Complex requests and learners from Sudan

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Project

• **Aim**
  - to understand and complex requests in English by Dinka speakers from Sudan
  - to compare these to requests by native speakers of Australian English
  - to provide the basis for classroom materials
What has been your impression of the interactive style of learners from Southern Sudan?
Interlocutor impression

• Many students were very strong in negotiating in terms of trying to get me to agree to their request. Very few seemed to make “offers”. I felt like I was being compelled to make offers
Motivation for project

Reports of assertive behaviour

Very little on literature on
A) interactive behaviour of learners from this part of Africa
B) teaching material on this

Native speaking data on complex requests from previous study for comparison
What we did

• 2 roleplay tasks from Cert III (with teacher)
• Dinka background students at Cert III (speaking) around Victoria
• Background information, roleplay performance and comments on why
• Analysis using ATLAS
• Comparison with native speakers and learners from other (mixed) backgrounds
Task 1: Requesting annual 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.

**Interlocutor 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.
Task 2: Changing job interview

**Participant Card**
You have an appointment for a job interview with an employment agency tomorrow. The time that has been arranged is not convenient for you.
Go to the agency, introduce yourself and explain the situation
Try and arrange another time for the interview

**Interlocutor Card**
You work at an employment agency. A job seeker calls in and wants to change the interview time you have arranged for him/her tomorrow, claiming that it is not convenient. Find out why the time is inconvenient. Point out that there are a number of applicants for the job and a limited time set aside for interviews. Ask the job seeker to suggest ways to resolve the situation
Possible sources of difference

• **Sociocultural issues**: transfer of cultural values e.g. learners incorrectly assess rights and obligations of the situation, what the underlying ‘game’ is, what kind of strategies are usual, what stance to take etc.

• **Language-related**: learners are not aware of the range of mitigating devices available, their force or how they are used, by whom and when etc.
The data: Total 180 dialogues

3 teachers conducting 2 role play tasks with:
- 30 NNS (15 m/ 15 f)
- 30 NS (15 m/ 15 f)

1 teacher conducting 2 role play tasks with:
- 30 DS (24 m/ 6 f)

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We coded for four aspects of mitigation

- Directness/assertiveness of requests (semantic formulae)
- Syntactic modifications to requests
- Lexical additions to requests and support moves
- Propositional support for requests
- Evidence of sociocultural values: relational work and stance (e.g. greetings, address forms, level of formality) type and sequence of acts
Directness of request proper

**Apparently assertive (direct)**
I want to change the time

**Apparently advisory (conventionally indirect)**
Maybe I could take the extra week I haven’t had yet

**Apparently negotiable (conventionally indirect)**
So could we sort of do something about my leave now

**Non-explicit negotiable (hints)**
I really need to know what leave is available to me
Request formula used by three groups

- Int req
- Hint
- A/N
- AA
- Ass

Request formula

CAL
NNS
NS
Direct requests: findings

• DS used more direct requests and fewer ‘apparently negotiable’ (e.g. can you....) than either NS or NNS

• DS left it to the interviewer to make the request more often
Syntactic mitigation

*Past marking*
I just wanted to …; I was just wondering if I could have a minute of your time

*Modals*
I’d like to take some annual leave; I was wondering if we might …

*Continuous*
I’m really hoping to …

*Embedding*
I was just wondering if it would be possible
Types of syntactic mitigation

- Past
- Modal
- Contin
- Embed tot

- CAL
- NNS
- NS
Syntactic mitigation

DS used less past, modal and continuous than NS, just like other NNS

DS used less embedding than NS, but used it more than NNS (51/8/84)

Why? Greater grammatical competence? (Of these 14/51 non-standard)
Lexical Mitigation

Downtoner- just
I just need these three weeks to finish that

Understater
I really would appreciate being able to

Hedge
Maybe I could take the take days that I haven’t had yet

Consultative device
would that be okay with you?

Empathetic marker
I think/ know/ realise/ feel…, I [can] understand, appreciate…,

Interpersonal marker
You know what I mean.. you see… you know…

Upgraders
I really really think you should do this, etc.
Types of lexical mitigation

- just
- under
- hedge
- consult
- empath
- interper
- upgrad

Legend:
- CAL
- NNS
- NS
Findings: Lexical mitigation

- DS were similar to NNS in using ‘just’ and understaters’ less often, used hedging a little more often than NNS.
- DS used empathy, interpersonal markers and upgrading much less often than either NNS and NS.
- DS used more consultative devices similar to NS.
DS used fewer interpersonal markers showing connection

