

# Strategic Solution of Sociopragmatic Problems in Using World Englishes

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This study investigates what sociopragmatic strategies are necessary to use World Englishes. For this purpose, a questionnaire survey was conducted targeting four different English-speaking regions which represent, in Kachru's terms, the inner circle (the U.S.), the outer circle (Singapore and Hong Kong), and the expanding circle (Japan). From among the six speech acts originally investigated in this survey, two (apology and request) were selected to make cross-regional comparisons of the responses.

The findings reveal some clear patterns of variation in strategy use among the four groups, and these findings present various pedagogical implications that are necessary for both language researchers and practitioners. The ultimate goal of this study is to show how different strategies underlie the surface linguistic forms of sociopragmatic competence and to discuss the pedagogical implications, especially from the perspective of teaching English as a foreign language.

本稿は、World Englishesを使用するのにどのような社会語用論的方略が必要であるかについて論じている。この目的のため、本研究では、カチュラーの分類に基づき、4つの英語使用地域の英語話者を対象にアンケート調査を実施した。4つの地域とは、inner circle (アメリカ)、outer circle (シンガポール、香港)、それに expanding

circle (日本) である。アンケートで調査した6つの発話行為のうち、本稿では2つ(「お詫び」と「依頼」)を採りあげ、得られた回答をこれらの異文化グループ間で比較分析した。

分析の結果、4つのグループ間には発話行為に用いられる方略に顕著な差異が見いだされた。こうした違いは言語教育に携わる研究者、教師のいずれにとっても重要な教育的意味合いを含んでいると思われる。得られた結果に基づき、本稿では、外国語としての英語教育(EFL)の観点から、社会語用論的能力によって表層化された言語形式にどのような方略的要因が含まれているかを明らかにし、その教育的示唆について考察している。

One of the most difficult questions facing teachers in an EFL (English as a foreign language) context is what variety of English we should be teaching. It used to be a fairly easy choice between British or American English, but now the choices have become much more complex. As a result of the widespread use of English on a global scale, numerous varieties have been emerging from different cultural identities that do not necessarily correspond to those in a native-speaker (NS) context like the U.K. or the U.S. Such new varieties are often referred to as “New Englishes” (e.g., McArthur, 1998). One useful categorization of English varieties is Kachru’s (1990, 1997) model. The model postulates an inner circle (where English is spoken mainly as a native language), an outer circle (where English has an official status but is spoken mainly as a second language, ESL), and an

expanding circle (where English is recognized as an important language for international communication and is taught as a foreign language).

A number of ideological controversies on the status of the English language (e.g., Phillipson, 1992; Tsuda 1997) have emerged. As discussed in Horibe (2000), ideological perspectives range from the positive view of English as a success story (“Cinderella”) to the critical view of English as a monster (“Godzilla”) destroying the linguistic balance in the world. Acknowledging these ideological issues, in this study we are focusing on more practical, pedagogical issues related to the question of which variety or varieties of English to teach our EFL students.

Besides the basic differences in pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary choice among linguistic varieties, a more difficult area for both teachers and students concerns the sociopragmatic choices of appropriate language use in context. In particular, “face-threatening” speech acts (Brown & Levinson, 1987), i.e., actions performed through words that potentially lead to embarrassment or other negative consequences, can lead to serious misunderstandings across cultures. For example, in recent years what constitutes an apology and what form is acceptable to the injured party has proved problematic between Japan and its Asian neighbors (over issues related to World War II) and between Europe/America and Africa (over slavery). A particularly vivid

example was provided in the spring of 2001, when a U.S. plane made an emergency landing in China after a midair collision, and the Chinese government refused to release the crew and plane until the U.S. government said it was “very, very sorry.”

One impetus for this study was to gain a better understanding of cross-cultural variation in solutions to sociopragmatic problems among both native and non-native speakers (NNS) of English. By sociopragmatic problems, we mean face-threatening social situations, such as those referred to above, that require appropriate linguistic utterances in order to create or maintain positive social relations among the participants.

### This Study

To investigate sociolinguistic variants and to derive pedagogical implications for EFL instruction, a questionnaire survey by means of a Discourse Completion Test (DCT) was conducted in this study, selecting four different English-speaking communities on the basis of Kachru’s model stated above. These included a native-speaker (inner circle) context: the United States; an ESL (outer circle) context: Singapore; and an EFL (expanding circle) context: Japan. It also included a fourth community, Hong Kong, which we considered less clear-cut in terms of its status as an ESL or EFL context but arguably closer to an EFL context. The total number of respondents in each region came to

100 from the U.S. (US), 71 from Singapore (SG), 100 from Japan (JN), and 44 from Hong Kong (HK). All were university students in relatively prestigious public universities.

