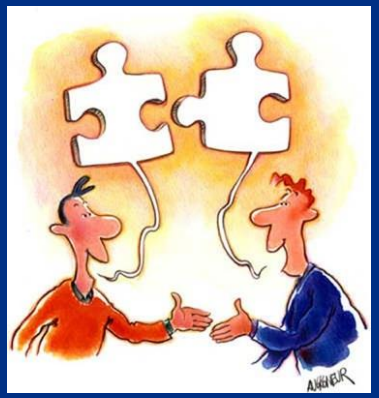
Methodological developments in assessing L2 pragmatics



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Educational Testing Service

Educational Testing Service (ETS)

Outline

1. **What is pragmatics?**
2. **The three historical phases of L2 pragmatics assessment**
   I. The cross-cultural sociopragmatic focus
   II. Pragmalinguistics and technology
   III. Discursive pragmatics and interaction
3. **Recommendations for Practice**

What is pragmatics?

"Pragmatics,

as the study of language use in context (Crystal, 1997),

has at its core the ability to map form and function with the goal of using language effectively and appropriately relative to a certain communicative context [and its interlocutors]."

(Timpe-Laughlin, 2018, p. 298)

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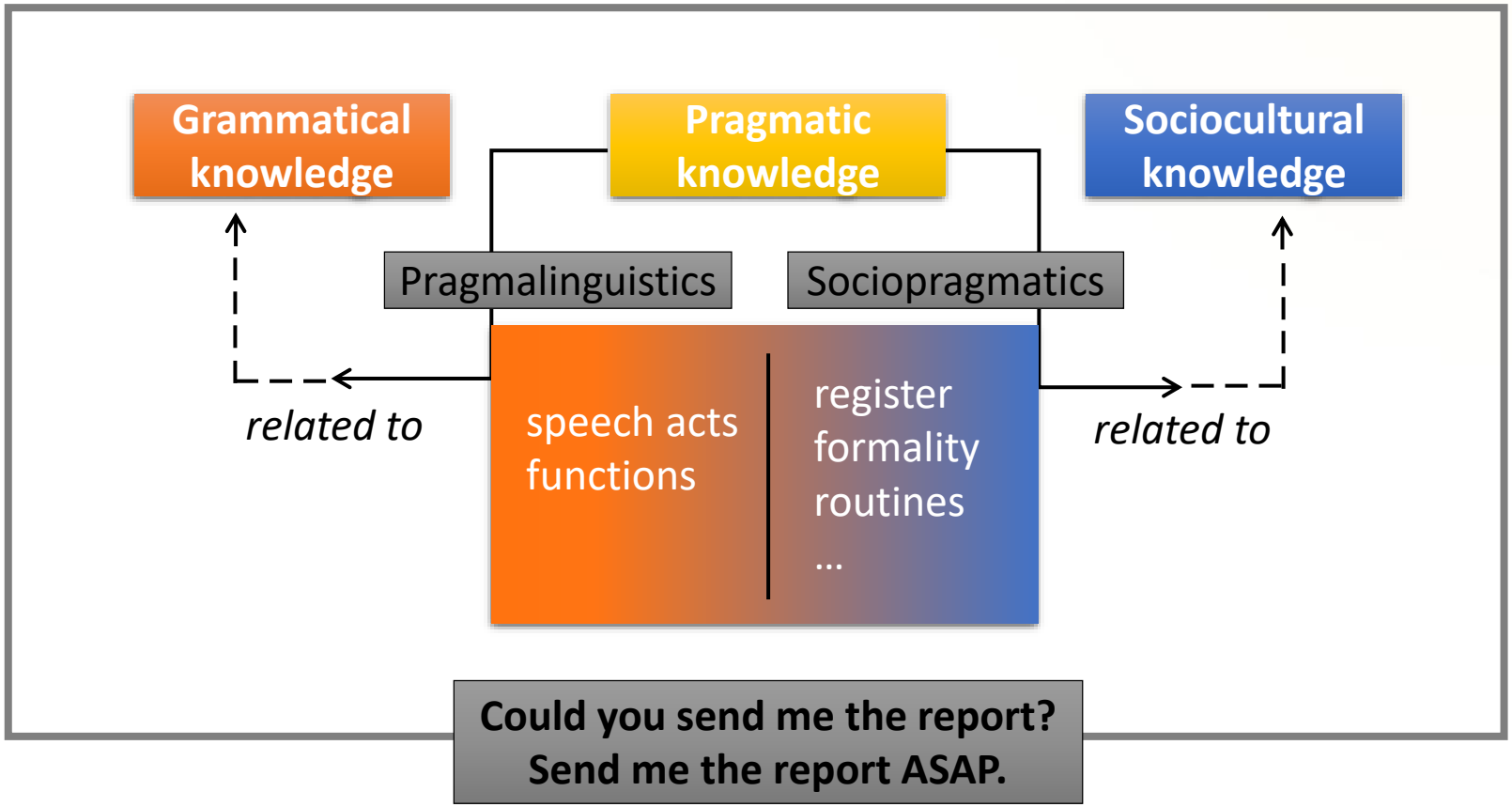
What is pragmatics?



