THE PRODUCTION OF REQUESTS BY CATALAN LEARNERS OF ENGLISH: SITUATIONAL AND PROFICIENCY LEVEL EFFECTS

Montserrat Pérez i Parent

The University of Reading

The paper examines the interlanguage behaviour of Catalan learners of English (CAT) at three different levels of proficiency (IL-A, IL-B, IL-C), focusing on the way they make requests in the second language. The data comprise request realisations under six different situation sets, collected by means of a discourse completion task designed to achieve systematic variation of the two social factors: *social distance* (SD) and *dominance*.

While the overall distribution along the scale of indirectness follows similar patterns for both the CAT and GB groups, the specific proportions in the choices between the more direct and less direct strategies depending on the situation set are culture-specific. Social distance and dominance are found to be significantly associated with differences in strategy choice in the cases in which request strategy production from the IL groups differs from that of native speakers, specifically –SD, x>y, and x<y situations.

The subjects' pragmatic competence in the foreign language is shown to increase with their linguistic ability. While IL-A use conventionally indirect strategies the most, and seldom use the nonconventionally indirect ones, IL–C are closer to native speaker performance, especially in the use of the latter strategy. However, higher proficiency in the target language leads IL–C to overshoot native speaker production in the case of direct requests.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the first studies into non-native speakers' perception and performance of speech acts (SAs) twenty years ago, a number of investigations into interlanguage (IL) speech act realisation have been conducted, examining how different types of SAs are performed by non-native speakers (NNSs) with a variety of language backgrounds and target languages (see overview in Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper 1989). When learning a foreign language, learners have to discover the linguistic and situational constraints that govern SA selection and realisation in the target

language and culture. In particular, they have to find out what is possible and appropriate in carrying out SAs in a second language (L2).

There are many different tasks involved in acquiring pragmatic knowledge in an L2. They range from learning new SA categories to learning how principles of politeness operate in the target culture, as well as learning new procedures and means of SA realisation. Which of these tasks requires new learning for NNSs depends largely on the distance between the cultures familiar to the learner and the target language and culture.

The present study is an attempt to investigate IL realisation of the SA of requesting by Catalan learners of English at three different proficiency levels. SA categories and their distribution may be of little importance in the case of these two languages and cultures as they are both Western.[1] In fact, it is expected that both languages will make available to the speaker the same range of strategies for conveying requests. However, similarity may not always automatically imply facilitation, in the same way as difficulty does not always follow on from difference.

2. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY OF REQUESTS AND INTERLANGUAGE PRAGMATICS

2.1. Interlanguage Pragmatics

Interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) belongs to two different disciplines, both of which are interdisciplinary. As a branch of second language acquisition research, ILP is one of several specialisations in interlanguage studies, contrasting with interlanguage phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics. As a subset of pragmatics, ILP figures as a sociolinguistic, psycholinguistic, or simply linguistic enterprise, depending on how one defines the scope of "pragmatics" (Kasper and Blum-Kulka 1993).

The perspective on pragmatics adopted by Kasper and Blum-Kulka (1993), and which is shared in this study, is an action-theoretical one, viewing pragmatics as the study of people's comprehension and production of linguistic action in context. ILP has consequently been defined narrowly as the study of non-native speakers' use and acquisition of linguistic action patterns, i.e. speech acts, in a second language (Kasper 1989; Kasper and Dahl 1991; Kasper and Blum-Kulka 1993; Kasper 1996).

ILP has derived its theoretical and empirical foundation from general and especially cross-cultural pragmatics (e.g. Blum-Kulka et al. (1989). For the most part, it has focused on illocutionary and politeness successful communication, as situational, social, and linguistic knowledge must be present for success.

---

[1] Much bigger cultural and typological differences would be expected if comparing a Western culture such as Catalan to a non-Western one such as Chinese.

2.2. Speech acts and illocutionary meaning

When speakers perform utterances in context, they accomplish two things: (1) *interactional acts* and (2) *speech acts* (Ellis 1984). The former impose structure on discourse by ensuring that one utterance leads smoothly to another. Speech acts constitute attempts by language users to perform specific actions, in particular interpersonal functions such as compliments, apologies, requests or complaints.

The focus of this study is on one specific illocutionary act within the general class of directives: *requests*. Requests have been defined as attempts on the part of a speaker to get the hearer to perform or to stop performing some kind of action (Ellis 1994). Thus, they are pre-event acts, intended to affect the hearer's behaviour. This definition is intended to exclude requests for information and permission, which differ from the other types of request goals in that they are aimed solely at *verbal goods* (Blum-Kulka, Danet and Gherson 1985).

As stated by Searle (1976), a request can be more or less direct. By *directness* is meant the degree to which the speaker's illocutionary intent is apparent from the locution. According to Blum-Kulka and House (1989), three general degrees can be distinguished to represent a universally valid scale of indirectness, where indirectness is defined as a measure of illocutionary transparency. "The more direct a given request strategy type, the shorter the inferential path to the requestive interpretation; such a request can then be said to be more illocutionarily transparent" (p. 133). These three levels are *direct*, *conventionally indirect*, and *non-conventionally indirect*. With the direct requests, the illocutionary force is indicated in the utterance by grammatical, lexical or semantic means; conventionally indirect requests express the illocution via fixed linguistic conventions established in the speech community; and non-conventionally indirect requests require the addressee to compute the illocution from the interaction of the locution with its context. These criteria are used to classify instances of requests from different languages into the right request category.

3. REQUEST DATA COLLECTION: DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

3.1.Subjects

A total of 72 subjects divided into four groups took part in this study: a group of NSs of English (GB), and three groups of Catalan learners of English as a foreign language (CAT). The NSs (N=36) were undergraduate students at Salford University (Manchester, UK). The Catalan learners of English were divided into three groups according to their level of proficiency in the English language.[2] Groups IL–A and IL–B were undergraduate university students learning English at the Servei d'Idiomes Moderns of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB), Spain.

