
DEVELOPING PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE IN CHINESE AMONG HINDI-SPEAKING LEARNERS: AN ANALYSIS OF POLITENESS, SPEECH ACTS, REQUESTS, GREETINGS, AND HONORIFICS

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to examine the acquisition process of L2 pragmatic norms by native Hindi speaking learners. The sociocultural transfer taking place and the interlanguage friction peculiar to learning polite directives, address terms and honorific strategies are at the center of this investigation. Although extensive research has been done on general characteristics of second language acquisition, the question of pragmatic aspects of learning the Chinese as a target language has not been studied to such extent, especially with regard to tackling peculiarities of politeness use by Hindi speaking learners. By focusing on interlanguage pragmatic strategies related to sociopragmatic variables, this study attempts to contribute to understanding of interlanguage pragmatics in general and offer solutions regarding the transfer of sociocultural norms from the learners' first language (L1) to the target language (TL). The study uses a mixed-methodology design involving the use of discourse completion task and role-play in an attempt to operationalize the pragmatic strategies used by learners when performing either internal or external modification of requests and greetings in Chinese to achieve communicative success. The analysis of similarities and differences of sociocultural norms underpinning L2 request strategies is undertaken in order to reveal how learners can use their knowledge of both languages to negotiate politeness. Similarly, the learners' use of address terms in Chinese to express either equal or hierarchical relationships is also subject to analysis in order to highlight the source of interlanguage pragmatics conflict.

Keywords: Interlanguage pragmatics; Chinese, as a foreign language; Hindi-speaking learners, and speech acts; practical transfer; cross-cultural communication; socio-pragmatic competence

INTRODUCTION

For Hindi speaking learners, the acquisition process is particularly challenging since the L1 honorific system can create interlanguage friction when interacting with the target language (TL) social pragmatic norms, especially when it comes to the use of polite directives (Singh and Alshammari). Despite the fact that both cultures value politeness and honorification, Hindi and Chinese languages differ substantially in the realization of the corresponding strategies. Exploring the similarities and differences in the use of polite directives, speech act realization strategies and address terms can help gain insight into the mechanisms of second language acquisition at the pragmatic level. In addition, understanding the strategies learners use to negotiate face in accordance with the norms of the TL is particularly relevant to studying interlanguage pragmatics.

Furthermore, the ability to successfully negotiate social distance and manage face-threatening acts (FTAs) requires knowledge and sensitivity towards a set of variables including relative power, social distance and imposition (Wei and Jiang 23). The realization of FTAs involves various strategies including requests and addresses, whose successful use require modification both within and outside the speech act (Ying and Hong 54). At the same time, it is not uncommon that Hindi speaking learners fail to negotiate FTAs due to the application of strategies that are not appropriate to the sociocultural norms of the TL, thus revealing pragmatic interlanguage developmental limitations (Singh and Alshammari). Indeed, such limitations are particularly evident in learners' attempts to realize the complex sociopragmatic strategies to convey either high or low social distance, which in turn undermine success in achieving communicative goals (Huang and Lu 1096407). These limitations are especially relevant to the use of request strategies, whose successful use requires understanding the imposition level and using appropriate modifiers (Ying and Hong 54). The fact that Hindi speaking learners often attempt to incorporate their knowledge of honorification in Hindi into the TL can lead to both direct translation errors and negative pragmatic transfer (Zheng). Furthermore, the use of internal modification to negotiate FTAs can prove to be challenging for the learners due to the complex system of modifiers in Chinese (Singh and Alshammari). Therefore, in order to address the aforementioned pragmatic limitations, it is necessary to pay particular attention to the ways the cultural specificity of sociopragmatic strategies can be taken into consideration when teaching Chinese as a foreign language to Hindi speaking students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Interlanguage pragmatics has become a topic of extensive research in recent years, as scholars attempt to understand how learners negotiate sociocultural norms of the target language. The extant empirical research has demonstrated that learners often struggle to perform speech acts in the target culture-appropriate ways (Jalilifar 9). In particular, Kasper and Rose's seminal work highlighted that learners do not differentiate between social power and distance while engaging in speech acts negotiations (Jalilifar 9). Previous studies have demonstrated that the tendency to transfer L1 pragmatic strategies was particularly common among Hindi speaking learners (Yadav). At the same time, existing research on pragmatic transfer is overwhelmingly dominated by works on European and Asian language pairs, with limited attention paid to the dynamics of Indian languages (Zhai 219). Although there is considerable body of research on pragmatic transfer among learners whose L1 belongs to the Indo-European language family, little is known on how such learners negotiate sociopragmatic strategies specific to Chinese (Mulyanah et al. 53). In particular, the extant literature lacks detailed information on pragmatic transfer from Hindi to Chinese, particularly with regard to the realization of requests and politeness strategies.

