Bilingual Pragmatic Competence

Istvan Kecskes
State University of New York
Albany
Chinese student and Turkish student

- Chinese: - I think Peter drank a bit too much at the party yesterday.
- Turkish: - Eh, *tell me about it*. He always drinks too much.
- Chinese: - When we arrived he drank beer. Then Mary gave him some vodka. Later he drank some wine. Oh, too much.
- Turkish: - Why are you telling me this? I was there.
- Chinese: - Yes, but you told me to tell about it.
Objectives

- Define pragmatic competence
- Discuss the differences between L1 and L2 pragmatic development
- Describe the nature of bilingual pragmatic competence
- Discuss how pragmatic competence develops and is reflected in adult sequential bilinguals
Claim

- There is a basic difference between the development of pragmatic competence in L1 and the development of bilingual pragmatic competence.

- While the former is controlled mainly by the socio-cultural environment and social interaction the latter is mostly motivated by individual will, preference and effort (Ortactepe 2012, Kecskes 2013).
Differences

- **L1**: *language development and social development* go hand in hand as a *subconscious, automatic and instinctive* process in which the individual consciousness and willingness to acquire social skills and knowledge play a limited role. The process depends mainly on *exposure to and nature of socio-cultural environment*.

- Bilingual pragmatic competence, however, is affected by *individual control, consciousness and willingness to modify* existing skills and behavior patterns and acquire particular social skills and ignore others.

- *Exposure, quality and quantity of input* can be effective only as much as the individual allows them to be.
Examples

- Help yourself.
- Bless you.
- Why don’t you sit down.
- Are you all right?
- I’ll talk to you later.
What is Pragmatic Competence?

- Linguistics has never really focused on pragmatics competence. Chomsky (1978:224) introduced a distinction between "grammatical competence," which is related to form and meaning, and "pragmatic competence," which involves "knowledge of conditions and manner of appropriate use, in conformity with various purposes".
No interest in pragmatic competence

- Chomsky and followers considered the separation of linguistic competence from pragmatic competence to be indispensable, for the ability to explore and discover the pure, formal properties of the genetically preprogrammed linguistic system.

- Gricean pragmatics is built on a modular view in which pragmatics comes in the second stage: what is said, what is communicated.

- Pragmatic knowledge has become an issue only lately with some scholars claiming that pragmatics affects “what is said” as well.
What does mainstream pragmatics say about pragmatic knowledge?

- There are two kinds of pragmatic information or knowledge, primary and secondary, that becomes activated during normal language understanding (Recanati, 1993; Gibbs and Moise, 1997).
Primary pragmatic knowledge

- **PPK:** Our ability to infer what speakers say when uttering any word or expression rests, to a large part, on deeply held **background knowledge** that is very much part of our pragmatic understanding of the world. (Searle 1983, Gibbs 2002).

- Searle (1978): **The cat is on the mat** presupposes an enumerable set of assumptions.

- **SPK:** refers to information from **context** that provides an interpretation of what speakers implicate in discourse.
Which affects utterance interpretation first?

It is difficult, if not impossible, to predict in advance which pragmatic knowledge is best viewed as primary and prominent in understanding what speakers say and what pragmatic knowledge is secondary, that is, essential for inferring what speaker’s conversationally implicate.

**What information is more salient and accessed more quickly? Differences in L1 and L2 speakers:**

It’s not my cup of tea.

Piece of cake. You are all set.
Third factor

1) Background knowledge
2) Actual situational context
3) **Socio-cultural load attached to lexical items**

- Chicken out; patronize

Lee: - Could you sign this document for me, please?
Clerk: - *Come again*...
Lee: - Why should I come again? I am here now.
Which subfield of pragmatics has taken an interest in L2 pragmatic competence?