Could you send me the report?
Send me the report ASAP.

Knowledge of the associations between form and meaning in context

- nature of pragmatic ability
- how to elicit pragmatic behaviors (instruments)
- how to measure L2 pragmatic development

Second Language Acquisition

Assessment

Pragmatics = key component of communicative language ability

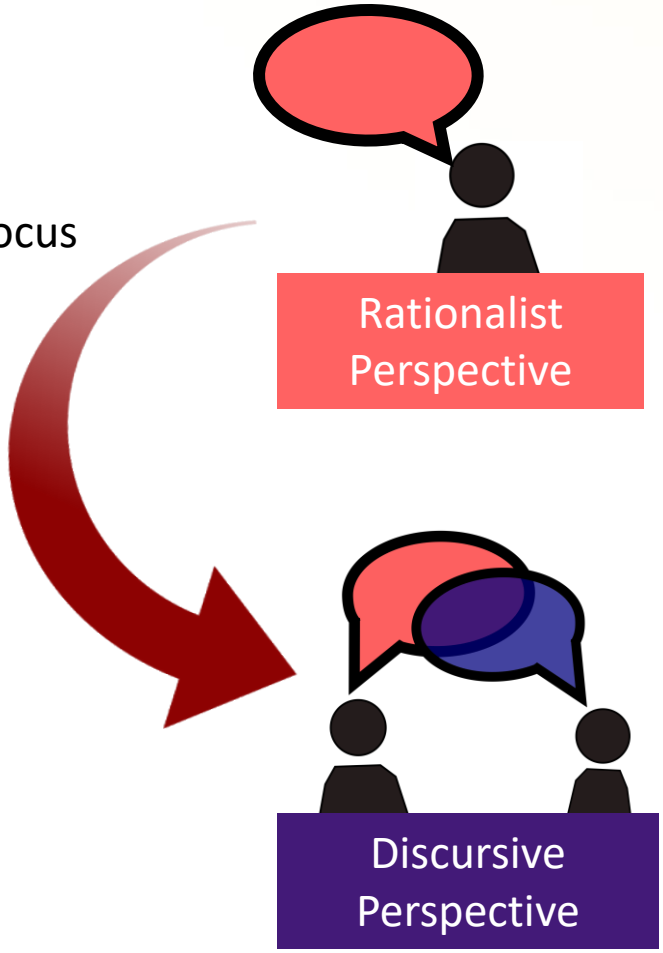
(Timpe-Laughlin, Wain & Schmidgall, 2015)

The three historical phases of L2 pragmatics assessment

Phase 1: The cross-cultural sociopragmatic focus

Phase 2: Pragmalinguistics & technology

Phase 3: Discursive pragmatics & interaction



Phase 1: The cross-cultural sociopragmatic focus

Hudson, Detmer, and Brown (1992, 1995)

- first large-scale cross-cultural pragmatics assessment battery
- to measure Japanese ESL learners' sociopragmatic abilities
- request, refusal, and apology

Discourse completion task (DCT)

Role-plays

Written DCT

Situation: You want to apply for a job in a small office. You want to get an application form. You go to the office and see the office manager sitting behind a desk.