---

[2] As the study examines pragmatic behaviour of Catalan learners in the Catalan educational system, those subjects who had spent a year or more in the environment of the target language and culture were ruled out.

Group IL–A (N=10) had an intermediate level of proficiency, while IL–B (N=14) had an advanced level. Group IL–C (N=12) were second year students of English Philology at the UAB (Spain) and their level of English was that of the Cambridge Proficiency exam.

By choosing university students as the target population, it was assumed that their educational background would be comparable, as all groups of students would have had to pass some exams before being admitted to university. It was also expected that their familiarity with the situations in the questionnaires would be similar. This would provide comparability of the groups so that the differences detected could not be attributed to variables other than those being studied. All students were given a background survey to ensure that groups were as homogeneous as possible.

3.2. The questionnaires

3.2.1. The Discourse Completion Tasks

Despite the limitations that some authors have pointed out for discourse completion tasks, a DCT was used in this study because it was considered to be an effective means of gathering a large amount of data quickly and creating an initial classification of semantic formulas and strategies that occur in natural speech. Other advantages of the method are controlling the contextual variables important to the study, as well as effectively comparing the strategies used by NSs and learners of the same language. The DCT as a data eliciting technique is still used by many linguists. Recently, Yu's (1999) study of the interlanguage request behaviour of Chinese learners of American English also used data collected via a DCT.

Two versions of an open ended DCT with no hearer response –one originally constructed in English, and its Catalan translation– were used. The instructions included an explicit reference to the possibility of opting out, and allowed subjects to answer in as many utterances as they considered were necessary in the space that was provided.[3]

No dialogue was used, but a scenario describing the situation which specifies the setting, the familiarity between the participants (social distance), their status relative to each other (dominance), their sex, and sometimes their approximate age and job. This was followed by a prompt to ensure the elicitation of a request, rather than a description of one, was produced. This kind of questionnaire allowed for the differences in the proficiency level of the subjects to show up.

There are twelve such situations in the questionnaire, which reflect everyday life of students in a Western university. This number provides for two instances of each of the six possible combinations of the variables, that is, social distance and social dominance. It was expected that an individual's main request strategy would be basically similar across situations with the same combination of distance and

---

[3] The Appendix presents such instructions and an example of a situation for each language.

dominance, but that including two situations for each variable combination would obtain more reliable data and provide a fuller picture of the subjects' behaviour. The situations were based on situations used in previous studies so as to validate them.[4]

By dominance we mean the power of the speaker over the hearer in a given role relationship. Thus, a situation in which a lecturer is speaking to a student is considered to be *speaker dominant* (x>y), but *status equals* (x=y) if the exchange is taking place between two students. Social distance between interlocutors is considered to be *low* (-SD) for members of a nuclear family, friends and relatives, and *high* (+SD) for strangers. Social distance is a binary-valued variable ({+SD} and {−SD}), while social dominance has three possible values: speaker dominant (x>y), hearer dominant (x<y), or status equals (x=y).

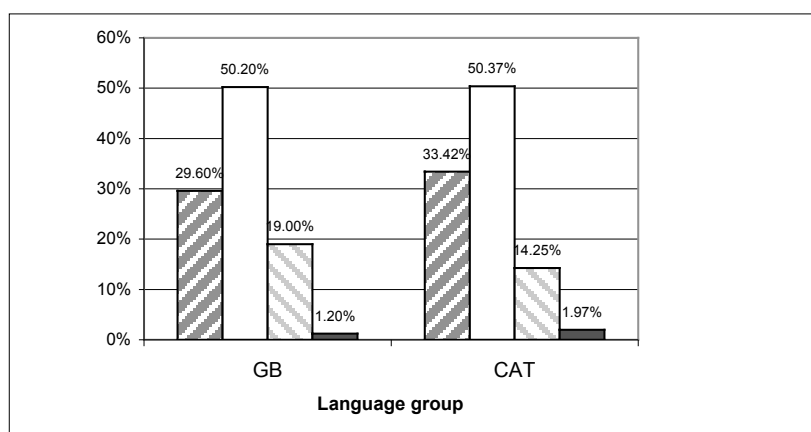## 4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

Figure 4-1: Cultural stratification of strategy types for all situations for groups GB and CAT.

As expected, the major request realisation strategies –direct, conventionally indirect, and nonconventionally indirect–, which have been found in different varieties of English, French, Hebrew and Spanish (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989), are also available for Catalan. Indeed, so are eight of the originally nine categories distinguished in the CCSARP. The only category that was not found in the CAT data is that of *performatives*, but then no examples were found in the GB data collected for this study either.[5]

---

[4] The situations in each situation set, with the SD and dominance values indicated between brackets, were as follows: 1. S1 asking to clean up kitchen + S3 asking for some lecture notes (–SD; x=y), 2. S2 getting rid of stranger on the street + S11 asking for change for parking meter (+SD; x=y), 3. S4 asking for ride home + S5 asking for information on job advert (+SD; x<y), 4. S6 asking to move a car + S9 asking to give a tennis ball back (+SD; x>y), 5. S7 asking a lecturer for an extension + S12 asking to put out a cigarette in the non-smoking compartment of a train (–SD; x<y), 6. S8 asking to give a presentation earlier + S10 asking for a beer in a pub (–SD; x>y).
[5] Explicit performative requests, although not found in the present corpus, do exist in Catalan. An example would be "*Et dic que callis*" (I'm telling you to shut up). In the CCSARP, instances of

Figure *4-1* summarises graphically the distribution of strategy types along the scale of indirectness in the two language groups of NSs examined –GB and CAT–, and Table 4–1 provides examples for each request strategy for both the CAT and GB groups as found in the subjects' responses to the DCTs.

