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Pragmatic Transfer and Length of Residence in a Target Language

Tomomi Sasaki

Michael S. Beamer

University of Hawaii at Manoa

In this study, the researchers compare the transfer of learners' perceptions of speech acts of refusal from their first language (Japanese) to their length of residence in the target language (English) environment. Data were collected from three different groups: Japanese native speakers living in Japan (JNS), Japanese learners of English living in the US (JESL), and American English native speakers (ANS). The data were then analyzed for the effects of transfer. This study revealed evidence for the pragmatic transfer of refusal strategies with respect to length of residence in a target language environment, which indicates that length of residence does mitigate negative transfer of refusal strategies among Japanese learners of English.

本稿では、日本人英語学習者におけるプラグマティックスの発達過程における母国語が及ぼす影響の度合いと、目標言語が話される環境での滞在期間との関連性の研究の調査結果を報告し、考察を行う。ここでは「断り方」の認識に焦点をあてた。研究データは日本に住む日本語母語話者、アメリカに住む日本人英語学習者、アメリカ英語の母語話者の3つのグループから集められ、その後、統計を用い、干渉の度合いを分析した。本調査により、「断り方」における母語の干渉と滞在期間の長さとの関連性が示され、滞在期間の長さが長いほど日本人英語学習者のプラグマティックスにおける干渉が少ないことが示された。

Introduction

Pragmatic competence represents one of the most challenging skills for learners of second languages to acquire. Learners of second languages often are not completely successful in interacting with native speakers, not because of grammatical difficulties, for example, but rather due to an inability to comprehend and use speech acts correctly (House, 1993). Thomas (1983) associates cross-cultural misunderstandings encountered by non-native speakers with their inability to successfully perform pragmatic speech acts. These misunderstandings are derived from non-native speakers' inadequate use of the sociolinguistic conventions and values of the target language culture, which Thomas refers to as "sociopragmatic failure" (p. 91). Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-

Weltz (1990) clearly show that there is a clear difference between the ways non-native speakers express refusals with regard to the order of components (e.g., expressions of regret or excuses), and native speaker usage.

Different researchers have conducted studies on interlanguage refusals through different methodologies. Beebe and Takahashi (1987) and Beebe et al. (1990) investigated refusals of Japanese learners of English and American English native speakers through discourse completion tasks (DCT) to examine differences in language production and the extent of L1 pragmatic transfer. Liao and Bresnahan (1996) looked at refusals of Mandarin speakers and American English speakers, also through a DCT followed by 7-point likert-scale questions to 1) understand the similarities and differences between American and the Chinese cultures and 2) investigate what initiated the learners' production in the DCT. Robinson (1992) investigated refusals of Japanese ESL learners, combining the introspective method and a DCT. The introspection method acted as a means of examining language process and providing information about language "learners' subjective theories about language and learning" (p. 31).

Interestingly, we can find no study that has investigated non-native speakers' perceptions of refusals in the target language. Carrell and Konneker (1981) and Tanaka and Kawade (1982) did examine non-native speakers' perception of requests, and they demonstrated that there were differences between non-native speakers' and native speakers' perceptions, and that non-native speakers tend to choose less pragmatically appropriate strategies overall. Some other recent studies on non-native speakers' perceptions studied requests and apologies, but not refusals (e.g., Olshtain & Blum-Kulka 1985, Maeshiba et al, 1996). Thomas (1983) notes that pragmatic failure is not simply limited to non-native speakers' interaction with native speakers. Simply looking at differences of production between non-native and native speakers does not inform us which of those differences may matter in interaction (Kasper and Schmidt, 1996). Therefore, it is important to investigate not only the differences between non-native and native speakers, but also how the perceptions of NNS are influencing their production and reception.

As a potentially significant factor, researchers have investigated the relationship between the learners' pragmatic transfer and proficiency levels. Beebe and Takahashi (1987), for example, compare native speakers of American English with Japanese learners of English in both EFL and ESL contexts. The subjects were divided into two proficiency levels, low and high. Although greater transfer was observed among learners in EFL context, they found that it could not be explained away as a function of lower proficiency" (p. 148) because based on their "overall impression" the group of Japanese learners in the ESL situation were of a lower proficiency level than their EFL counterparts.