You:

_____

_____

_____

Sample of a written DCT (Hudson, Detmer, & Brown, 1995)

Role play

At the car garage

Background 1a: Last week you had trouble with your company van and took it to the company mechanic. The mechanic promised to have it ready by tomorrow at noon. However, you just found out that you have to go on a business trip tomorrow morning and have lots of display materials and samples to bring with you. So, **you need your van to be ready early tomorrow morning.**

NOW: You go into the shop and walk over to the head mechanic who is eating lunch at a work station in the garage.

Background 1b: When the mechanic was gone you accidentally knocked the mechanic's coffee over and it spilled all over some paper work on the table.

NOW: The mechanic comes back.

Sample of a role play (Hudson, Detmer, & Brown, 1995)

Rating & scoring

DCT responses and role-play performances were evaluated by native speaker raters, using a 5-point scale ranging from “very unsatisfactory” to “completely appropriate”

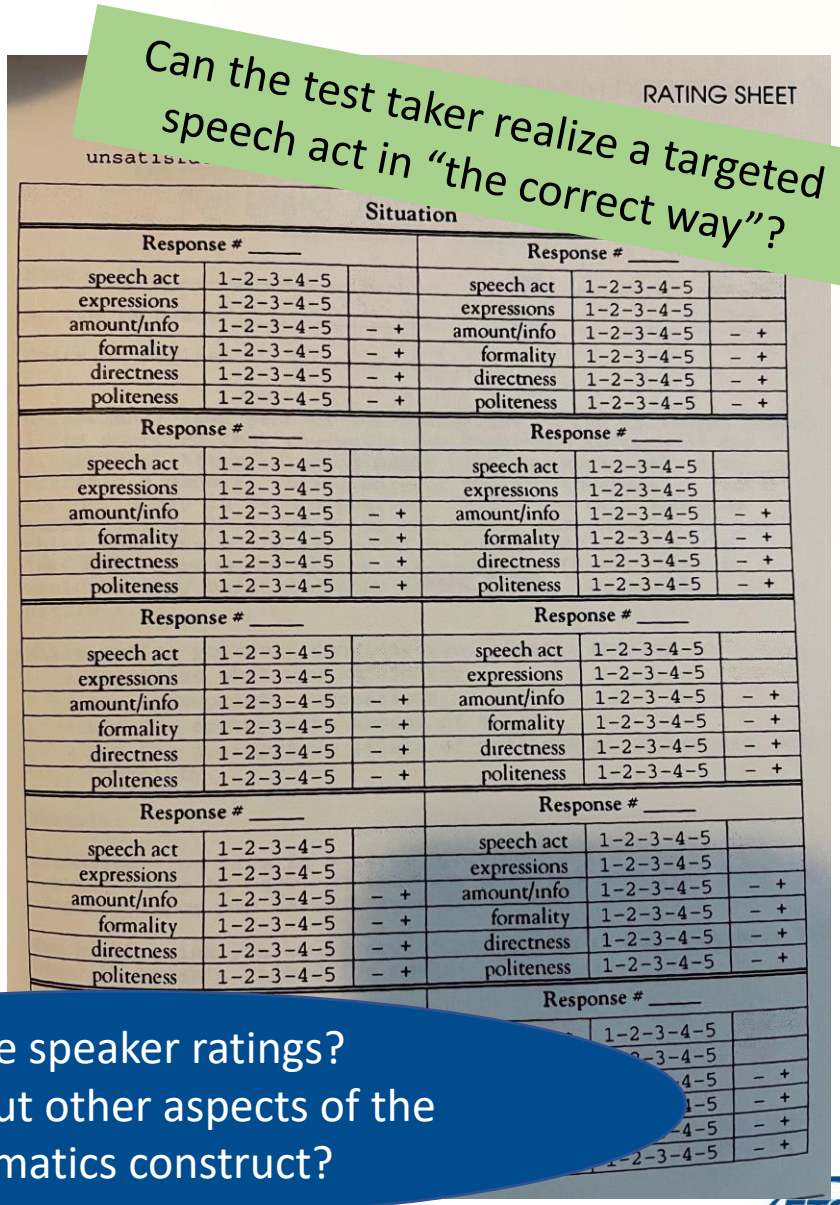
Criteria:

- ability to use the correct speech act
- formulaic expressions
- amount of information
- degree of formality, directness, and politeness

Rating & scoring

individual, rational actors who use their linguistic repertoire to achieve a particular intended communicative goal

(Kasper, 2006; Youn & Bogorevich, 2019)



RATING SHEET

Situation

Response # ____			Response # ____		
speech act	1–2–3–4–5		speech act	1–2–3–4–5	
expressions	1–2–3–4–5		expressions	1–2–3–4–5	
amount/info	1–2–3–4–5	– +	amount/info	1–2–3–4–5	– +
formality	1–2–3–4–5	– +	formality	1–2–3–4–5	– +
directness	1–2–3–4–5	– +	directness	1–2–3–4–5	– +
politeness	1–2–3–4–5	– +	politeness	1–2–3–4–5	– +
Response # ____			Response # ____		
speech act	1–2–3–4–5		speech act	1–2–3–4–5	
expressions	1–2–3–4–5		expressions	1–2–3–4–5	
amount/info	1–2–3–4–5	– +	amount/info	1–2–3–4–5	– +
formality	1–2–3–4–5	– +	formality	1–2–3–4–5	– +
directness	1–2–3–4–5	– +	directness	1–2–3–4–5	– +
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Response # ____			Response # ____		
speech act	1–2–3–4–5		speech act	1–2–3–4–5	
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amount/info	1–2–3–4–5	– +	amount/info	1–2–3–4–5	– +
formality	1–2–3–4–5	– +	formality	1–2–3–4–5	– +
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			Response # ____		
				1–2–3–4–5	
				–3–4–5	
				–4–5	– +
				–1–5	– +
				–4–5	– +
				–2–3–4–5	– +

Can the test taker realize a targeted speech act in "the correct way"?

Native speaker ratings?
What about other aspects of the pragmatics construct?

Phase 2: Pragmalinguistics & technology

- Goal: broadening the construct
- Focus on pragmalinguistic dimension
- Roever's (2006) "agnostic" web-based test battery assessed the…
  a) comprehension of implicatures
  b) comprehension of routine formulae
  c) production of requests, apologies, refusals

Computer scored Multiple-choice DCTs

Rater-scored DCTs with rejoinders

Multiple-choice DCT

Jack is talking to his housemate Sarah about another housemate, Frank.

Jack: 'Do you know where Frank is, Sarah?'
Sarah: 'Well, I heard music from his room earlier.'

What does Sarah probably mean?

1. Frank forgot to turn the music off.
2. Frank's loud music bothers Sarah.
3. Frank is probably in his room.
4. Sarah doesn't know where Frank is.

Sample of a multiple-choice implicature comprehension item (Roever, 2006)

DCT with rejoinder

Anna is about to drive to work when her car won't start. Her neighbor, Bill, who works at the same company, is about to drive to work and Anna decides to ask him for a ride. She walks over to Bill and says:

Bill, can you give me a ride to work? My car won't start.

_____

Bill: 'Oh, I hate it when it happens. Sure, I'll give you a ride.'

Sample of a DCT item with rejoinder (Taguchi & Roever, 2018)

Written extended DCT with rejoinders

ble at a restaurant for a dinner with some friends. He calls the as Muertas.

LVM: "Las Vacas Muertas, this is Jack. How can I help you?

John: _____

LVM: Tomorrow night, sure. For how many?

John: _____

LVM: That's fine. What time?

John: _____

LVM: Let me have a look. Hmmm, unfortunately, we don't have anything at 7:30. Would 8 be okay?