REQUEST STRATEGY	CATALAN	ENGLISH
1 Mood-derivable:	Ei tio, **neteja** la cuina que vas ser tu i els teus amics qui ho van embrutar i avui venen uns amics meus a sopar. (S1 B2)[6] No se li acut res millor per fer? **Deixi** de molestar-me. (S2 B10)	**Clean** the bloody kitchen. (S1 GB10) Do you mind? **Leave** me alone. (S2 GB24) **Put out** your fag grandad. (S12 GB15)
2 Performatives:		
3 Hedged performatives:	**Li pregaria** que em deixés tranquil·la. No m'agrada la seva companyia. (S2 A4) **Pregaria** que treguessis el cotxe d'aquí ja que no es pot aparcar. (S6 A4) **Li volia preguntar** si li puc entregar el treball més tard, doncs m'ha sigut impossible. (S7 A7)	Excuse me, but do you realise this is a no parking area. **I'm going to have to ask you** to move your car. (S6 GB 24) Excuse me, this is a no parking area - **I'm going to have to ask** to move your vehicle. (S6 GB25)
4 Locution-derivable:	Perdoni, però aquí no es pot aparcar. **Hauria de** canviar el cotxe de lloc. (S6 C9) Perdona Marta, però crec que **hauries de** presentar el treball una setmana abans. (S8 A3)	Excuse me Madam but you've parked your car in a no parking zone **you'll have to** move your car. (S6 GB 32) **Have you got** change for a five pound note? (S11 GB18)
5 Scope stating:	Marta, em sap molt de greu canviar la data de la teva presentació, però **necessito** que la facis una setmana abans. (S8 C5) Marta, **m'agradaria** que avancessis la teva presentació una setmana perquè va bé per completar les meves classes, et faria res? (S8 B7)	I've got some friends coming over and **I need** you to clean the kitchen as it is your mess, would you mind? (S1 GB26) Excuse me, do you mind? I don't know you, and **I'd rather** you didn't bother me thank you. (S2 GB2)
6 Suggestory formula:	Pau **per què no** t'acostes a la barra i demanes dues cerveses? Pago jo. (S10 A2) Avi, no pots fumar aquí. **Per què no** surts fóra o l'apagues, faras bé! (S12 C7)	**Why don't you** give your lecture a week earlier? (S8 GB18)

performatives were also found for English: "*I am asking you to shut up*" (Blum Kulka et al. 1989: 279).
[6] All examples are taken from the data obtained by means of the DCT questionnaires. The letters and numbers in brackets indicate the following: S + number denotes situation (in this case situation 1="kitchen"); abbreviations stand for language group (A=IL-A, B=IL-B, C=IL-C, GB=English, CAT=Catalan); and the final number denotes informant number (2 = informant number two in the researcher's data files).

7 Query-preparatory:	Escolta Joan, **podries** netejar la cuina si us plau? La vas deixar molt bruta ahir amb la festa i avui venen uns amics a sopar. (S1 A9) **Li importaria** deixar-me en pau, és que tinc molta pressa. (S2 A6) Que vas anar a classe ahir? **Em pots** deixar els apunts? Ara te'ls torno, vaig a fer fotocòpies, gràcies. (S3 A5)	Please **could you** get this mess cleared up —my friends are coming soon. (S1 GB11) Listen mate I'm really not interested, **could you** just find someone else to annoy. (S2 GB23) **Can I** lend [borrow] your notes from last week's class please, as I was off sick. (S3 GB1)
8 Strong hint:	La setmana passada no vaig poder venir a classe. No tens pas els apunts aquí? (S3 B13) Hola, em sembla que viviu al mateix carrer que jo. No tindríeu lloc per a mí en el cotxe quan torneu? (S4 A8) En aquí no es pot aparcar, senyora! (S6 A5)	Is there any room in your car? (S4 GB7) Isn't it about time we got going? (S4 GB 23) Excuse me madam, are you aware that you're parked in a "no parking" area? (S6 GB7) Can't you see the sign? This is a strict no parking area and unless you move your car, you'll get a parking ticket. (S6 GB31)
9 Mild hint:	Ei, ara no tinc temps, vale? (S2 A5) Tinc pressa i no tinc temps per parlar. Adéu. (S2 A9)	Grandad. Look at the signs. I'm sure on your pension the last thing you need is a 50 pound fine. (S12 GB 29) Look, I'm sorry but I've got to go, I'm in a rush, taraa. (S2 GB1) I'm sorry, I've got to go and wash my hair. (S2 GB9)

Table 4–1: Request strategies for CAT and GB as found in the DCTs.

The results show that GB speakers are slightly less direct than CAT speakers: less than 30% of the GB requests are phrased as impositives (direct), more than 50% are phrased as conventionally indirect, and 19% as nonconventionally indirect. In the CAT requests, direct impositives constitute 33.42%, conventional indirect strategies 50.37%, and nonconventionally indirect ones only 14.25%. Statistical analysis by chi-square (DF = 3, p>0.05),[7] though, shows that there is no significant difference between the distribution of strategy types in the two language groups.

4.1. The IL groups

Figures 4–2 to 4–5 show situational and within group variation for each level of directness. In these figures, the horizontal axis depicts the situation sets, and the vertical axis shows the percentage of use of each directness level. The values for the GB and CAT groups are plotted in the diagrams and connected along horizontal

---

[7] Statistical tests were carried out using the Minitab 11.2 for Windows statistics package.

lines. In order to distinguish the IL values from these, the former are displayed by means of bars.