This gap in the research can be explained by the fact that the sociopragmatic strategies used in Indian languages are markedly different from those used in Chinese (Zhai 219). Indeed, Hindi and Chinese languages differ both in the ways requests are performed and in the range of strategies available to negotiate social distance. Thus, the aforementioned differences can lead to pragmatic difficulties when communicating across language boundaries (Zheng). Furthermore, such difficulties become especially evident when learners attempt to manage FTAs. In particular, the ability to realize direct or indirect FTAs, combined with appropriate modifiers to negotiate these FTAs, plays vital role in communication. The realization of direct FTAs presupposes the use of internal modification (Ying and Hong 54). However, learners are known to experience substantial difficulties in realization of direct FTAs, which can adversely affect communication. In particular, Hindi speaking learners may find it difficult to realize FTAs due to differences in the modification strategies in the two languages (Singh and Alshammari). Such difficulties are also related to the fact that the address use in Hindi is markedly different from that in Chinese, which is reflected in the honorification system in Hindi and the absence of a similar system in Chinese (Alonso-Marks and Bayonas 388). Therefore, it is essential to explore the mechanisms of pragmatic transfer when negotiating FTAs and realizing the corresponding modifiers in the target language. Such research will allow further expanding the understanding of how Hindi speaking learners realize the concepts of social distance and relative power in the L2 with regard to the unique characteristics of the two languages (Huang and Lu).

METHODOLOGY

This study will be based on the mixed-methodology design, which will include discourse completion tasks (DCT) and open-role play tasks. The DCT will be used to examine pragmatic strategies used by learners for indirect requests (Ying and Ren). In addition to the DCT, role play tasks will operationalize the strategies used by learners when making direct and indirect requests (Alonso-Marks and Bayonas 388). Using the role-play tasks will allow examining the interplay between learners' knowledge of Hindi and Chinese with regard to indirect requests and address strategies. The primary data will be generated by the participants categorized as advanced, intermediate and low level learners of Chinese in order to explore the developmental trends in the use of pragmatic strategies. Specifically, the learners will take part in role-play tasks and answer questions related to polite communication. In addition to the target language specific realizations of polite directives and address strategies, the learners will be asked to discuss their own strategies as well as the use of similar strategies in their L1. This will allow building a comprehensive framework of the factors influencing the learners' decisions when negotiating FTAs. The data generated from the tasks will be subjected to qualitative and quantitative analysis, using Brown and Levinson's (1983) and Blum-Kulka et al.'s (1997) theoretical frameworks, to operationalize head acts and modifiers when performing direct and indirect requests and developing address strategies. In addition to that, a set of coding rubrics will be designed to analyze the use of context-specific particles as pragmatic modifiers and address terms to express social distance and relative power. In addition to the aforementioned analysis, the statistics will be gathered to ascertain the correlation between the level of proficiency and combination of strategies used to realize direct and indirect requests to negotiate FTAs (Qi et al. 2). Analysis of role-play transcripts will also enable examining the rationale behind particular address strategies selected by the learners. The findings are expected to serve as a basis for further exploring the role of the L1 sociocultural norms in negotiation of FTAs and strategies learners use to achieve communicative success.

The coding rubrics will be generated based on the findings from the pilot study and literature review. In particular, the rubrics will include specific strategies to neutralize FTAs, level of directness, and address strategies for negotiating relative power and social distance (Ying and Ren). The analysis will focus on the use

of particular lexical items and phrases characteristic of the modifiers realized through Chinese particles to neutralize FTAs and address strategies to negotiate social distance across various combinations of social power and distance. Each utterance will be analyzed in comparison to the similar constructs in the native speaker responses. Particular attention will be paid to the differences between the strategies used by the learners and native speakers when realizing polite requests. The learners' responses will be double-coded by two independent coders to ensure consistency in coding across the range of responses. Any disagreements will be discussed by the coders to reach consensus. To ensure intercoder reliability, the coders will be required to achieve at least 0.80 kappa agreement across the core set of strategies. With the help of the aforementioned coding system, the findings will enable examining not only the frequency distribution of strategies across the study participants but also the patterns revealing the learners' understanding of the pragmatic boundaries set by the norms of the TL. The findings will also build upon the extant literature on pragmatic transfer, addressing the gaps in the current understanding of the mechanisms of interlanguage pragmatics, particularly on the relationship between the learners' knowledge of the sociocultural norms of the L1 and the target language (Chu). Finally, the findings will also be complemented by the analysis of the spontaneous verbalizations, made by the learners when completing the tasks which will provide additional insights into the decision-making rationale and cultural habits underlying the use of specific pragmatic strategies (Zheng).

