closeness of friendship, whereas American English-speaking respondents did not.

Goldsmith (1989) examined the favor as a form of request. Data on favor asking was collected ethnographically and analyzed according to the status, gender, age, and social relationships of the participants. Among the strategies were being minimally offensive, showing the importance of the need for a favor, hinting at reciprocation, and building solidarity. Three types of favors were identified: veiled obligation, a veiled favor, and a true favor.

In addition, the Cohen and Olshtain verbal report study of speech act production (1993) produced an interesting finding with regard to requesting. The study gave empirical backing to the fact that not all speaking tasks are created equal — that there are tasks which make far greater demands on learners than do others. The seemingly simple task of requesting a lift home from a teacher, for example, was the task which called for the most mental logistics in terms of selecting the language of thought and monitoring for pronunciation and grammar. Verbal report revealed that for the French-Hebrew-English trilingual, the request itself was the result of mental processing in three languages and of repeated internal debate as to which lexical word or phrase to choose. Respondents also reported doing more monitoring for pronunciation and grammar because they were speaking to their teacher.

Other speech acts

Bodman and Eisenstein (1988), cited earlier, investigated expressions of gratitude with speakers of various languages. Their corpus consisted of
ninety-eight role plays: thirty-four performed by native pairs, forty by nonnative pairs, and twenty-four by native speakers paired with nonnative speakers. They found thanking to be a speech act that was mutually developed by the two interlocutors. The giver (i.e., the person being thanked) was seen to be as active during the speech act as the thanker in commenting, prompting, and reacting, as well as in providing needed reassurance and approval. The thanker asked for favors, gifts, or services indirectly and, once these were offered, made ritual refusals and downplayed the giver's obligation. The investigators found that even advanced learners of English still had considerable difficulty in such thanking situations, requiring information on what to say or needing experience in attending to what native speakers said.

Beebe and Takahashi (1989a, 1989b) looked at the performance of American and advanced Japanese ESL speakers in three face-threatening acts: disagreement, giving embarrassing information, and chastisement. The researchers made notes about naturally occurring instances of face-threatening acts and asked fifteen American and fifteen Japanese respondents to do a discourse completion task in English with twelve situations and a choice of opting out. They found that, contrary to popular belief, the American respondents were not always more direct or more explicit than the Japanese respondents, nor did the Japanese always avoid disagreement or critical remarks. 20 Although both Japanese and American respondents used questions to warn, correct, disagree, chastise, or signal embarrassing information, the questions asked differed significantly in tone and content from one group to the other. In general, the Americans used positive remarks more frequently and in more places than did the Japanese.

Finally, the style of both the Japanese and the American respondents shifted in English according to the status of the interlocutor. The Japanese subjects were more outspoken if they did not like the boss's plan. To explain this, the investigators speculated that this candidness may have resulted from the context of second language learning—that is, their ESL guise influenced their behavior. Another explanation would be overcompensation in the efforts of the subjects to conform to their perception of the more direct speech patterns of American English.

Takahashi and Beebe (1993 in press) examined American and Japanese performance in the speech act of correction in language classrooms—a situation of status inequality in which a higher-status person, the teacher, corrects the error of a lower-status person, the student. The investigators gave a twelve-situation discourse completion task to fifteen native English speakers and fifteen Japanese speakers in Japan who responded in Japanese. They found that positive remarks were an important adjunct to face-threatening acts in English—"I agree with you, but..." Although 64 percent of Americans did this, only 13 percent of the Japanese speaking in Japanese did so. All groups used softeners such as "I believe" and "I think" and questions like "Did you say...?" In addition, they used expressions that played down the gravity of the mistake (e.g., "You made one small error in the date") or that defended the interlocutor. The Japanese respondents used softeners less frequently in the ESL context than did native English speakers. Both groups used more verbal softeners than did the Japanese respondents in Japanese, although paralinguistic means such as facial expressions, tone of voice, sighs, and hesitancy served that function among the last group. Although the Japanese were more overtly conscious of status and did not cover it up in their use of language, the Americans were found to harbor a polite fiction that they and their interlocutors were equals.