4.1.1. Opting out strategy

Low levels of opting out of situations in which the speaker is in a dominant position over the hearer (situation set 4) might be anticipated. Being in a position of dominance over the hearer, the speaker does not lose face when making a request to the hearer.
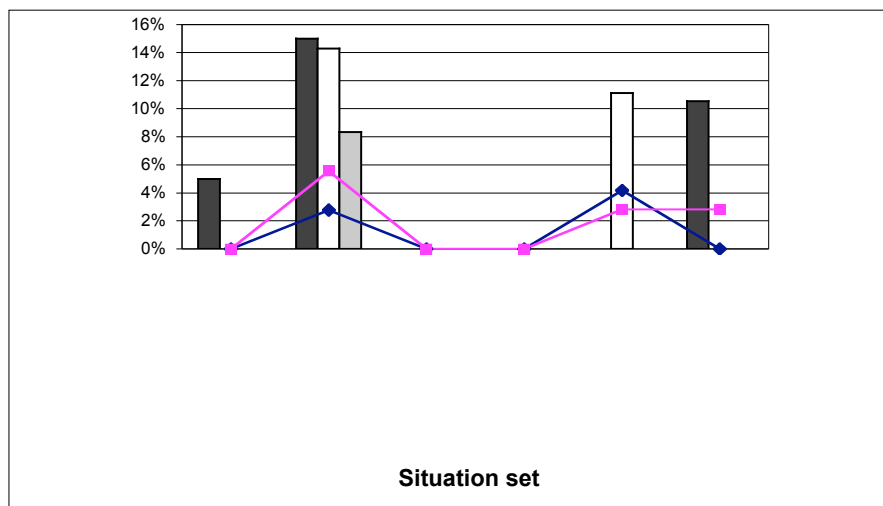

Figure 4-2: Use of the opting out strategy in the six situation sets for all language groups.

The fact that the same behaviour is found in the opposite dominance situation (situation set 3) is more contrary to expectations. Still, it can be explained if we take into account the nature of the situations. In S5 *information*, which is one of the situations that make up situation set 3 (+SD x<y), it would be very difficult for subjects to opt out, as the context in which the request is to be produced is a telephone call that the subject in the DCT has made herself. On the other hand, in the x=y situations (S2 *street* and S11 *meter*), which show the higher levels of opting out for all language groups, it is easier for a request not to be made at all as the speaker can easily avoid making any kind of contact with the hearer, as the hearer's attention has first to be aroused by the speaker for the request to take place. Dominance does have an effect on strategy choice. Even in the x<y and x>y situations (situation sets 3 and 4 respectively), in which no difference is shown as far as opting out is concerned, more indirect strategies are used in the former than in the latter, in which direct strategies are preferred (see sections 4.1.2 and 4.1.3, displayed graphically in Figure 4-3 and Figure 4-4 below).

4.1.2. Direct strategy

In the use of the direct strategy, we see a tendency for groups IL–A and IL–B to be closer to native speaker production than group IL–C. The latter is only the

closest to GB in situation set 4. The fact that learners with the higher level of proficiency are the ones who are further away from the results produced by the GB group may be due to the fact that, having a higher level of proficiency in the foreign language, subjects in the IL–C group might monitor their production less.[8] The same effect is found, to a lesser extent, in the conventionally indirect strategy.
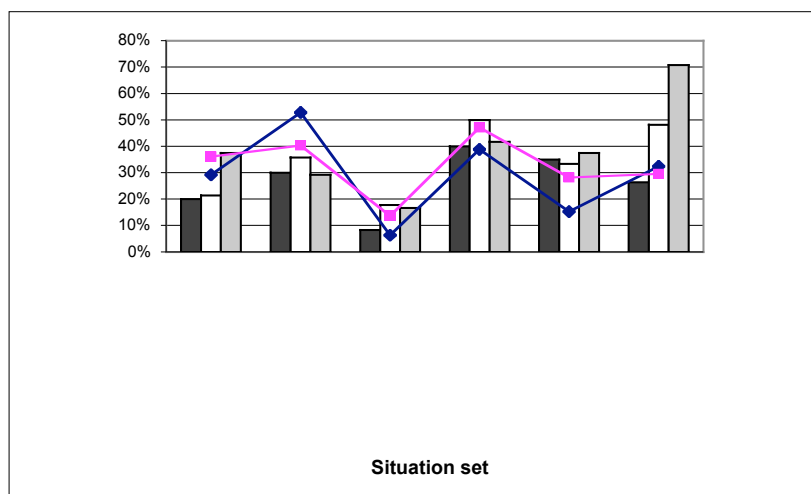

Figure 4-3: Use of the direct strategy in the six situation sets for all language groups.

The highest levels of directness are displayed in the two x>y situations (sets 4 and 6), which include the *police*, and *lecturer* situations. These situations exert high obligation on the addressee and are more likely to be met by compliance. Thus, they grant the speaker a strong right to carry out the request, which may account for the high use of the direct strategy. House (1986: 50-1) (quoted in Kasper (1989) describes these kinds of situations as *standard*. These standout against *non-standard* situations, which are characterised by a "relatively low obligation for the addressee to comply and equally low rights on the part of the requester, thus resulting in greater difficulty in performing the request". The *ride* and *lift* situations (set 3), would fall under the description of non-standard. The interaction in these situations is not arranged by social contract, as would be the case of standard situations such as the *policeman*, and setting the social parameters is more open to negotiation. This is reflected in the data: as Figure 4-3 and Figure 4-4 show, situation set 3 displays the lowest levels of directness and the highest levels of occurrence of the conventionally indirect strategy.

4.1.3. Conventionally indirect strategy

---

[8] Monitoring is a learning strategy. Although some learning strategies have been shown to be more evident in advanced learners (Ellis 1994: 555), more information about the students' background (such as the type of tuition they have received) would be needed to be able to compare within the groups and establish generalisations about their levels of monitoring.