- **Interlanguage Pragmatics:**
  - *Pragmatic competence is the ability* to produce and comprehend utterances that is adequate to the socio-cultural context in which interaction takes place (Rose & Kasper 2001; Thomas 1983).
  - Focus: speech acts, politeness
Basic issue of bilingual pragmatic competence: Language socialization in two languages.

How will the emerging new language with its own developing socio-cultural foundation affect the existing L1-governed knowledge, conceptual base and pragmatic skills of the language user, and how will this effect be reflected in the use of both languages?
The question presupposes that

- the change means the **modification** of an existing system,
- the process is **dynamic** with its ups and downs,
- there is a **bidirectional influence** between languages and cultures,
- **subjectivity** plays a major role in what new elements are accepted and incorporated into the existing system.

- **No new pragmatic system, just modification of the existing one.**
“Language socialization” (Schieffelin and Ochs 1986): both socialization through language and socialization to use language.

Ochs (1996:407): “...the acquisition of language and the acquisition of social and cultural competence are not developmentally independent processes, nor is one process a developmental prerequisite of the other. Rather, the two processes are intertwined from the moment a human being enters society.”
Conceptual socialization in L2

“Transformation of the conceptual system which undergoes characteristic changes to fit the functional needs of the new language and culture”. (Kecskes 2002)

Ortaztepe (2012): evidence that L2 learners’ conceptual socialization relies predominantly – contrary to what previous research says – on learners’ investment in language rather than on extended social networks.
Differences between L1 language socialization and L2 conceptual socialization

- Partial consciousness of the process,
- Age and attitude of bilinguals,
- Direct or indirect access to the target culture and environment,
Partial consciousness of the process

- L1 language socialization is a **subconscious and partly automatic process** through which the child gradually integrates into her/his environment and speech community both linguistically and socially.

- **Bilinguals in their L2 make deliberate, conscious choices** about pragmatic strategies and/or features of the target language. **Exposure, quality and quantity of input can be effective as much as the individual allows them to be.**

Help yourself. I’ll talk to you later. Bless you.
Age and attitude of bilinguals

- The later the L2 is introduced the more bilinguals rely on their L1-dominated conceptual system, and the more they are resistant to any pragmatic change that isn’t in line with their L1-related value system and norms (Barro et al. 1993; Adamson 1988).

- For second/foreign language users the crucial question is whether those existing world views will be modified to any extent under the influence of the new language and culture, and how this new blend (if any) will affect language production in both languages.
Example

- Professor: - Is there anything else you want to tell us about yourself?
- Aysa: - Uh,... no, nothing.. .. When can I call for the result?
- Professor: - *There is no need to contact us. We’ll call you.*
- Aysa: - Ok, but .., uhm, ...when?
- Professor: - Very soon.
Direct or indirect access to the target language and culture

- With development of proficiency direct access develops to target language but socio-cultural norms, conventions and beliefs are filtered through L1.

- In L2 **pragmatic socialization is more about discourse practices as related to linguistic expressions** rather than how these practices relate to cultural patterns, norms and beliefs.

- Learners may have direct access to the linguistic material they need but **not to the socio-cultural background knowledge** that gives sense to linguistic expressions in the L2.
Socio-pragmatic error

Bill: - Well, I have to go now. *Why don’t we have lunch some time?*

Dmitrij: - When? Do you have time tomorrow at noon?

Bill: - I am afraid not. I’ll talk to you later.
Conceptual socialization can be explored in two dimensions: a content side and a skill side (Kecskes, 2002).

- **Content side**: social identity construction, social practices of community
- **Skill side**: linguistic reflection of conceptual change
Skill-side and the content-side of conceptual socialization

- **Content-side** is expected to give information about metalinguistic awareness, interactional style, pragmatic strategies, knowledge base, and multicultural attitude. They are **qualitative changes** in the content of what the bilingual says, and the way the bilingual behaves in communication.