The acquisition of speech acts

To date, there appear to be only a few studies of the untutored acquisition of oral speech act behavior among nonnative speakers. One such study was conducted with elementary school children, and another study was conducted with college students.

Ellis (1992) looked at the extent to which communication in an ESL classroom in London resulted in the acquisition of requests by a 10-year-old Portuguese speaker and an 11-year-old Punjabi speaker. The latter had had little formal education in Pakistan. Ellis recorded 108 requests over 16 months for the former and 302 requests over 21 months for the latter. The researcher made a written record of everything the subjects said and had an audio recording as a backup. He found that both learners failed to develop a full range of request types and also lacked a broad linguistic repertoire for performing the types of requests that they were able to acquire. They also failed to develop the sociolinguistic competence needed to vary their choice of request to take account of different addressees. The researcher's interpretation was that the classroom lacked the conditions for the whole range of sociolinguistic needs even though it fostered interpersonal and expressive needs. There were no data, however, as to the kinds of requests the two boys were exposed to.

In the study with college students, Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1993a) conducted longitudinal research on the acquisition of pragmatic competence, specifically on the speech acts of suggestion and rejection. Ten advanced adult nonnative speakers of English were taped in two advising sessions over the course of a semester—an early and a

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20 They were most critical when talking to lower-status persons.
later session. The speech acts of suggestion and rejection were analyzed according to their frequency, form, and successf ulness and compared with similar data gathered from six native speakers. The nonnative speakers showed a change toward the native speaker norms in their ability to employ appropriate speech acts, moving toward using more suggestions and fewer rejections, and they became more successful negotiators. However, they changed less in their ability to employ appropriate forms of the two speech acts, continuing to use fewer mitigators than the native speakers. Furthermore, unlike native speakers, they also used aggravators. The investigators claimed that these results may be explained by the nature of the input: learners received positive and negative feedback from the adviser regarding the desirability and outcome of particular speech acts, but they did not receive such feedback regarding the appropriateness of the sociolinguistic forms that they used to realize those speech acts.

The teaching of speech acts

The fact that speech acts reflect, for the most part, routinized language behavior helps learning in the sense that much of what is said is predictable. For example, almost half the time an adjective is used in a compliment, it is either nice or good (e.g., "That’s a nice shirt you’re wearing" or "It was a good talk you gave"), with beautiful, pretty, and great making up another 15 percent (Wolfson & Manes, 1980). Yet despite the routinized nature of speech acts, there are still various strategies to choose from — depending on the sociocultural context — and often a variety of possible language forms for realizing these strategies, especially in the case of speech acts with four or more possible semantic formulas such as apologies and complaints. Target language learners may tend to respond the way they would in their native language and culture and find that their utterances are not at all appropriate for the target language and cultural situation.

The findings from a cross-cultural study by Cohen, Olsho tain, and Rosenstein (1986) can serve as an example of gaps between native and advanced nonnative apology behavior in English. The 180 respondents for this study included 84 native Hebrew-speaking advanced learners of English studying at one of five Israeli universities and a comparison group of 96 native speakers of American English studying at one of six U.S. universities. The basic finding was that nonnative speakers lacked sensitivity to certain sociolinguistic distinctions that native speakers make, such as between forms for realizing the semantic formula of expressing an apology, for example, excuse me and sorry. At least one of every five times a native speaker offered an expression of apology, it was with excuse me, whereas few nonnative speakers used this form. Nonnative speakers limited themselves to the use of sorry in contexts where excuse me would also be acceptable and possibly preferable.

Although native speakers and nonnative speakers did not seem to differ markedly in the use of main strategies for apologizing, striking differences emerged in the various modifications of such apologies, especially in the use of intensifiers such as very and really. Nonnative speakers intensified their expression of apology significantly more in one situation (forgetting to help a friend buy a bike) than did native speakers. This extra intensity on the part of the nonnative speakers was not necessarily warranted, given the generally low or moderate severity of the offense in that situation.