The conventionally indirect strategy is the one in which there is less variation between the groups. This is the category in which GB and CAT differ less, and also the one in which the three IL groups provide more homogenous answers, both with each other and with the NSs groups. This could be related to the fact that this strategy is the most used by all language groups, and the one they are most confident using. This fact is corroborated in the literature (see section 4.4 below).
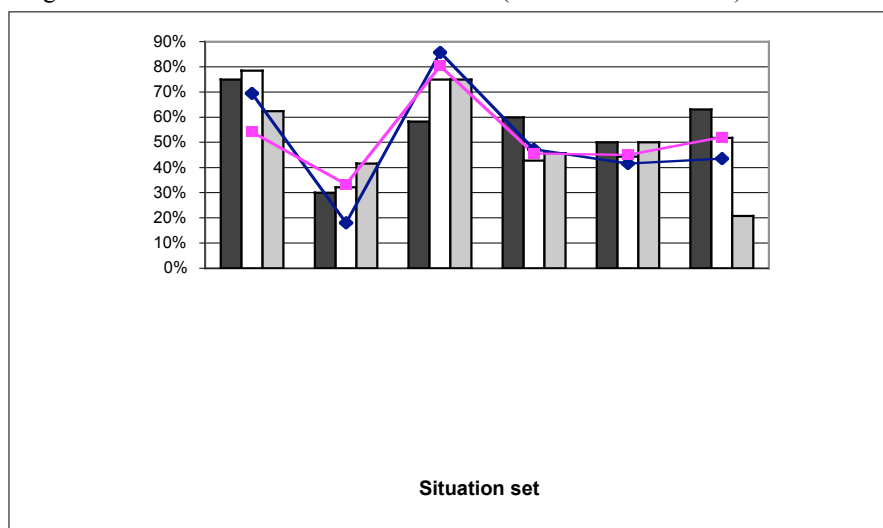

Figure 4-4: Use of the conventionally indirect strategy in the six situation sets for all language groups.
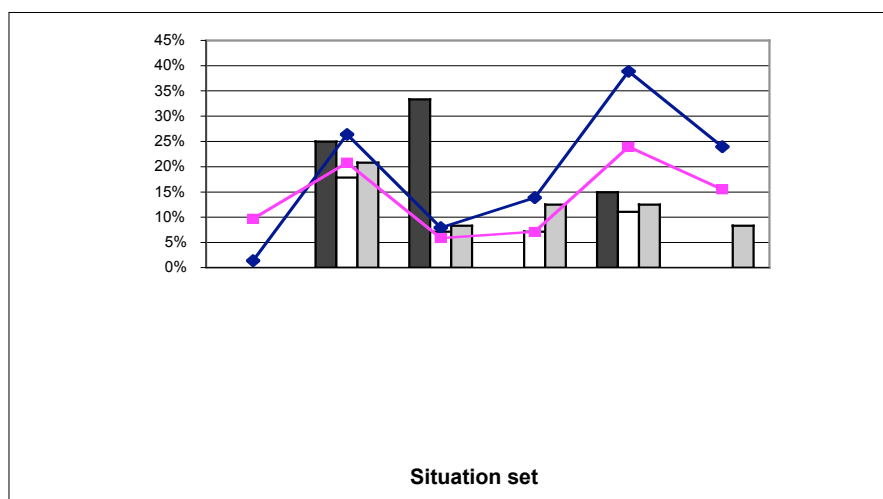

Figure 4-5: Use of the nonconventionally indirect strategy in the six situation sets for all language groups.

4.1.4. Nonconventionally indirect strategy

The use of the nonconventionally indirect strategy, or hints, shows some variation between the GB and CAT groups. This variation is also reflected in the IL groups. IL–A do not seem to be very fond of hints and, in fact, they did not produce any for situation sets 1, 4, and 6. IL–C seems to be the group which, for this strategy, best resembles native speaker performance. Although they do not reach the GB levels of use of the nonconventionally indirect strategy for situation sets 5 and 6, they at least produce a higher number of hints than the other groups and are closer to GB levels than to those of the CAT group.

In the particular case of the nonconventionally indirect strategy, then, as the learners' linguistic ability increases, so does their pragmatic competence in the foreign language, and thus their responses to the DCT are closer to those produced by NSs. This is particularly so in situation sets 3, 4, and 6. A likely explanation might be that learners at lower levels of proficiency have not acquired adequate sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic abilities to use non-conventional indirectness at discretion (Yu 1999), and, instead, resort to the relatively easily learnt conventionally indirect forms in making their requests.

4.2. Social distance

Social distance, or more specifically –SD, seems to have an effect on the subjects' choice of request strategy. While there is no statistically significant difference between the choice of request strategies for all language groups in the +SD situations (situation sets 2, 3, and 4), the –SD situations (1, 5, and 6) give a statistically highly significant result (p-value = 0.000).
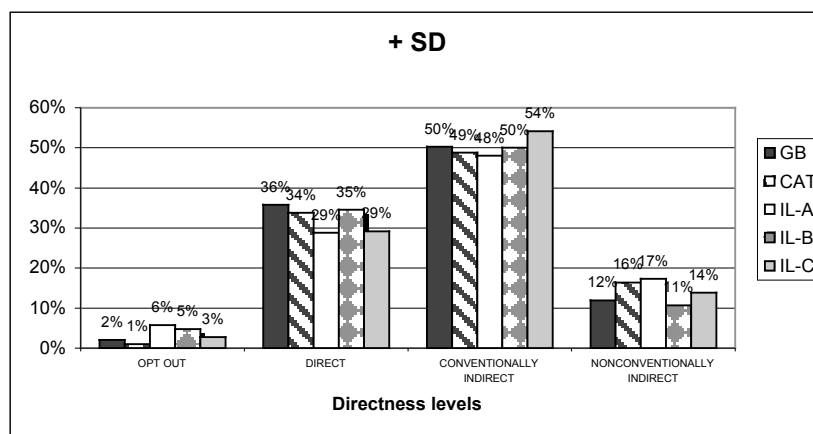
4.2.1. +SD

Figure 4-6: Choice of request strategy per language group in +SD situations.