- **Skill-side**: conceptual socialization will be reflected in the actual language skills: language manipulation, sentence-structuring, lexical quality and formulaic language use. **Measurable**.
Dogma: Learning through osmosis: immersing oneself in a language

- This way of thinking does not take into account the decisive role of the individual learner in the process.
- Ortactepe (2012) analyzed the conceptual socialization process of her subjects one by one. She provided evidence that L2 learners’ conceptual socialization relies predominantly, contrary to previous research, on learners’ investment in language rather than on extended social networks. This finding demonstrates that not only in language use but also in language development and socialization the role of individual cognition is as important as the role of the socio-cultural environment and social networking.
Nature of pragmatic competence in two languages

Appropriateness
Willingness
Resistance
Limits imposed by cultural factors
1) Appropriateness

- **Rules of language use** are like suggestions, recommendations by members of a speech community, which are based on norms, conventions and standards.

- Thank you.
- You bet. Don’t mention it. No problem.
- Ne daj bogh.

“*What can I do for you*” versus “*What do you want*?”
2) Willingness, motivation and ability of bilinguals

- Socio-cultural beliefs and norms seem to play a **decisive role** in bilingual development and language use.

- An advanced L2 speaker cannot be expected “**simply to abandon his/her own cultural world**” (Barro et al. 1993:56). Adamson (1988) pointed out that non-native speakers are often **reluctant to accept and share the values**, beliefs and presuppositions of an L2 community even if they have been living there for a long period of time and can speak the language quite well.
Resistance to L2 norms

- Bilinguals may see things in L2 through their L1 socio-cultural mindset.
- Resistance toward the use of NS norms and speech conventions to maintain their own identity.
- They may commit *pragmatic negative transfer* “on purpose” (e.g. Al-Issa, 2003; Fujiwara 2004; Siegal, 1996).
Ulrike: - Don’t you think Jim drinks a bit too much?

Joe: - Is the Pope Catholic?

Ulrike: - I think so. But why do you ask?

Joe: - What?
3) Limits imposed by cultural factors

According to Lu (2001) the influence of the traditional Chinese culture is so far-reaching and persistent that even second- or third-generation Americans of Chinese descendants are unable to fully ignore it although their English proficiency is on a par with that of native English speakers. Many of these people do not speak Chinese and totally depend on English as the tool of thinking and communication. “Nevertheless, their speech acts are still in the shadow of culturally governed modes of thinking, talking and behaving (Lu 2001: 216).”
How is pragmatic competence reflected in language use?

- Successful coordination of social interactions heavily depends on **standardized ways of organizing interpersonal encounters** because conventional ways of doing things with words and expressions are familiar to everyone in the speech community so speakers can be expected to be understood according to their communicative intentions and goals.
Preferred ways of saying things and organizing thoughts

- Languages and their speakers have **preferred ways of saying things and preferred ways of organizing thoughts** (Wray 2000; Kecskes 2007).
- Shoot a film; Dust the furniture; Run a business; Stick around; You are all set.
- Help yourself; Having said that..
- ++++
- Are you OK, Mary?
- I am fine, Roy.
- I would have believed you if you hadn’t said “Roy”.
1) Role of formulaic language

- Pragmatic competence is directly connected to and develops through the use of formulaic expressions, mainly because **use of formulas is group identifying** (Kecskes 2013).

- They reflect a community’s shared language practices, and so **they discriminate those who belong to the group from those who do not** (Yorio, 1980). This is so because, as Wray and Namba (2003:36) claimed “...speech communities develop and retain common ways of expressing key messages”.
Language socialization studies

- highlighted the importance of **prefabricated chunks** in the socialization process both in L1 and L2 development. (Ochs and Schieffelin 1984; Willett 1995)

- **Situation-bound utterances** are direct reflections of what is considered appropriate language use in a speech community.
Ordering a pizza on the phone

The woman who answered was fluent in English but had an accent.
- Sanders: - I'd like to order a medium pizza.
- Woman: - Is that pickup or delivery.
- Sanders: - Pickup.
- Woman: - Is that it?
- Sanders: - What?
- Woman: - Is that it?
- Sanders: - Is that what?
- Woman: (No response. Silence)
- Sanders: - We want three toppings: pepperoni, mushroom, cheese
- Woman: - OK, you want pepperoni, mushroom and cheese
- Sanders: - Right.
- Woman: - Okay, about 20 minutes.
Situation-bound utterances

Situation-bound utterances are highly conventionalized, prefabricated pragmatic units whose occurrences are tied to standardized communicative situations (e.g. Coulmas 1981; Kiefer 1995; Kecskes 1997, 2000).