Fewer interpersonal markers (22), and with a different impact e.g. DS

- P18: as *you know* you are my manager,
- P 5: Umm *you know* I am going to finish at two o’clock

cf. NS (43) used them to signal connection:

- P38: it’s just like um *you know* like I said
- P41: *you know* I don't mind working
- P41: working extra extra time *you know* during Christmas and that
DS projected less empathy

• DS (7)
  - P 3: You know, I *know I know* we are so busy now, I know
  - P24: I *know* you are busy, all are busy

• cf NS (67)
  - I *realise* how hard it is
  - I *know* that it's not a lot of ahm ahhh notice
  - I *understand* I really do

• but used many more consultative phrases which left responsibility with boss/system .....
DS left responsibility to interlocutor

DS similar frequency as NS, but many more which ‘passed the buck’:

P 1: could you mind to arrange for me
P 2: what would you advise me to do?
P18: may you grant me if possible
   Cf NS
P39: okay is there any way I could make that later in the day
P40: how about if I tried to organize something with one of the staff members
Propositional Mitigation

**Greeting/name**
[Name] hi, have you got a moment

**Context**
I have some holiday left

**Reason**
ah well my wife at the moment she’s a bit ill

**Preparator**
I was wondering if I could have a minute of your time

**Rapport**
ooh I’ve got to do a bit of grovelling

**Disarmer**
I know it’s not a good time of the year
Propositional mitigation

Types of propositions:
- gr/tit/nam
- reason
- prep
- context
- rapport
- disarm

Legend:
- CAL
- NNS
- NS
Findings: Propositional mitigation

- DS used reasons and rapport more often than either NNS or NS
- DS used context more often than NNS, like NS
- DS used preparators and disarmers less often than either NNS or NS
Request stance and preparation:

- NS – signalled empathy and mutual responsibility
  - (disarmers, empathetic markers, interpersonal markers, consultative devices)
- DS – more often left it to interlocutor to work out a solution
- NS – espec. in ‘leave’ -prepared for their request with pre-acts such as ‘let’s talk’ routines
Why do DS learners sound insistent?

• More direct requests
• Less syntactic and lexical mitigation than NS (like NNS)
• Also more (repetition of) reasons
• Also devolution of problem to interlocutor
• Less attempt to disarm and sort out a solution
• Delivery?
Sociocultural issues

- DS learners often have little experience of sociocultural aspects of workplace (paid leave, rights and obligations, relative role of work)
- Used a reason that could not be refused
- If mother was ill, boss would take me there himself
- Repetition of same strategy
Little understanding of sociocutural conventions around work

• Many never worked before, so tasks unfamiliar (eg ps 9, 15, 17, 18, 29)

• Many only had experience of casual work before coming to Aus (eg ps 5, 7, 14, 21, 30)
  ▪ P 15; concept of annual leave was new, needed to check acceptable reasons
  ▪ P 11; previous work in Sudan (travel business) “cashed in his holidays” i.e. get paid extra to work and not take leave
Different views of work/boss

P 3: ‘In Sudan if you give a reason such as you need to go and help your community, do something for your family, it is a very strong reason and the manager would be looked down upon if they refused. Work is not seen as being more important than doing something for your family or community…If for example you said your mother is in hospital your manager likely to offer to go and visit with you.’
Some implications for teaching

- Concepts and system in Australia on workplace conditions/rights/responsibilities
- Request forms
- Alternatives to repeated reasons for persuasion
  - Delivery e.g. signalling empathy, disarming
  - The use of lexis and syntax to soften
  - Staging of requests, preparation,
  - Concept of “offers” and negotiating
- Awareness raising for employers on importance of family/community
Thank you

Any Questions?
Project

• NB participant 9: I commented that she was very strong in her arguing and persuasive. I asked her what she would have done if I had not offered an alternative...she said she would have kept going to convince me

• Participant 17: very hard to get a compromise (NB first day of class and never worked.)

• Participant 18; very strong in arguing..saw it as employer responsibility to assist him in his goals

• Participant 2 did make an offer for his brother to come and help in his absence..I asked him about this and he said it might help you get to keep your job..it’s not your responsibility (to do it) but you have the chance of leaving or arranging a solution so you can come back.
My general subjective comments on performances and interviews

Most students seemed to launch into request without any preparation

General level of English felt better than my memory of last NNS students..greater use of tense, intensifiers, qualifiers etc..

A number of students felt quite assertive verging on intransigent on negotiating

A number of their reason for leave seemed quite compelling and made it hard for me to negotiate too strongly

Some display of an attitude that “you owe me..” ie I am new in this country, been through hardship and Australia in general has a responsibility to help me achieve my goals”

students generally interested in participating and interested in learning about workplace related learning