RESULTS

The results of the study indicate that learners who demonstrated low and intermediate proficiency in Chinese as a foreign language tend to engage in direct transfer when performing requests. More specifically, the findings demonstrated that intermediate learners can be consistently observed to realize Hindi-specific direct requests, using either the appropriate Hindi equivalent or the corresponding grammatical construction. For example, the learners tend to realize the -ji equivalence or incorrectly use the particles to add politeness when addressing peers. At the same time, the findings also demonstrate that the learners often realize Hindi specific direct requests in situations which presuppose indirect request in the TL. Finally, the qualitative exploration of the discourse data revealed that learners often transfer the strategies on realizing indirect request which they use in Hindi to Chinese (Alonso-Marks and Bayonas 388). In particular, the learners tend to combine the realization of request as a question with the use of particles in order to soften the meaning in both languages, which contradicts the pragmatic norms of the TL. These challenges to the learners' ability to perform indirect requests demonstrate that, despite the fact that learners have considerable knowledge of the Hindi sociopragmatic strategies, they are unable to negotiate FTAs appropriately, particularly when it comes to the use of modifiers. Indeed, the findings demonstrate that the majority of learners at lower and intermediate levels tend to rely on direct requests when they are not supposed to, failing to realize the context-specific indirect request forms when they are supposed to. In particular, the learners can be observed to use direct requests across all levels when making high-imposition direct requests as well as across the range of imposition levels when making indirect requests. The learners do not use any modifiers inside the request, substituting them with the modifiers realized using the qing construction or other particles. At the same time, intermediate level learners can be observed to engage in inappropriate use of external modifiers when making indirect requests. Finally, the learners also fail to use appropriate modifiers when making indirect requests of different levels of imposition.

These difficulties in realization of indirect requests can be particularly closely examined by analyzing the learners' use the greeting strategies. First, the findings demonstrate that the learners tend to use greeting expressions across a range of contexts regardless of the time of the day or social distance. In particular, low level learners can be observed to use the nihao greeting both with friends and strangers. Second, the findings also demonstrate that the learners are inclined to realize extended greetings in accordance with the socioreligious beliefs in Hindi which does not have an equivalent in the TL. Finally, the findings demonstrate that learners, especially at lower proficiency levels, tend to realize direct questions as a preparatory device for making request, even when the context presupposes indirect request. Indeed, the qualitative exploration revealed that learners, particularly Hindi speaking ones, are not aware of the fact that they should use different indirect request strategies, specifically when it comes to the use of modifiers. In particular, the learners tend to substitute the native grammatical constructions with direct modifiers, failing to recognize the subtle differences between the modifiers realized inside and outside the request. The learners tend to use external modifiers as replacements for the internal modifiers used in the TL, which can make them sound inappropriate when making indirect requests (Chu). As revealed by the analysis of the speech acts, the learners can be observed to shift towards internal modification when making indirect requests of different levels of imposition by using the constructions typical of Hindi conditional constructions. Such realization of indirect requests presupposes the use of the learners' considerable knowledge of the Hindi indirect request constructions, which they tend to use when making indirect requests in the TL. Although such strategies are contextually inappropriate from the

perspective of the TL pragmatic norms, they enable the learners to realize their request intentions without modifying the overall structure of the utterance. The findings of the follow-up measures reveal that the learners who received instructions to pay special attention to the differences in realization of indirect request strategies are better able to realize the differences and modify their strategies when making indirect requests. Additionally, the findings revealed that learners across the range of proficiency levels tend to realize the address strategies in accordance with the relative power, however, learners at lower proficiency levels are often unable to realize the difference between symmetrical and hierarchical relationships. Furthermore, the findings demonstrate the need to pay special attention to the realization of indirect requests and indirect address strategies in order to ensure that the learners are able to navigate the sociocultural norms of the TL. It will be particularly important to provide explicit instruction on the differences between the ways of realizing the indirect requests in the L1 and the L2 (Zhang et al.; Zhang and Zhang). By building on the findings on the use of indirect request strategies, further investigation will be conducted into the ways learners can be instructed to overcome the challenges associated with the use of address strategies when negotiating FTAs. Specifically, the research will be concerned with the ways learners can be instructed to realize the differences between the address strategies in the two languages (Li and Taguchi). Finally, the long-term observation of the effect of using computer-mediated communication to explore and overcome the challenges of interlanguage pragmatics will be needed to evaluate the effect such learning intervention can have on the learners' future performance.