As can be seen in Figure 4-6, the request strategies used by all the language groups are fairly similar, with the conventionally indirect strategy being the most used, followed by the direct and the nonconventionally indirect strategies. There are very low levels of opting out and, as already pointed out in section 4.1.1, these are

all due to the x=y situations. It seems, then, that in situations in which social distance is high, that is in situations in which there is no familiarity between the interlocutors, all language groups agree on the use of the conventionally indirect strategy in almost 50% of the cases.

4.2.2. –SD

Figure 4-7, though, shows a different picture. In the –SD situations, there is less agreement between the groups, which is shown by the high level of significance obtained in the chi-square analysis (p-value = 0.000).
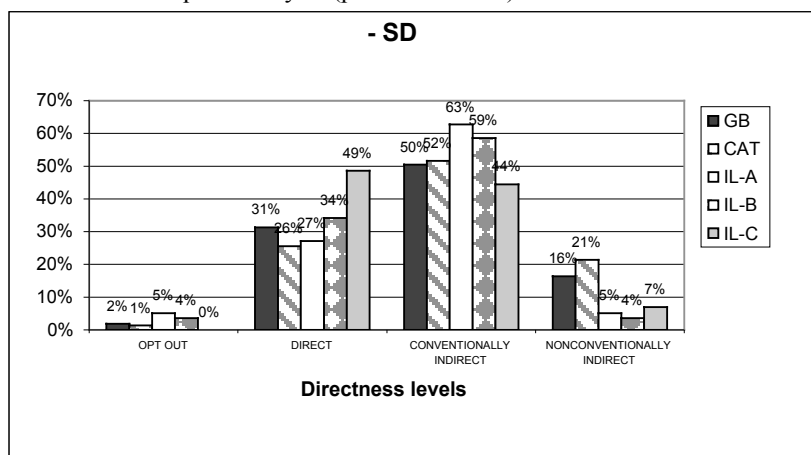

Figure 4-7: Choice of request strategy per language group in –SD situations.

The GB and CAT groups do not differ significantly in their choice of request strategy. Moreover, and contrary to expectation, the results obtained for the –SD situations are very similar to those obtained for the +SD situations reported in the previous section. A trend towards greater directness was anticipated with an increase in familiarity, and this did not take place. The direct strategy is used in 36% and 34% of the +SD situations by groups GB and CAT respectively, and the conventionally indirect one in 50% and 49%. Similarly, in –SD situations the direct strategy is used in 31% and 26% of the occasions and the conventionally indirect strategy is used in 50% and 52% of the occasions respectively.

The IL groups, though, do show differences in behaviour, with the use of the direct strategy by the three groups being indirectly proportional to their use of the conventionally indirect strategy. Thus, IL–A uses few direct requests (27%) and many more conventionally indirect ones (63%). IL–B uses a slightly higher number of direct requests (34%) and thus a lower number of conventionally indirect requests (59%). Finally, IL–C uses the direct strategy most (49%) and the conventionally indirect strategy least (44%), showing a completely reverse tendency to the use of the IL–A group and indeed to all other language groups. For –SD situations then, when there is familiarity between the participants in the situation, groups IL–A and IL–B do not seem comfortable enough using the direct strategy and resort to the

conventionally indirect one even more than NSs of both English and Catalan. Probably, the lower proficiency groups do not assess the social distance of the situation correctly and, even if there is familiarity between the speakers, the fact that they are producing a request in a foreign language which is traditionally described to them as being more polite in its request forms than their native language, they produce more indirect forms. IL–C, on the other hand, uses the direct strategy more but go too far and use it in even higher levels than NSs.

4.3. Dominance

When looking at dominance, the statistical results, when all request strategies are included, are not reliable enough. This is because the low levels of opting out cause too many cells to have expected counts of less than 5.0 and, in the case of the x>y variable, 3 cells give expected counts of less than 1.0, which probably invalidates the chi-square approximation. As a result, a second statistical analysis of the data was carried out in which the opting out strategy was omitted. This analysis gives more accurate results and, in the case of x>y and x<y, the results are statistically significant.

4.3.1. x=y

In cases in which speaker and hearer have the same status we see in Figure 4-8 that there is no difference in the choice of strategies between the GB and CAT groups. Again, the IL groups produce less direct requests than NSs, with IL–C being closer to NS production. As for the conventionally indirect strategy, we get the reverse tendency and the IL groups use this strategy more than NSs, with IL–C being the group that uses it the least. All language groups use the opt-out and nonconventionally indirect strategies similarly.
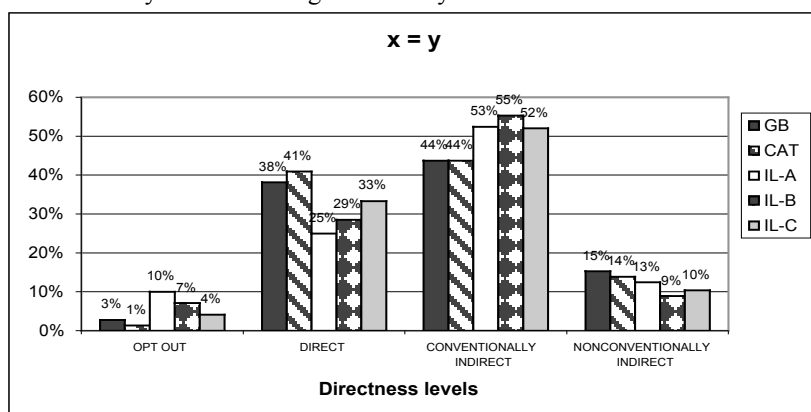

Figure 4-8: Choice of request strategy per language group in x=y situations.