Non only did nonnative speakers tend to intensify more, but they also used a wider and more indiscriminate set of forms. Actually, the nonnative pattern was either to overgeneralize one of the forms (very and sorry) or to use a variety of forms (terribly, awfully, truly). The nonnative speakers did not use really in the way that the native speakers did. They attributed to the intensifier very the same semantic properties as to really, whereas the native speakers tended to make a distinction whereby really expressed a greater depth of apology, regret, and concern and very was used more for matters of social etiquette. For example, in a situation of scalding a friend with coffee in a cafeteria, the native speakers tended to use really sorry and nonnative speakers used very sorry, which sounded less intensified.

There is evidence that acquisition of nativelike production by nonnative speakers may take many years (Olshtain & Blum-Kulka, 1984) because the sociocultural strategies and the sociolinguistic forms are not always "picked up" easily. Hence, the question has arisen as to whether speech act strategies can be taught effectively. The research question is whether teachers would be contributing to the learners by explicitly teaching them some of the finely tuned speech act behavior that is not simply acquired over time. The rationale for doing this would be that learners do not necessarily have an adequate awareness of what is involved in complex speech behavior. The purpose of research would be to gather information that could then be used to prepare a course of instruction to teach gaps in speech act behavior.

At present, there are only a few published studies dealing with explicit teaching or tutoring of speech act behavior, but the findings seem promising. For example, Olshtain and Cohen (1990) conducted a study with advanced EFL learners in Israel, ten of whom were studying in private language schools and eight in a teachers college. Native speakers of American English provided baseline data for comparative purposes. The learners were pretested to determine gaps in their apologizing behavior. Then they were taught a set of three 20-minute lessons aimed
at filling in the gaps — information about the strategies within the apology speech act set and about modifications of apologies through the use of intensification and emotional adjectives. Finally, they were posttested to determine what was learned.

The findings suggested that the fine points of speech act behavior, such as (1) types of intensification and downgrading, (2) subtle differences between speech act strategy realizations, and (3) consideration of situational features, can be taught in the foreign language classroom. Whereas before the instruction, the nonnative speakers' apologies differed noticeably from those of the native speakers, after instruction, advanced learners were somewhat more likely to select apology strategies similar to those used by native speakers in that situation. For example, in a situation of forgetting to buy medicine for a neighbor's sick child, the response of one nonnative before training was a weak expression of responsibility ("Unfortunately not yet...") and an offer of repair ("... but I'll be happy to do it right now."). After training, it was an intensified expression of apology ("I'm really sorry.") and an offer of repair ("I can do it right now."). Furthermore, after training, nonnative speakers produced shorter utterances, also more in keeping with native behavior.

Prior to instruction, one learner responded verbosely to a situation of forgetting to meet a friend with "Did you wait for me? You must forgive me. I could not come because of problems and I tried to warn you by phone but..." This response was typical of learners at the advanced-intermediate stage of language acquisition who, when uncertain about how to say something, would overcompensate by using too many words (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1986). After training, the utterance was shorter: "Oh, I'm so sorry. I dropped out of my mind." Perhaps the area that met with most success was that of the use of intensifiers. Before training, intensifiers were generally absent in situations like forgetting to buy medicine for a neighbor's sick child (only 20 percent use). After training, intensifiers (e.g., "I'm really sorry I forgot...") were used in almost all cases (90 percent).

In another study involving the teaching of speech acts, Billmyer (1990) compared nine female Japanese ESL learners tutored in complimenting and responding to compliments with nine similar learners who were untutored in complimenting. The study assessed not just the speech act but the reply — that is, whether the respondent accepted, deflected, or rejected the compliment — and the types of deflecting moves (a comment, a shift of credit, a downgrade, a request for reassurance, or a return). It was found that learners who were tutored in complimenting produced a greater number of norm-appropriate compliments, produced spontaneous compliments (which the untutored group did not), used a more extensive repertoire of semantically positive adjectives, and deflected many more compliments in their reply. The researcher concluded that formal classroom instruction concerning the social rules of language use can assist learners in communicating more appropriately with native speakers outside the classroom.