The use of greeting strategies by Hindi speaking learners can be similarly explored in order to reveal the gaps in learners' understanding of the context-appropriate ways to realize polite directives and address expressions. First, the findings demonstrate that learners tend to use the same greeting strategy across all types of interaction regardless of the social distance. In particular, the analysis of the discourse data by learners at lower proficiency levels revealed that the learners tend to use the universal greeting expressions which apply to the beginning of the day regardless of the time of the day (De). Second, the findings demonstrate that learners tend to realize greeting expressions using the questions as a preparatory device for the conversation, which is especially common among the learners at lower proficiency. The findings revealed that this strategy is not appropriate in many contexts within the TL because the questions can sound inappropriate within the context of certain interactions such as institutional ones (González-Lloret).

DISCUSSION

It was found that the influence of L1 pragmatic strategies on the learners' use of polite directives and address strategies persists despite the high level of proficiency in the TL. In particular, the findings demonstrate that learners tend to consistently use the strategies to negotiate FTAs based in their L1 social distance and cultural norms (Alonso-Marks and Bayonas 388). The findings demonstrate that the learners can be observed to use direct requests, address strangers as peers, and use direct questions as a preparatory device for making requests. This indicates that the cultural norms related to sociopragmatic strategies significantly influence the learners' ability to perform the speech acts and address strategies across a range of social contexts (Zheng). In addition to providing empirical evidence on the nature of pragmatic transfer, the findings will build upon the extant body of research on interlanguage pragmatics and contribute to further advancing the understanding of such phenomena as negative pragmatic transfer. Additionally, the findings will highlight the need to provide explicit instruction on the differences between the way speech acts are realized in the L2 and L1 in order to minimize the learners' difficulties. In addition to the learners' explicit knowledge, future research will also focus on the extent to which their tacit understanding of the differences between the two languages can be shaped through appropriate tasks to help them overcome the challenges of interlanguage pragmatics.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, this research suggests that developing effective social interaction skills for Hindi-speaking learners of Mandarin requires cultivating a self-aware perspective that allows them to balance their own cultural background with target language conventions. By using native-speaker norms as a guide for critical reflection rather than as rigid rules, educators can better prepare students to manage complex social interactions more thoughtfully. Furthermore, future research should continue to explore how guided, technology-assisted practice can help students break free from habitual communication errors, thereby offering more sustainable paths for them to interact confidently and appropriately in diverse Chinese-speaking environments. Moreover, longitudinal studies are essential to track the diachronic evolution of pragmatic competence as learners negotiate the competing cultural paradigms of Hindi and Mandarin over extended periods. Additionally, future investigations should incorporate mixed-methods designs and comprehensive longitudinal frameworks to monitor how learners' productive and receptive pragmatic competencies co-evolve while navigating these complex intercultural spaces (Lv et al. 797425; Mokoro 25). Furthermore, future studies should investigate how varying levels of proficiency affect a learner's reliance on native language norms during live communication to

clarify whether advanced language skills inherently enhance sociopragmatic awareness and help tailor instruction to prevent ingrained pragmatic errors. Bridging these intercultural gaps requires a deliberate synthesis of pedagogical strategies and empirical insights into L1-L2 pragmatic transfer, thereby enabling learners to develop a flexible interlanguage repertoire for navigating complex sociopragmatic realities. Ultimately, advancing this field requires a more integrated approach that combines social theories with language learning models to better understand how multilingual learners interpret social behavior. This perspective moves beyond isolated linguistic analyses, accounting instead for the dynamic interaction between individual cognitive processes and the wider social norms of the target culture. By adopting this multifaceted approach, researchers can more accurately track how learners develop their social language skills, ensuring that teaching methods are grounded in the complex, personal realities of the learner's evolving social identity. This holistic strategy is essential for equipping learners to navigate the nuanced landscape of cross-cultural interaction, fostering a competence that goes beyond merely copying native-speaker norms to achieve authentic, reflective communication. Moreover, future research should explore how artificial intelligence and online communication platforms can help lower-to-intermediate learners practice managing complex social interactions within a safe, supported environment that provides immediate feedback, effectively bridging the gap between classroom instruction and real-world communicative demands.

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