How are they tied to pragmatic competence?
Situational obligatoriness is culture-specific

- "have a nice day", "you are all set", or "I'll talk to you later"; “bless you”
- Chinese: Jiu yang, jiu jang; Ni chi le ma?
- Turkish “gülü gülü oturun” (“stay laughingly”) to someone who has just bought, rented a new house. “Gözünüz aydın” (“your eye bright”) to someone who had the good fortune to be visited by a loved one who was far away.
SBUs and phatic communication (small talk)

Malinowski defined phatic communication as “[...] language used in free, aimless, social intercourse” (1923: 476).

Why is small talk important for bilingual pragmatic competence? Because it is part of what we referred to as preferred ways of saying things and preferred ways of organizing thoughts in a language.

Bilinguals do not have two sets of small talk:
Mugford (2011) has shown that his Mexican learners of English transferred local norms and practices and did not adhere to those of the L2 when engaging in phatic exchanges. For instance, Mexican learners made overly personal comments to their instructors, as if assuming they were talking to very close subjects.
2) Semantic analyzability

Some studies in English Lingua Franca use (e.g. House 2003; Philip 2005; Kecskes 2007) found that bilinguals in their L2 rely on **semantically more transparent language** rather than formulaic and/or figurative language that may carry more nativelikeness but may cause misunderstanding.
Example

Emiko: - Melody, I have received the travel grant.

M: - Noooou, **get out of here**!

E: - You should not be rude. I did get it.

M: - OK, I was not rude, just happy for you.
3) Misunderstanding and conflict avoidance strategies

- Bilingual speakers in their L2 anticipate possible conflicts and misunderstandings and develop sophisticated strategies to avoid them.
Examples

(1) American student and Korean woman
- NNS: °I love sports.°
- NS: What sports do you love?
- NNS: I love football: (0.5) op- in here we call soccer.
- NS: ↑Oh okay.

(2) Thai student and American student
- NNS: Ah:: I’m au pair, do you know:? down here, (all [        ])
- NS: [Yeah,] I know [au pair
- NNS: [Yeah. (0.2) I have five kid. [This mean I play wit dem:
Conclusion

- Adult sequential bilinguals already have an L1-governed pragmatic competence at place, which is **adjusted to accommodate the socio-cultural requirements of the new language** as much as the bilinguals allow that to happen.

- The language socialization process in subsequent languages **may not take place through osmosis**. Contrary to previous research bilingual conceptual socialization relies predominantly on learners’ **investment in language** rather than just on extended social networks.
Individual control of pragmatic socialization

A unique feature of bilingual pragmatic competence is that **individuals usually control** what they find acceptable from the norms and conventions of the L2.

- Individual control of the pragmatic socialization is demonstrated in the use of **situation-bound utterances** because these formulaic expressions represent cultural models and ways of thinking of members of a particular speech community.

- P. competence is directly tied to and develops through the use of formulaic expressions, mainly because use of **formulas is group identifying**.
Symbiosis of pragmatic features of two languages

- BPC shows a unique symbiosis of pragmatic rules and expectations of both languages. Since a bilingual is not two monolinguals in one body (e.g. Grosjean 1989) **there is hardly any transfer of pragmatic skills between the two languages.** Rather what we can see is that bilinguals have preferences in both pragmatic rule systems and act accordingly.
Literature