Speaking with intent: Pragmatics in the AMEP

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Pragmatics: The ‘secret rules of speaking’

• What is pragmatics?
• What do learners need to know?
• How can we teach it?
Pragmatics: The ‘secret rules of speaking’

- Making and understanding meaning in context.
- We often don’t say exactly what we mean.
- Conventions of speaking
  - Sociocultural - Cultural values, roles and expectations (socio-pragmatic)
  - Linguistic - Ways of expressing and signalling things in English (pragmalinguistic)
- Differ across situations, cultures and times
How do we really say things?

Task

You are a business woman/man working in a company. Yesterday your fiance(e) in the U.S. called you and said that s/he will arrive in Australia tomorrow at 3.00 in the afternoon. Since it takes at least 2 hrs to get to the airport, ask your boss for the afternoon off.
At the sociocultural level

• Roles and relationships:
  – Boss-employee

• Values reflected in communication:
  – ‘It’s good to show rank’
    • Overt displays of respect/ hierarchy
  – It’s good to be formal
    • Formal/ informal; jocular/ serious

• Topic:
  – Personal reasons for time off?
At the linguistic level

• How much small talk is needed?
• How much softening is needed?
• What softening devices there are:
  – Would you be able to ..........
  – I was wondering if I could ..... 
• ‘Can you’ / ‘you do’ in other languages
• Use of stress and intonation
At the paralinguistic level

- Body language
- Touch
- Distance from addressee
- Facial expression
- Eye contact
- Voice quality
Language socialisation

• We learn how to do things in a language at an early age
  – e.g. how to make a polite request, an indirect refusal
• Speakers in different cultures have different ways of seeing roles, relationships and communication.
• Speakers in different cultures have different ways of expressing politeness, feelings, respect etc.
What happens when we speak another language?

- Transfer of the ‘secret rules’
- Speakers and interlocutors cannot always see what is going wrong
- Speaker seen as rude, uncooperative etc.
- Unhelpful stereotypes develop
- We cannot always learn simply by listening
How do we really say things?

• Speaker intuitions are notoriously unreliable
• Best behaviour/ telephone voice phenomenon
• Teacher on ‘Learning how to mean project’:

‘cause I thought what’s going on here? – I couldn’t work it out...but it was something that sounded quite natural when it came out, but, it’s something I’d never teach in a million years.’
When you look at what people really say, life gets interesting….  

Three Australian projects:  

1. Teachers project (Yates 2000)  
   - How do Anglo background and Chinese background teachers direct student activity?  

2. Learning how to mean project (Wigglesworth and Yates)  
   - How do NS and NNS negotiate leave?  

3. Generic skills project (Yates, Guilfoyle and Howell)  
   - How do NS negotiate a problematic exchange?
Teachers project

• Anglo background and Chinese background trainee teachers recorded in Australian secondary classrooms
• The use of softeners in directives (requests) analysed and counted.
• Both more formal, distancing softeners, (e.g. please) and less formal, softeners (e.g. colloquial language)

  — So *come in* quietly.
  — Quietly year seven
  — *Excuse me* year seven *could you* go back outside and line up *please.*
Use of softeners with requests
What ‘secret rules’ were they following?

People have individual styles in softening directives, but:

– Anglo background used softeners used more often (particularly females)
– Chinese background used formal distancing devices:
  • please, could you, would you
– And did not use solidarity markers like Anglo background
  • eg. ‘guys’, ‘mate’, colloquial language, humour
Some possible implications

• Chinese background who did not soften their directives seen as ‘bossy’?
  – Need awareness of sociocultural and linguistic aspects of softening

• Chinese background who use formal devices but do not use solidary devices seen as cold?

  e.g. Teaching swimming:
  
  AB: Get out of the pool *mate*, your nose is all bloody
  CB: .. could you please move to the deep side

  – Raise awareness of and explore tenor of teacher-student relationship and how this is signalled
Learning how to mean project: Negotiating leave

Participant Card
You have 4 weeks annual leave available this year. You would like to take 3 weeks leave now, even though it is a busy time at your workplace. Talk to your manager about this situation, explain why you want to take the leave now and negotiate a solution.

Interviewer Card
You are the manager of a workplace. One of your employees has applied to take 3 weeks of their 4 weeks annual leave now. It is a particularly busy time at your workplace. Find out why he/she wants to take leave now. Explain that employees normally take leave at Christmas when things are quieter. Ask the employee to suggest ways to resolve the situation.
What ‘secret rules’ were they following?

Differences in task role play by NS and NNs:

- Asking a favour vs collaborating in solving a problem, e.g.
  
  E: Oh, good morning (name). Er, could you, could you help me about this er this problem. …..

- More ‘respect’ greetings by NNS, e.g. Good morning manager

- More NS prepared request with greetings, ‘let’s talk’ routines, context, and rapport e.g.