In a small-scale instructional study, a group of three intermediate ESL students received 70 minutes of training in refusal strategies in a conversation class (which the researchers admit may have been too little), and three others just received conversation on getting to know Americans (King & Silver, 1993). Pretests and posttests consisted of a written discourse questionnaire on refusals — without rejoinders. In addition, to elicit a spoken refusal, 2 weeks after instruction, participants were telephoned and asked to perform a burdensome activity known to conflict with their schedule (to give a talk when they had a class and to set up an information booth on exam day).

Results from the questionnaire indicated that instruction had had little effect, and the telephone interview indicated no effect. A large disparity between the written and the spoken refusal strategies was found. Although the study did not describe the responses in any detail, they apparently included saying something to make the person feel good before refusing, using a starter ("Let me see..."), using "That's too bad" instead of "I'm sorry" (which nonnative speakers overuse), and using specific rather than general excuses. The researchers were surprised to find that the telephone conversation prompted many fewer strategies than did the discourse completion task.

Finally, Dunham (1992) describes an informal study of 45 Southeast Asian high school students, employing the complimenting strategy as outlined by Wolfson. The students in the study were instructed on how to connect, that is, to maintain or continue the conversation based on the response of the addressee. Feedback from the students concerning their use of complimenting and connecting was encouraging and often resulted in increased confidence in initiating and maintaining conversations with native speakers.

The author then describes a series of ten techniques for teaching complimenting behavior (Dunham, 1992, pp. 82–83): reviewing how it is done in the native culture, reviewing how it is done in the United States, vocabulary phrase lists, student practice, role playing in pairs, teacher role play with students in front of the class, projects in which learners must compliment native speakers, students' oral reports to the class following their field experiences with native speakers, connecting techniques to lengthen conversation, and paired interaction with complimenting and connecting techniques.
Implications for the language teacher, the learner, and the language classroom

Undoubtedly, a review of this nature leaves many questions unanswered. The field of sociolinguistics deals with variation and looks as much at how people differ in their speech behaviors as it does at how they are similar. Hence, it is somewhat risky to make assertions about the way that native speakers say X, Y, or Z. All the same, it is evident that there are somewhat predictable alternatives for how native speakers perform certain routinized speech acts, and these patterns can be and have been described and can be passed on to nonnative speakers as useful insights into how the language functions in communicative situations.

The role of the teacher-researcher can be to obtain some information on how native speakers perform certain important speech acts, such as requesting, complaining, and apologizing. This sounds like a tall order, but information is already available in some of the more empirically based textbooks. Other sources of information are available in the research literature (e.g., works cited in this chapter). If information is not available, a valid means for obtaining it is through observing speech acts as they occur naturally. As noted in this chapter, however, this may not be a very efficient means of obtaining data, especially if fine-tuned distinctions are desired. So, there is a need to turn to more contrived means whereby data are elicited in a more or less structured way.

Actually, if learners have access to native-speaking informants (more likely in a second language than in a foreign language learning experience), they could elicit speech act samples from the native speakers. In fact, this approach may enhance the learning process more than if the teacher were simply to lay out the possible alternatives in class.

Once descriptions of the speech acts are made available, the next task is to determine the degree of control that learners have over those speech acts through the multiple measures already suggested — role play, discourse completion tasks, verbal report interviews, and acceptability ratings. Ideally, this information could then be used to prepare a course of instruction that would fill in the gaps in language knowledge and also give tips on strategies that might be useful for producing utterances. The role of the learners is to notice similarities and differences between the way that native speakers perform such speech acts and the way that they do — which is often influenced to some extent by the way they would perform such communicative functions in their native language.