In speech between equals in dominance (x=y), requests are more likely to constitute a threat to both speaker and hearer. The higher level of conventional requests, by the IL groups especially but also by the NSs, seems to reflect the need for threat minimisation by both parties.
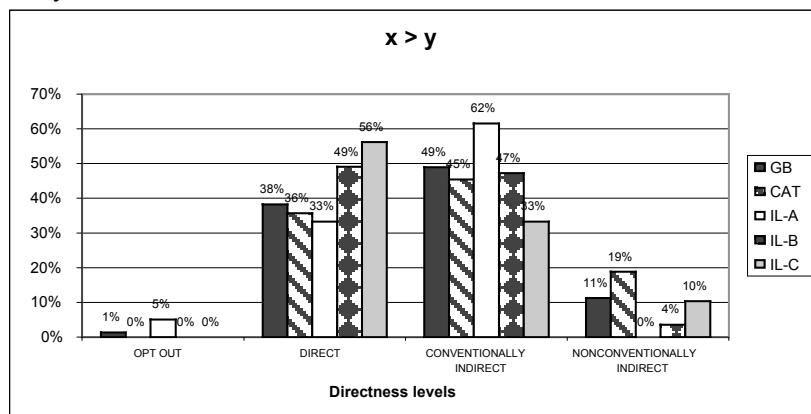
4.3.2. x>y

Figure 4-9: Choice of request strategy per language group in x>y situations.

When the speaker is in a higher position than the hearer, the picture that emerges is very similar to that of the −SD situations (compare Figure 4-7 to Figure 4-9 above) and indeed the statistical analysis of the data also gives out highly significant results at the 0.01 level (p-value = 0.000). In *downward speech* (Blum-Kulka 1985) (i.e. x>y situations in which requests are made by people endowed with power in a given role), directness would be expected to be the norm. However, and despite the higher dominance position of the speaker, the GB and CAT groups do not make more use of the direct strategy than they do in the x=y situations. The IL groups, on the other hand, do use the direct strategy more, with IL–C being the group that uses it the most. This tendency is reversed for the conventionally indirect strategy, as it is IL–A who uses it the most and IL–C the least. IL–B uses both strategies in almost the same percentage.

As far as the opting out strategy is concerned, despite both groups of NSs using opting out in some of the cases, and the CAT group opting out more than the GB group, NNSs hardly use this strategy. In fact, there are only instances of opting out for IL–A. IL–C is, again, the group of NNSs which is closer to GB performance.

4.3.3. x<y

In the x<y situations, it is the hearer who is in a higher situation than the speaker. In these circumstances, we would expect a greater use of indirect strategies to the detriment of the direct strategy. This is precisely what Figure 4-10 depicts.
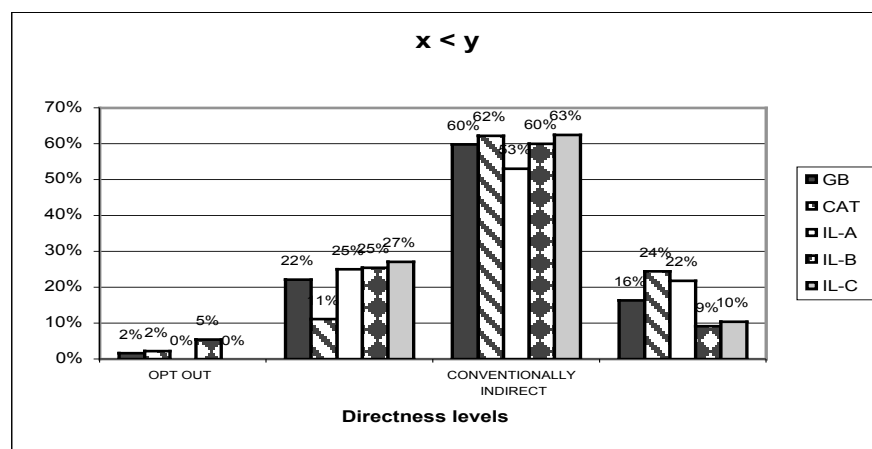

Figure4-10: Choice of request strategy per language group in x<y situations.

The percentage of use of the direct strategy is the lowest in all the dominance situations and, as a result, the use of both the conventional and the non-conventionally indirect strategies is the highest. The use of the nonconventionally indirect strategy deserves special mention as it is most used by all groups in these situations. The choice of strategy type for the x<y situations also proves to be statistically significant, in this case at the 0.05 level (p-value = 0.000). The expectation that in *upward speech* (Blum-Kulka 1985) the proportion of indirect strategies will be greater than that of the direct ones is, thus, confirmed. When the request is made upward in rank or power, the speaker has to face the possibility of non-compliance, and social conventions in both languages seem to agree in showing deference upward in unequal encounters like these.

4.4. Summary of the results

To summarise the most significant descriptive facts, in all situations and for all language groups, the most frequently chosen directness level is the conventionally indirect one. In the literature, reasonable explanations have been offered to account for this fact, which is corroborated by many other studies (e.g. Fraser and Nolen (1981; Kasper 1981; Rintell 1979). Conventional indirectness offers a convenient balance between the maxim of clarity and politeness, i.e. the requestive force is brought out unambiguously while at the same time social requirements for face-saving are observed.