  ‘Let’s talk’:
  
  E: oh hello (name) are you busy? I was ah just ah wondering if I could talk to you a little bit about annual leave

  Rapport:
  
  E: oo I don’t think you’re going to be very happy with me
  B: oh dear that sounds a bit ominous
  B: oo I’ve got to do a bit of grovelling
NS prepared for the request

• Ns used significantly more disarmers:
  – Look I know this is probably ahm () an awkward time

• Disarmers used by NNS not successful, e.g. :
  – You know its a very busy now

• Stress and intonation very important!!

• NS made more offers
  – e.g. I could get one of the others to cover for me
NS used more softeners

• Word choice
  e.g. and I really would appreciate being able to take a couple of weeks now in maybe 2 or 3 weeks

• ‘Just’
  e.g. I'm just wondering if I can have 3 weeks off.

• Hedges
  e.g. What I was thinking is maybe I could take the 10 days..

• Embedding: I was wondering if…..

• Continuous: I was hoping…..

• Used past tense differently: I wanted to ask if…..
So what can we teach?

• How to structure the request event
  – Pre-acts such as ‘Are you busy’ or ‘Have you got a moment?’

• Focus on cultural roles and values
  – Use of names / titles
  – Apparent egalitarianism

• Useful formulae that can be easily taught
  – Disarmers
  – Greetings

• Specific phrases and devices
  – ‘just’, ‘be able to’
  – Continuous, embedding, use of past
Developing Generic skills project

- NS role plays using generic negotiating skills in requesting and complaining
- Focus on ‘secret rules’ of:
  - What moves to make
  - How we soften threatening information
  - How we intensify positive expressions or acts
  - How to be politely assertive
  - How to avoid conflict
  - How to react to information
  - How to link turns
- Teaching materials to be published with tape in Teaching Guide on generic skills
Approaching pragmatics

- Secret rules often relate to deeply held values, e.g. It’s good to be silent, it’s insincere to say thank you, it’s good to show rank
- People do not always notice them for what they are
- People may not want to (or be allowed to) change the way they do things.
- Not ‘Anglising’ but offering choices so that they can understand their options and the impact of the way they choose to speak

!From the beginning at all levels!
Approaching pragmatics in the classroom

1. Use texts based on authentic language
2. Raise awareness of the secret rules
3. Have learners compare with C1 and reflect
4. Have learners identify examples in context
5. Get them to practise and experiment (the third cultural place)
6. Give them the tools to do their own ‘analysis’
• Awareness

In the Mood: Introducing Pragmatic Awareness at Low Levels,
Politeness is More than “Please”,
Greetings with a Difference

• Conversational Management

Promoting Solidarity in Short Interactions
Discourse Markers “Well” and “Oh”
“Actually, the Deadline was Friday of Last Week, Not This Week...” Polite Ways of Correcting or Contradicting
Listen Actively! You Can Keep that Conversation Going!
• Conversational Openings and Closings
  Hello! I Must Be Going!
  How Do You Say Goodbye?
  Telephone Conversation Openings
• Requests
  The Pragmatics Action Maze
  Softening Short Requests
• Assorted Speech Acts
  The Rules of the Queue
  Giving and Responding to Compliments

http://exchanges.state.gov/education/engteaching/pragmatics.htm
Where to go from here: The Pragmatics toolbox

• Need to raise our own awareness of how things are really done in English
• Need to help students become more aware of the choices they make and the impact these have
• Need to help them become ‘researchers’ so that they can find out more for themselves
Scaffolding learning about pragmatics

• At the level of values:
  – Comparison of dialogues – discussion of roles, rights etc.
  – Analysis of greetings, acts, tone – communicative values
  – Reflection and comparison with C1

• At the level of structure
  – Analysis of dialogues – what moves, how are they done?
  – Reflection and comparison with C1

• At the level of linguistic devices
  – Identification in context
  – Analysis of force and function
  – Reflection and comparison with C1
  – Practice in and out of context
Types of activities

• Analysis of dialogues:
  – Identifying stages of an event
  – ‘Find the…’
• Sorting activities:
  – Order moves in a dialogue
• Dialogue matching:
  – Match initiation and response
  – Mingle activities (e.g. I think it’s nearly the end of the session)
• Gap-fills for mitigating devices
• ‘Ranking’ activities for:
  – Request forms, difficulty of request/refusal etc
• Drills!!!
• ‘Improving’ dialogues
• Role plays (following preparation)
Olga wants to take two weeks leave from her job. It’s a very busy time at work at the moment. She goes to ask her boss, Steve, for some leave.

Activity 1: Listen to the two role plays

What are the differences between the two?
- Who speaks first?
- How does Olga address her boss?
- Which dialogue is longer? Why?
- Which one do you think is more successful? Why?
Activity 2:

In dialogue 2, Olga makes her request in a number of stages. Listen to the dialogue again, and try to pick out what you can of what Olga says in each of these stages.

Now look at the list of her utterances listed below. Put each one in the box next to the stage of the dialogue when she uses it.
Activity 2: chart

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stages</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Greeting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-request/Support moves</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The request</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reason</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offer/support move</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ranking activities

• Could I maybe …
• I want to …
• I’m wondering if I could …
• Can you just …
• Would it be possible for me to …
• I’d like to …
• I was thinking I might be able to…if that’s ok