Cross-Cultural Pragmatics: Requests and Request Refusals in British English and Palestinian Arabic

Implications for Language Learning in Palestine

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Abstract

The purpose of the research was to compare the performance of the speech acts of request and request refusal in Palestinian Arabic (PA) and in British English (BE) as well as to find out whether Palestinian learners of English approximate the target language in their use of these speech acts. Another aim was to reveal any differences between the L2 groups who come from different educational contexts, the Open University (QOU) and a traditional University (AAU). Both in Britain (L1) and in Palestine (L1 and L2) the subjects were University students.

The study used the Discourse Completion Test for data collection. For the quantitative analysis of the empirical data a pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic approach was adopted. Cultural values were identified qualitatively following the politeness theory, the kind of social orientation and the traits of family and religion.

Pragmalinguistically, the two languages were found similar in the use of some strategies, such as conventionally indirect requests and reason statements, and different in others such as direct strategies, alternative statements, and regret statements. In modification, PA showed a preference for lexical downgraders, alerters and post-head grounders. BE on the other hand favoured syntactic downgraders and pre-head grounders. Sociopragmatically, PA showed more sensitivity to status. BE responses were influenced to a larger extent by distance relations, particularly in making refusals. In both languages the degree of imposition had less influence on the speech acts. As far as gender is concerned, female responses were found to be less direct, more mitigated and more upgraded in both languages. With regard to cultural value, PA showed more orientation to positive politeness, collectivism, and gave a more prominent role to family and religion. BE on the other hand showed more orientation to negative politeness, individualism, and gave less important roles to family and religion. L2 learners showed mother tongue interference in their performance of both speech acts in many instances, such as use of strategy and level of indirectness. Another finding was that the L2 groups differed among each other in the extent of pragmatic transfer. QOU L2 showed more instances of pragmatic transfer than AAU L2. The differences were attributed to the educational context and learning input of L2 in each of the Universities.

The findings of this research may help to raise language learners’ and teachers’ awareness of similarities and differences between L1 and L2 in order to avoid miscommunication, and to acquire a better intercultural and interactional competence.