John: _____

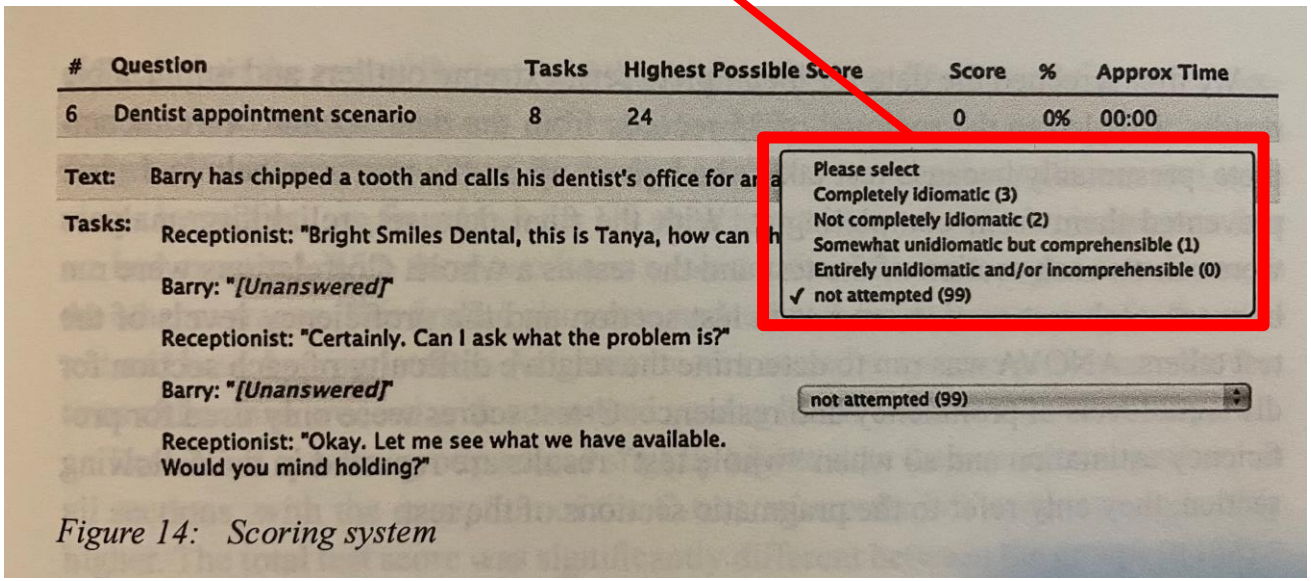
LVM: Great, so we'll see you tomorrow at 8pm."
John: Ok, thanks.
LVM: See you then.

Sample an extended DCT (Roever, Fraser, & Elder, 2014)

Rating & scoring

- Trained raters with knowledge in pragmatics

- Each turn is rated on a scale from 0-3
  - 3=completely idiomatic
  - 2=not completely idiomatic
  - 1=somewhat unidiomatic but comprehensible
  - 0=entirely unidiomatic and/or incomprehensible



#	Question	Tasks	Highest Possible Score	Score	%	Approx Time
6	Dentist appointment scenario	8	24	0	0%	00:00

Text: Barry has chipped a tooth and calls his dentist's office for a

Tasks: Receptionist: "Bright Smiles Dental, this is Tanya, how can I h

Barry: "*[Unanswered]*"

Receptionist: "Certainly. Can I ask what the problem is?"

Barry: "*[Unanswered]*"

Receptionist: "Okay. Let me see what we have available. Would you mind holding?"

Please select
Completely idiomatic (3)
Not completely idiomatic (2)
Somewhat unidiomatic but comprehensible (1)
Entirely unidiomatic and/or incomprehensible (0)
✓ not attempted (99)

not attempted (99)

Figure 14: Scoring system

Phase 2 summary

- still operating within the rationalist speech act tradition
- broadened the scope of L2 pragmatics assessment
- added a stronger focus on reception
- began to implement technology

- written DCTs
- each turn scored separately
- their operationalization underrepresented a key component: context
- items were limited:
  - relationships between interlocutors
  - co-constructed nature of pragmatics in talk-in-interaction

Speakers jointly organize their turns while employing interactional resources to accomplish pragmatic actions.