The following is a brief review of techniques for teaching speech acts. There are various means for presenting and rehearsing the use of speech acts. Whatever approach is used, it is always necessary to specify the situation (e.g., student making request of professor, patron complaining to waiter) and to indicate the social factors involved (age, sex, social class and occupation, roles in the interaction, status of the participants) and then to match the situation and the social factors with the most common realizations of the speech act. It is important for learners to realize, for example, that in English, neglecting to intensify an expression of apology dilutes the apology, and hence the apology might not be adequate when interacting with friends or interlocutors who have a higher status than they do. Untintensified apologies are more common with strangers and are appropriate when the infraction is not severe. Continuing with the example of apologizing, learners need to become aware that intensification with the word very is not always perceived as true intensification, since really is more common as an intensifier in colloquial American English. In order for learners to become aware of the preferred sociolinguistic forms for apologies, they need to be given the chance to compare apologies in a variety of contexts, carefully considering the similarities and differences.

The planning and implementation of lessons on speech acts could involve, among other things, the following five steps (adapted from Olshtain & Cohen, 1991):

1. Diagnostic assessment is often the first step which helps the teacher determine the students' level of awareness of speech acts in general and of the particular speech act to be taught. Such assessment can be done through acceptability ratings, to reveal perception of speech acts, or through discourse completion tasks or role play, to assess the ability to produce the speech acts. Such assessment can be done orally, in writing, or through a combination of the two. For example, in a task of speech act perception of acceptability, the student can be presented with a situation followed by a number of possible responses. For instance, suppose that one accidentally bumps into an older person in a department store, causing her to drop some packages. Which of the following apologies would be most appropriate? (1) “Forgive me, please.” (2) “I'm really sorry. Are you okay?” (3) “Lady, such things happen.” (4) “Hey, watch where you're going.”

If the students choose item 1, it may be a translation from what they would say in their native language. If they choose item 3 or 4, they may not see the event as constituting an infraction. In some cultures, bumping goes on so often in crowded places that apologizing would seem superfluous. If students choose item 2, they would be considered to have some grasp of what is appropriate in this instance. Production tasks could also be used; in this case, the lear-
ers are not given choices but instead provide their own responses. Once results have been obtained on such assessment measures, it becomes easier for the teacher to plan teaching goals and procedures.

2. Model dialogues are a useful way to present students with examples of the speech act in use. These dialogues should be short and natural sounding. At the first stage, the students listen and identify the speech act(s) of concern. Then they are given the dialogues without the information concerning the particular situation, and they must guess whether the people speaking know each other, if they are of the same age, and, in the case of an apology or complaint, for example, whether the matter of concern constituted a serious offense. These considerations, which can be discussed in groups, help sensitize students to the sociocultural factors that affect speech acts. These model dialogues can be used to focus attention on key distinctions, such as between different intensifiers of apologies like *very* and *really*.

3. The evaluation of a situation is a useful technique to further reinforce the learners’ awareness of the factors affecting the choice of semantic formulas. In this activity they are given a set of complaint or apology situations, for example, and for each they must decide, in pairs or small groups, whether the violation requiring the complaint or apology is mild or severe, whether the complainer or apologist needs to intensify the complaint or apology, whether the hearer is likely to accept to accept the apology or provide a remedy to the complaint without further ado, and whether a certain situation-specific strategy is called for.

4. Role-play activities are particularly suitable for practicing the use of speech acts. Here it is important to supply the learners with ample information about the interlocutors who are going to interact in the conversation and about the situation. Thus, for a complaint situation, the students may receive a card or see a video clip of a situation in which one role is that of a neighbor who is having a party and playing loud music late at night and the other is that of the person in an adjacent apartment who needs to get to sleep because she or he must take an important exam the next morning. The learners provide the details of the violation and then act out, in role-play fashion, the conversation which is likely to take place between the two interlocutors.

5. Feedback and discussion are useful activities for speech act teaching because students need to talk about their perceptions, expectations, and awareness of similarities and differences between speech act behavior in the target language and in their first culture. Such feed-

back relating to the role plays, for example, and further discussion with a larger group of learners help participants become more aware of speech act behavior and help them recognize areas of negative transfer where communication failure may occur.