While there has been considerable amount of research on proficiency levels, there has not been conclusive studies conducted considering the length of residence in the target language environment to measure the pragmatic ability and the degree of language transfer from the learners' L1 (see Beebe, et al., 1990; Maeshiba, et al., 1995). Also, although studies have demonstrated that there is a clear pragmatic transfer from the learners' native language (e.g., Takahashi and Beebe, 1990), proficiency level is not a sufficient factor that explains the learners' pragmatic ability in the target language.

One study that addressed the relationship between pragmatic transfer and length of residence in a target language environment is Nakajima (1997). Her study considered pragmatic transfer among young Japanese businessmen with regard to general politeness strategies. Using DCTs and questionnaires, Nakajima obtained data from Japanese workers speaking Japanese in

Japan and American workers speaking English in America. While she does divide her subjects into three groups of average residency (4 months, 1.8 years, and 4 years), the lowest level group according to residency was living in Japan at the time and few details of their experiences are given to differentiate them from the baseline group other than they answered the DCT and questionnaire in English. Also problematic is the small *N* size for the group residing abroad for an average of 4 years, and even though she does conclude that "living experience in the target culture helps learners to acquire target-like pragmatics" (p. 64), she did not analyze any of the differences in pragmatic transfer between the two groups of differing residency (1.8 years and 4 years). She also made neither mention of nor control for the relative proficiency levels of her subjects.

Our study, therefore, aims at addressing the relationship between differing lengths of residency and pragmatic transfer of refusals while controlling for proficiency levels. For the purpose of this study, we researched the effects of length of residence in a target language (TL) environment has on transfer from the L1. We focus on the pragmatic speech act of refusals, specifically the perceptions Japanese learners of English have regarding refusals to requests, offers, invitations, and suggestions of native speakers of American English. Thus our research question for the present study is the following: Whether and in what way does length of residence in a target language environment enable Japanese learners of English living in the US to more adequately perceive native-like refusals?

The Study

Participants

We collected data from three different groups, with a total of 64 subjects. The participants were 16 Japanese native speakers (JNS) living in Japan, 32 Japanese learners of English (JESL) living in the US from two months to 11 and one half years, and 16 American English native speakers (ANS). The JESLs were either undergraduate or graduate university students at the University of Hawaii at Manoa or were studying at intensive English language programs attached to the university. Their English proficiency levels, which were measured by their most recent TOEFL scores, their course levels and the participants' self-evaluations about their oral, reading, and writing skills, ranged from intermediate to advanced.

We divided the JESLs into two groups of equal size in accordance with their length of residence in the US. The JESL group with a "short" length of residence (from 2 to 14 months) and the JESL group with a "long" length of residence (16 months to 11½ years) had 16 participants each.

Data Collection

The data collection instrument (see Appendix) consisted of two parts. The first was questions about the participants' background, including their proficiency levels, length of residence in English speaking countries and so forth. The second was ten different situations with two independent refusal responses for each. Data on the JNSs' living experiences in English speaking countries were collected as well in order to eliminate any participants with more than two weeks stay in

an English speaking country. The ten situations in the second part included requests, invitations, offers and a suggestion. Having acknowledged that there might have been a possibility that one response could influence the other, we used more than one response so that if an unpredictable problem came up with a response, it would not invalidate the whole situation set. However, considering the time commitment of the participants, we decided to use only two responses. Two dissimilar responses, which included different types of full or partial refusals, hesitations, mitigations and so forth, were chosen and used for the instrument. The situations were daily-life, school and business contexts. Although some of the participants might not have had business experience, the situations were fairly general and easily understood. A rating scale of 0 (completely inappropriate) to 7 (completely appropriate) followed each response. Participants were asked to circle how appropriate they believed each response to be. Our instrument used responses, elicited from native speakers by using semi-scripted role-plays, which were recorded and transcribed. The word "refusal" was not used in collecting this data in order to avoid biasing the respondents toward the role-plays. Second, the transcriptions were then used to form the responses for the instrument. Finally, the instrument was piloted with two Japanese native speakers and two American English native speakers and any difficult or unclear parts of the instruction or content were modified based on their feedback.