Phase 3: Discursive pragmatics & interaction

- Goal: Develop a more comprehensive construct representation
- Conversation analysis (CA)
  - employing interactional resources to accomplish pragmatic actions
  - co-constructed, sequential unfolding of pragmatic meaning across multiple turns in real-life conversations

- **Youn (2015)**
  - approach rooted in task-based language assessment, discursive pragmatics, and interaction competence
  - Needs analysis
  - Analysis of the language used in the TLU context

In-person
Role plays

Role-play 1 (with a professor)

Situation: You have an appointment with a professor Morgan Brown today to ask for a recommendation letter for a scholarship for international students from your department and to ask a few questions about a course project. Your professor is meeting with you outside of the office hour since you have a class during the office hour. Now you're about to visit your professor. You just enter to a professor's room.

Task : You will receive role-play cards that describe what you're going to tell your professor. Please have a conversation with your professor naturally.

Sample of a role play task from Youn (2013)

Rating & scoring

- analyzed the performance data qualitatively using CA and quantitatively deploying multifaceted Rasch measurement

- identified performance markers for learners at different levels of proficiency which she then used to inform the design of her scoring rubrics

- trained raters based on scoring manual

Score	Contents Delivery	Language Use	Sensitivity to Situation	Engaging with Interaction	Turn Organization
3	• Clear, concise, fluent (esp. speech act delivery) • Smooth topic initiations with appropriate transitional markers and clear intonations (i.e., smooth turn initiation) **#1**: a letter request & letter submission option **#2**: need for a meeting & decide a time **#3**: respond to professor's request & explain a situation	• Pragmatically appropriate linguistic expressions (**bi-clausal, conditional**: I was wondering if, I don't think I can; **modal verbs**, would, could, might) • Good control of grammar and vocabulary that doesn't obscure meaning	• Consistent evidence of awareness and sensitivity to situations exists in contents or tone **#1**: request along with explanations about the scholarship; acknowledge a short letter due **#2**: explanations for a meeting request **#3:** handle a face-threatening refusal with acceptable reasons or accept a request	• A next turn shows understandings of a previous turn throughout the interaction (i.e., shared understanding) • Evidence of engaging with conversation exists (e.g., clarification questions, backchannel, acknowledgement tokens) ***Note***: Non-verbal cues also serve as acknowledgement, so no need to heavily rely on the amount of discourse markers.	• Complete adjacency pairs (e.g., question & answer, granting a request & thank) • Interactionally fluid **without awkward pauses** or **abrupt overlap** ***Note***: Interactionally meaningful pauses include those before refusal and between disagreements
2	• Generally smooth, but **occasionally unclear**, or unnecessarily wordy • **Abrupt** topic initiation (in terms of contents) • Unclear transitional cues (e.g., unclear intonation and stress)	• Able to use modal verbs in **mono-clausal** (e.g., could, can, might), but doesn't or inconsistently use complex structures for pragmatic meaning • Linguistic expressions are occasionally inaccurate and a bit limited that sometimes obscure meaning	• Inconsistent evidence of awareness and sensitivity to situations (e.g., explain the letter request, but not acknowledge a short letter due)	• Some evidence of engaging with the conversation, but not consistent • A next turn doesn't sometimes show understandings of previous turns	• Some turns are **delayed** and a next turn is **absent** in adjacency pairs (e.g., absence of answers & thank) • Sometimes **abruptly cut off** a previous turn
1	• Delivery is choppy, fragmented, and minimal (due to lack of language competence)	• Expressions sound **abrupt, direct,** or **not polite enough** (e.g., I need, I want, I can't) • Linguistic expressions are inaccurate and quite limited that obscure meaning	• Little evidence of situational sensitivity (e.g., not acknowledge a short letter due, insist turning in the letter on time, lack of explanations for refusal)	• Noticeable absence of discourse markers • Evidence of not achieving a shared understanding	• Noticeably abrupt overlap or no pauses between disagreements and refusal • **Noticeably long pauses** or **noticeable cutoff** between turns