Among six speech acts investigated in the original survey, this study focuses on strategic realization of sociopragmatic competence in two speech acts: apology and request. Two different situations were specified for each speech act to examine register effects (one situation to an intimate interlocutor, i.e., a friend, and the other to a higher status interlocutor, i.e., a college professor). The following are brief summaries of these situations:

- a) A speaker accidentally broke a vase at a friend’s house. (Apology to a friend)
- b) A speaker unintentionally broke a promise of helping a professor for a research project. (Apology to a professor)
- c) Having missed a class, a speaker wants to borrow the notes from a classmate. (Request to a friend)
- d) A speaker wants to get information on a missed class from the professor who taught it. (Request to a professor)

### Main Findings

The responses were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively, and various patterns were found in the respondents’ strategic attempts to respond to these

situations. Among them, the most overtly notable features are reported in this study (more detailed results including statistical analyses are presented in Iwai & Rinnert 2001). Table 1 presents the major findings, which are explained below.

*Table 1: Summary of Main Findings*

Speech Acts	Interlocutor	Features	US	SG	HK	JN
Apology	Friend / Prof	Repetition	X	O	O	O
	Friend	Apology only	X	X	O	O
	Friend / Prof	Intensifier	O	O	X	X
	Professor	Repair Q	X	O	O	X
	Professor	Mitigation	?	O	O	X
Request	Friend	Dominance	S	H	H	H
	Friend	Head act	Pm	Abl/ Pm	Abl/ Pm/ Wil	Dir/ Des
	Professor	Desire	X	O	O	O
	Professor	Apology	X	O	O	X
	Friend / Prof	Please	X	X	X	O
	Friend / Prof	Softener	O	O	O	X
Length			Long	Longest	Shorter	Shortest

N.B.: O=strategic feature identified, X=strategic feature not identified, and ?=strategic feature partially identified.  
Pm=permission, Abl=ability, Wil=willingness, Dir=direct, and Des=desire

First, use of several strategies revealed a division between the JN, HK, SG groups and the US group, suggesting a distinction between “Asian Englishes” and “American

English.” Specifically, the strategies of repetition of apology expressions (e.g., “Sorry, sorry” or “I’m sorry [...] I’m very sorry”); greater use of hearer dominance (e.g., “Could you...” as opposed to “Could I...”) in requests to a friend; and expression of desire (e.g., “I would like ...”) in requests were remarkable in these varieties of English. Additionally, there was a tendency to use a repair question in apologies (e.g., “What should I do?”) and to express apologies to the professor for missing class in the request situation, although the JN group did not demonstrate frequent usage of these last two strategies, the way the HK and SG participants did.

Second, several patterns of strategy use distinguished between the EFL-related groups (JN and HK) and the non-EFL groups (SG and the US). The EFL groups, most notably, were more likely to use apology expressions only (with no other supporting moves, such as taking responsibility or offering repair) and no intensifiers (such as ‘very’, ‘so’ or ‘really’), as opposed to the use of more supporting moves and more intensifiers among the non-EFL groups, especially the US group. The result of a word-count comparison for the apology situation to a friend (shown in Figure 1), where the SG and US groups used similarly higher numbers of words than the JN and HK groups, also supports this pattern.