We provided the data collection instrument in English to the JESL and ANS participants. A translated version of the entire instrument was then provided to the JNS participants living in Japan. The situations were also translated so that the participants would consider that the situations were taking place in Japan.

Data Analysis

We used the JNSs and ANSs' data as baselines to measure whether or not transfer from their first language to the target language existed. For all four groups (JNS, JESL (short), JESL (long), and ANS) we calculated the mean and standard deviations of each response. We compared the scores and looked for patterns whereby the mean average of responses of JESL subjects would fall between the baseline data of the JNS and ANS speakers. We also compared the results between the two groups of JESL subjects to look for evidence of one group or the other performing more closely to the ANS group. MANOVA was chosen as a statistical test in this study for the following reasons: a) in order to examine significance of means between different groups; b) the scale we used in the questionnaire was not linear, which hindered us from using multiple regressions; and c) we had multiple dependent variables. We ran MANOVA on all 20 items. After we found statistical significance of the data as a whole, a post-hoc Bonferoni test was run to test for statistical significance between the four groups in each of the 20 items. These 20 items were the dependent variables and the participants' status differences (i.e., JNS, JESL(S), JESL(L), and ANS) was an independent, fixed variable. Based on Beebe et al. (1990) we would assume transfer if we found the following patterns in the means of the groups: a) JNS<JESL/S<JESL/L<ANS; or b) JNS>JESL/S>JESL/L>ANS.

Results

Through this study we found evidence supporting pragmatic transfer from Japanese into English with regard to length of residence in the target language environment. A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was run on the data. Pillais, Hotellings,

and Wilks, (PHW) indicated a multivariate significant difference. A post-hoc Bonferoni test was run as well to detect significant differences between the groups' mean scores within the individual items. Thirteen of the refusals in the questionnaire had statistically significant results for between-subjects effects. From these thirteen refusals, each type of situation (e.g., invitation) was represented. We did not find any significant differences between the two JESL groups. Finally, within the thirteen statistically significant refusals we found seven patterns exhibiting varying degrees of transfer.

Table 1 shows the mean scores and standard deviations for the thirteen refusals with significant differences between subjects. In the row "Pattern," the following notations are used: J=JNS, S=ESL/S, L=ESL/L, and A=ANS. The final row shows which groups specifically performed statistically significantly different from each other based on the Bonferoni tests.

Discussion

As stated above, we found evidence for the existence of transfer from the participants' first language. Overall, the ratings of JESLs with relatively long lengths of residence were closer to those of ANSs in terms of judging the appropriateness of refusals. However, one of the problems in drawing this conclusion is that there is a positive correlation between the lengths of residence and participants' proficiency levels based on participant reported TOEFL scores ($n = 28$, $r = .40$, $p < .05$). Although the relationship was moderate, the correlation was statistically significant between these two variables. Hence, although we could find transfer from the participants' L1, we could not determine whether the determining factor behind the transfer was length of residence or proficiency levels. Also,

Table 1: Statistical results

Pattern	J<S<L<A								J<A<S<L		J<A<L<S	
Item	3A (df=3, F=8.88)		4A (df=3, F=4.58)		7A (df=3, F=3.58)		9A (df=3, F=8.86)		5B (df=3, F=3.58)		1A (df=3, F=3.12)		8A (df=3, F=19.65)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
1. JNS	3.18	2.04	3.75	2.29	3.00	2.50	3.00	1.83	4.19	2.19	3.75	2.14	3.25	2.24
2. ESL/S	5.13	2.47	4.94	2.08	3.88	2.39	4.25	2.44	2.81	1.72	2.63	1.86	6.50	1.03
3. ESL/L	5.75	1.61	6.25	1.39	4.75	2.23	5.63	1.67	2.88	1.46	5.19	1.94	6.56	1.73
4. ANS	6.13	1.31	6.25	1.12	5.13	1.59	6.00	2.29	5.00	1.79	4.50	1.41	6.12	1.26
Significantly different Groups	1 & 2, 1 & 3, 1 & 4		1 & 3, 1 & 4		1 & 3		1 & 3, 1 & 4		1 & 3		1 & 2		1 & 2, 1& 3, 1 & 4	