Phase 3

- Authenticity & broader construct representation, esp. in talk-in-interaction
  - CA as a magnifying glass to inform the test construct
- Mostly speaking, little research in the written domain
- Role-plays: time- and resource-intensive in terms of administering and scoring

Taking stock

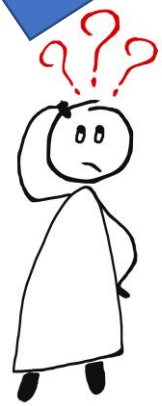
- A move from sociopragmatics via pragmalinguistics to interaction
- From a rationalist view to interaction perspective
- Two types of elicitation methods:
  - DCTs
  - Role plays

Which approach is better?

NEITHER

What should I use? DCTs or role plays?

It depends.



What is the intended use of the pragmatics assessment?

Which pragmatics features should be included?

- New phases in research driven by attempt to “broaden the construct representation”
- it is impractical, if not impossible, to cover the entire construct in any individual assessment
- Select features of the construct that are of interest for the specific context or purpose of an assessment

DCTs or role plays?

DCTs

- systematic implementation of context variables
- fairly easy to administer large-scale
- rather efficient with regard to scoring
- practical elicitation devices
- capture test-takers' offline knowledge of semantic formulae

- far from actual conversations
- responses are not constructed under the pressure of real time communication
- test-takers therefore oftentimes respond in a way they *think* they *would* respond in that situation, which is not necessarily how they actually respond in real-life interactions (Golato, 2003)

DCTs or role plays?

Role plays

- Provide stronger evidence of how learners produce or comprehend pragmatic meaning in interaction

- cognitive demands during interaction may obscure learners' knowledge of pragmatic forms (e.g., Safont, 2004)

DCTs → aspects of pragmatic knowledge

Role plays → elicit pragmatic performance in interaction

It is critical to contextualize the scenario presented to students in order to adequately allow for form-function-context mapping.

How to establish benchmark criteria?

Pragmatic norms (i.e., what is and what is not appropriate) can vary from one context to the next and even among speakers in the same situation.

Appropriateness =

How to establish benchmark criteria?

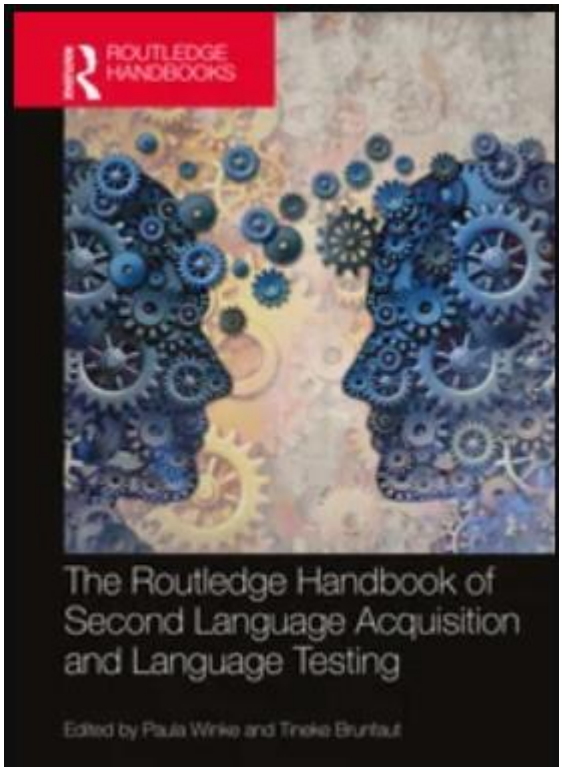
Steps to determine rating criteria:

1) What kinds of behavior need to be elicited or observed in order to draw inferences about learners' pragmatic ability in a certain context?
2) Scoring rubric → relevant descriptors and performance examples
3) Rater training
4) How to deal with test takers' subjectivity and individual identities?

Many thanks!

Questions?

Book chapter



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Resources

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