These five steps or techniques are but some examples of the kind of activities that might be appropriate for speech act teaching, but they reflect the need to expose students first to the common realization patterns, then to gradually make them understand some of the factors involved, and finally to enable them to practice the use of the speech act set. Even if, as a result of such carefully planned activities, learners do not necessarily begin to behave like native speakers, they have a good chance of becoming better listeners and of reacting more appropriately to what native speakers say to them. Needless to say, it is imperative for the sake of language instruction to continue the research efforts necessary to provide accurate information regarding the way speech acts actually work in communicative situations within differing languages and cultures.

Suggestions for further reading


This article asserts that learning appropriate forms of English is necessary for language fluency. The author believes, however, that many teachers are unaware of what comprises pragmatic competence in English. She describes a way to develop ESOL teachers' pragmatic awareness so that they can better teach the rules of language appropriateness to their students. The project was designed as part of in-service teacher training at Indiana University and was intended to increase awareness of pragmatics through direct observation of speech acts in context (e.g., expressions of gratitude and replies, apologies, commands, greetings, complaints, polite requests for action, invitations). The course involved background reading, data collection from native speakers through observation and elicitation for 3 to 6 weeks, discussion, evaluation of approximately fifteen textbooks, and development of pragmatically appropriate materials (with the scope varying from discrete lessons to larger units).


The author presents a model for the study of interlanguage pragmatics which expands interlanguage to embrace intercultural dimensions. She focuses on the pragmatics of requests and discusses constraints (level of proficiency, transfer from L1, perception of target language norms, and length of stay in the target community). She presents data from bilingual English-Hebrew immigrant speech acts, showing that the behavior is dif-
different from Israeli and from American patterns — authentically intercultural. The author claims that native Israeli norms are defined because learners do not wish to identify with such native speaker norms.


The authors examine why it is important to study speech acts — their cultural specificity and contrastive pragmatics. They describe the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) — looking at requests and apologies across languages and within speech communities with different social variables operating. They discuss the use of the discourse completion task, that is, an incomplete dialogue with a section to be filled in (in writing) by the respondent. They then present some data from requests and apologies in their various studies using the discourse completion task. They list the nine request types they found (i.e., performatives to hints). They close with implications for foreign language teaching.


This book examines the impact of sociolinguistics on the TESOL profession, reviews new material and current issues, and provides a historical overview and critical discussion of research methods. Chapter 4 deals with the sociolinguistic behavior of English speakers and, especially, with forms of address, apologies, requests, disapproval, refusals, the expression of gratitude, and so forth.

References


To those who view literacy as an individual skill, it may be surprising to see a chapter on literacy in a sociolinguistics text. Yet, for those who view literacy as a social practice, literacy is an essential component of the study of sociolinguistics. One purpose of this chapter is to illuminate the debate between those who view literacy as an individual skill and those who see it as a social practice and to point out the dangers of ignoring the social aspect of literacy. This chapter supports the notion that literacy is a complex interplay between both individual skills and social knowledge. However, since the focus of this book is on the interaction between language and society, the chapter will emphasize the ways in which literate behavior is dependent on the social context. The chapter will examine four aspects of literacy as it relates to the social context — (1) as a collaborative practice, (2) as a reflection of community values and traditions about how to approach texts, (3) as a reflection of cultural values and traditions about text and topic development, and (4) as a reflection of social relationships as well as a vehicle for changing the status quo. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of the pedagogical implications of viewing literacy as a social practice for language classrooms in Anglophone countries. Throughout the chapter, the term text will be used to refer to any printed material, ranging from signs and forms to extended academic prose.

As the title suggests, it is assumed in this chapter that literacy is multidimensional. Different contexts demand different types of literacy expertise. The ability to fill out an employment application calls for very different kinds of literacy expertise than does writing an academic paper. Speech communities can encourage individuals to interact with texts in different ways. Reading a story out loud in a speech community which encourages listeners to participate in storytelling is a different experience from reading a story in a speech community in which listeners are discouraged from participating. Finally, cultures can foster specific rhetorical traditions. A business letter written in English for a Western audience rests on different assumptions about the appropriate organizational pattern and the writer-audience relationship than does a business letter written in Japanese for a Japanese audience.