Pattern	S<J<L<A				J<L<S<A		L<J<S<A		J<L<A<S			
Item	1B (df=3, F=5.85)		6A (df=3, F=3.48)		2A (df=3, F=3.43)		3B (df =3, F=3.1)		7B (df=3, F=2.96)		5A (df =3, F=3.34)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
1. JNS	2.81	2.17	6.06	1.34	4.50	2.53	5.00	2.07	3.56	1.97	5.38	3.69
2. ESL/S	2.63	2.03	4.94	1.95	6.00	1.55	5.25	2.32	3.94	2.41	3.69	2.47
3. ESL/L	4.32	1.70	6.06	1.48	5.69	1.89	4.81	2.17	2.13	1.89	3.50	1.67
4. ANS	5.06	1.88	6.50	1.00	6.38	1.09	6.67	.70	4.19	2.04	4.38	2.55
Significantly different Groups	1 & 4, 2 & 4		2 & 4		1 & 4		3 & 4		3 & 4		1 & 2	

care should also be taken to more extensively explore the nature of the participants' experience in the TL environment. For example, more qualitative and quantitative data should be collected about the living situations of the participants.

Several problems and limitations were encountered during the execution of this pilot study. These fell into two main areas: problems dealing with the participants and problems dealing with the data collection instrument. First, the major problem we encountered was controlling for various proficiency levels across their lengths of residence in the target language environment. We found that the participants' length of residence in the target language environment tended to correlate with their proficiency levels. A better comparison would be to collect data from EFL students in Japan who have comparable proficiency levels but who have not resided in an English speaking country for a significant amount of time.

Another limitation we had was our small N size. In addition, there could have been a translation effect, which influenced the results. Finally, there may have been some difficulties in the participants understanding the language on the instrument itself. Participants were openly confused by at least the following response: "OK, I know you're good for it" in situation 6, response 2. This was the only one we were able to discern, but it is reasonable to conclude there were more, especially among the lower proficiency levels.

Conclusion

Through this study we found preliminary evidence for the pragmatic transfer of refusal strategies with respect to length of residence in a target language environment among Japanese learners of English. We found evidence in four different situations, namely requests, offers, invitations, and suggestions. The study also shows transfer in situations where people who request and those who refuse are of different or equal status.

The results are only preliminary in that we cannot clearly rule out the effects of proficiency on the data. While we do feel there is a strong indication that length of residence does mitigate negative transfer of refusal strategies among Japanese learners of English, refinements in participant selection and data collection will be necessary in future studies.

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Appendix

(Note: All respondents were asked to rate the refusals on a Likert scale with 0 being completely inappropriate and 7 being completely appropriate.)

Data collection instrument

1. Situation: You are the owner of a music store that is financially stable, but not extremely profitable. One of your best workers asks to speak to you in private.

> Worker: As you know, I've been here just a little over a year now, and I know you've been pleased with my work. I really enjoy working here, but to be quite honest, I really need an increase in pay.
>
> Response 1: I see, well, let me get back to you on that. Can you give me some justification of why you might need this raise?
>
> Response 2: I don't know. I guess I'd have to look at our books and see if we can financially support that.

2. Situation: You are a senior in college. You attend classes regularly and take good class notes. You have a study group tonight. Your classmate often misses classes and often asks you for your class notes.

> Classmate: We have a test tomorrow, don't we? I don't have the class notes from last week, so would you mind terribly if I borrowed your notes tonight?

Response 1: I'm going to have to study tonight, so maybe if you'd like to study together, that'd be fine.

Response 2: Unfortunately, I've got to study tonight myself. Sorry.