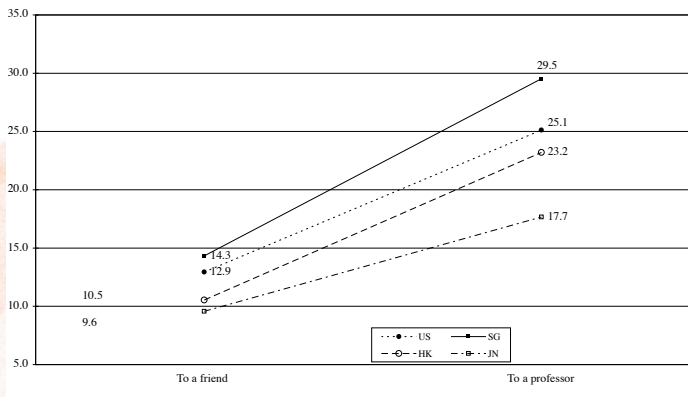


Figure 1: Apology Word Count by Situation

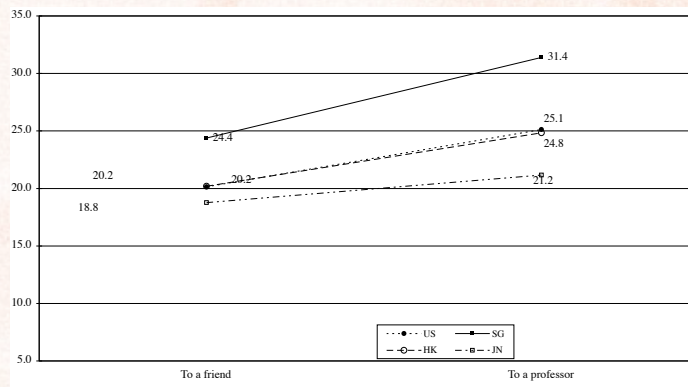


Figure 2: Request Word Count by Situation

Third, a clear difference between the JN group and the other three groups was seen in several patterns. Most

notably, the JN group frequently used ‘please’ while the other groups more often used a variety of other softeners (such as modals and hedges like ‘possibly’) in requests. Related to this difference, the JN group was the only one that showed a preference for direct requests, whereas the other three groups preferred the use of various conventionally indirect requests and hints. The results of the word-count comparison (shown in Figure 2), which revealed significantly lower word counts for the JN responses as compared to the other three groups in both request situations, also correspond to this pattern. Determination of whether this tendency represents transfer from Japanese of a preference for use of fewer words or results from linguistic limitations in English, or both, requires further investigation. In summary, the patterns of variation across the four groups indicate a certain amount of overlap among them. This overlap in turn provides evidence for a continuum, of sorts, going from US to SG to HK to JN, as represented schematically in Figure 3. That is, certain aspects of strategy use appear to vary between one extreme (the American NS group) and the other extreme (the Japanese EFL group), with the other two groups falling in between (Singapore being closer to the American group and Hong Kong, closer to the Japanese one).

$$\text{US} \cong \text{SG} \cong \text{HK} \cong \text{JP}$$

Figure 3: *Schematic Representation of Strategy Use*

### Pedagogical Implications and Conclusion

We can infer from the findings of this study that it is not adequate, in cross-cultural communication, for either NS or NNS English speakers to possess sociopragmatic competence appropriate for only one particular region. One important implication from this would be that every speaker of English might eventually have to be “bilingual” or “bidialectal.” Such bilingualism (or multilingualism) or bidialectalism (or multidialectism) would be necessary in order to communicate in English with people from diverse regions around the world. To achieve this purpose, teaching one particular cultural norm (a monomodel approach, Horibe, 2000) would appear to be of little practical use, and speakers of every variety of English need to become more aware of the diversity in norms of sociopragmatic appropriateness. In addition, participants need to be encouraged to approach unfamiliar situations flexibly. What is required must be a multi-dimensional perspective (a polymodel approach, Horibe, 2000) and strategic adaptability.

Taking for granted that sociopragmatic awareness and linguistic flexibility are requisites for the users of “World Englishes”, it seems evident that this purpose cannot be

achieved by a monomodel approach. Some readers may object to this claim since, in reality, the primary concern for teaching English in either an ESL or an EFL context is to advance English learners’ linguistic competence. However, we believe that a polymodel approach provides English learners with abundant opportunities to practice saying the same thing in different ways, which will eventually foster both their sociopragmatic awareness and their linguistic flexibility. Needless to say, when and how such instruction should be incorporated into classrooms has to be carefully examined, but these issues are beyond the scope of this study and, thus, additional studies are necessary.

Finally, for EFL learners who have very limited exposure to any English target speech community, semantic values and accompanying social meanings of linguistic items need to be introduced. Moreover, it should be emphasized in EFL classes that direct translation from the students’ first language (L1) can result in sociopragmatic failure (e.g., overuse of the direct request strategy). Nevertheless, in many cases of actual social interaction, it may be better to say something rather than nothing, even if it is a direct translation of the L1 into the L2. It may fit the norm of the target community, as our findings on the repetition strategy for apology suggest. What is important is to see the interlocutor’s reaction, try to modify the utterance if the actual intention does not seem to be accepted,

and thus strategically solve unfamiliar sociopragmatic problems. Raising English learners' linguistic and sociopragmatic competence in such ways appears to be the key for successful English teaching in this new century, regardless of the teaching contexts.

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