3. Situation: You are at a friend's house for lunch.

Friend: How about another piece of cake?

Response 1: It was really good thanks, but um, I'm trying to watch my weight.

Response 2: No thank you. I couldn't eat another bite.

4. Situation: You are the president of a printing company. You have just signed a long-term contract with a new parts supplier, company X. A salesman from another parts supplier, company Y, calls you on the telephone.

Salesman: I have some new figures my sales manager has just authorized and I'd like to meet to discuss them. I was wondering if you would be my guest at The Ritz-Carlton in order to talk it over and have a look at the contract.

Response 1: You know, that sounds really great, but we've actually, uh, given that contract to someone else, and if you could call me next fiscal year, I'd love to hear from you.

Response 2: I'm sorry, we've just signed a contract with another supplier. Thank you for your offer.

5. Situation: You're a language teacher at a university. It is just about the middle of the term now and one of your students asks to speak to you.

Student: Um, excuse me, some of the students were talking after class recently and we kind of feel that the class would be better if you could give us more practice in grammar and less in conversation.

Response 1: Well, you know, when we started the semester we went through the syllabus and you saw that the focus of this class was on conversation and communication skills, not grammar, and I was really clear about that, so believe me I think the conversation will be much more useful in the long run for you than grammar.

Response 2: Uh, OK. This is what all the students thought? Let me think about it and we'll talk about it in class tomorrow.

6. Situation: You have a friend staying with you for a week. He has recently lost his job due to the slowing economy. You also know that he has a wife and two children to support. He comes rushing up to you immediately when you return home from work.

Friend: Oh God, I'm so sorry! I had an awful accident. I was trying to help out and while I was cleaning I bumped into the table and your family's china vase fell and broke. I feel just terrible about it. I'll pay for it, I promise.

Response 1: Don't worry about it. It's not that important.

Response 2: OK, I know you're good for it. Don't worry; you can take your time. We'll think about it.

7. Situation: You are at the office in a meeting with your boss. It is getting close to the end of the day and you have promised to have dinner with your family.

Boss: We really have to finish this up tonight. Why don't you go order some pizza, it looks like we're going to be here for a few more hours.

Response 1: You know, do we really have to finish this up tonight, or do you think we could finish it tomorrow morning? Because, um, I hadn't planned on being here much later and my wife and kids are waiting for me to come meet them tonight. I mean if we have to, ok, but you hadn't mentioned it, that there was a deadline for tomorrow, so if we could maybe finish it tomorrow morning, I'd be happy to put the work in then.

Response 2: Uh, tell you what, I could give you about thirty more minutes, but after that I've really gotta get home.

8. Situation: A friend invites you to dinner, but you really dislike this friend's husband/wife.

Friend: How about coming over for dinner Sunday night? We're having a small informal get-together.

Response 1: You know I'd really like to, but I got a really important meeting early on Monday morning, so uh, I'm afraid I'm going to have to pass this time. Sorry about that.

Response 2: OK, let me get back to you on that for sure. I might have something planned this weekend. Let me check.

9. Situation: You've been working in an advertising agency for some time. The boss had recently offered you a raise and promotion, but it involves moving out of the state. The boss calls you into his office.

Boss: I'd like to know what you think about the offer of the executive position in our new offices in Mainville. It's a great town—only three hours from here by plane. And a nice raise comes with the position. What have you decided?

Response 1: Well, you know, I've decided that I'm afraid I'm going to have to pass on this. I know it's not very good for my career, but, you know, the kids have just started school here and, uh, my wife's not very happy about the idea of moving, so I'm afraid I'm going to have to pass.

Response 2: I really want to spend more time with my family and at this point, um, I really can't take that position.

10. Situation: You are a top executive at a very large accounting firm. You also have tentative plans for this weekend. One day the boss calls you into her office.

> Boss: Next Saturday my husband and I are having a little party. I know it's short notice, but I am hoping all my top executives will be there with their spouses. What do you say?
>
> Response 1: I'm sorry. I already have plans for the weekend.
>
> Response 2: You know I'd really love to, but I actually have plans for this weekend.