Throughout the language groups and situation sets, the choice of directness levels follows a consistent pattern: very few choices of opting out; somewhat more of the nonconventionally indirect strategies; the single most frequent directness level is the conventionally indirect one, and the frequency of the direct strategy lies roughly between that of the conventionally and that of the nonconventionally indirect strategies. This overall pattern is shown graphically in Figure 4-11. The IL–A group indicates the least contextual variation in their choice of directness level: in over 55% of cases, they chose the conventionally indirect strategy. All other groups opt for alternatives slightly more often, reflecting the social constraints of the situational contexts.
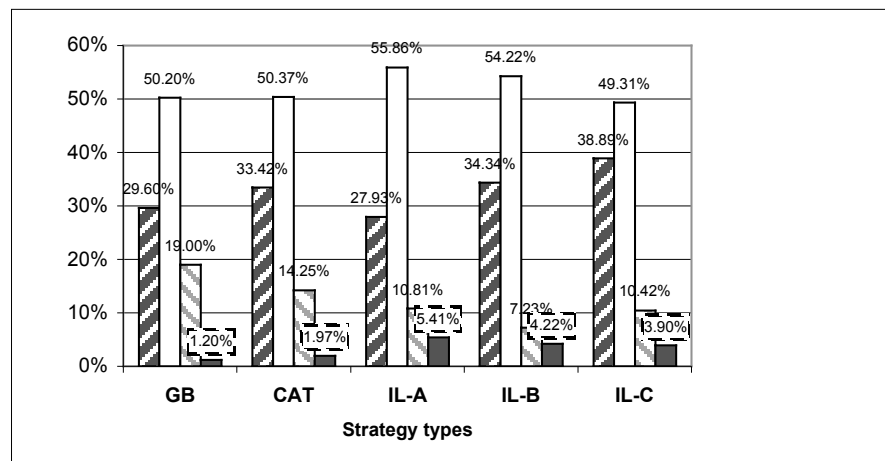

Figure 4-11: Cultural stratification of strategy types for all situations and all language groups.

All language groups vary their directness level depending on the situation set. Thus, higher directness levels are chosen by all groups in situation set 2 (+SD, x=y), while the nonconventionally indirect strategy is the most popular strategy in situation set 5 (–SD, x<y). However, the different language groups choose to vary their strategy choice differently depending on the situation. In this study, we considered the role of two variables –*social distance* and *dominance*– to explain variation in requests using statistical analysis by chi-square. These two social dimensions were found by (Blum-Kulka 1985) to be significantly associated with choice of request strategy type in Hebrew, together with age (more specifically that of the hearer) request goal, setting, and medium.[9] Yu (1999) also looked specifically at these two variables and his results show that they affect the requestive performance of Chinese learners. In the present study, SD and dominance have been shown to be significant in the cases in which request strategy production from the IL groups differs from that of NSs. In particular, the –SD, x>y, and x<y situations are ones which have been found to be significantly associated with differences in strategy choice. However, dominance seems to override social distance as shown by

---

[9] See Blum-Kulka (1985: 116-119) for a description of each of these variables.

the fact that higher directness levels are used in x=y situations even if they are +SD situations.

The group with the lowest level of proficiency in the target language (IL-A) produced more conventionally indirect than direct strategies in all possible combinations of the two variables. At the same time, they used few nonconventionally indirect strategies throughout. One possible explanation for these findings is that IL-A have not yet acquired adequate sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic abilities to use nonconventional indirectness, so instead resorted to the relatively easy learnt conventionally indirect forms in making their requests.

The fact that they use conventionally indirect forms more than the other IL groups, especially in familiar and equal status situations, may be due to the fact that speakers intend to achieve their requestive goal with both effectiveness and politeness. An effective request is one for which the hearer recognises the speaker's intent. The easier it is for hearers to understand that they are being requested to do something, and the easier it is for them to understand what they are supposed to do, the more successful the speaker has been in issuing an effective and transparent request.

To achieve requestive goals with maximum effectiveness and politeness, speakers must match verbal knowledge of their available pragmalinguistic repertoire with an appraisal of the most relevant situational factors. If, however, the level of linguistic and pragmalinguistic proficiency in the target language is restricted –as is the case with IL-A subjects–, they may resort to a familiar and easy form –such as conventionally indirect strategies– even if this is not the most effective strategy to use in that situation. All groups feel more confident using these strategies, which is shown by the fact that they are the most used. The lack of confidence in their production at the lower proficiency levels is also shown by their higher levels of opting out, compared to IL-C. They may use the opting out strategy as an avoidance strategy so as not to produce a request in a situation in which they lack the appropriate vocabulary to produce a request adequate to the situational factors.

I have also shown how the subjects' pragmatic competence in the foreign language increases in turn with their linguistic ability. This is shown in the use of nonconventionally indirect requests. The group with the higher level of proficiency provided closer answers to the GB group. IL-C, though, was the group that differed the most from GB in the case of direct requests. On this occasion, the higher confidence in their performance of this group may have led them to overshoot the target language norms.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this piece of research was to consider the variation in requesting behaviour in five different language groups: two groups of NSs –GB and CAT– and three groups of Catalan learners of English as a second language –IL–A, IL–B, and IL–C. More specifically, the aim of the study was to determine whether and to what extent IL realisation of the SA of requesting by Catalan learners differed

from request realisation in their native language and from English, the target language, at three different levels of proficiency. Data was collected by means of a written DCT administered to a total of 72 subjects. It consisted of twelve situations grouped into six situation sets allowing for all the possible combinations of the variables under study: social distance and dominance. From the subjects' responses to the DCT, only the main request strategy was coded and analysed. This study did not look at the length of the requests produced, the use of politeness markers, or external and internal modification of requests.

The first issue that concerned us was the range of request strategies available in each language. As expected, the three main request realisation strategies identified in previous studies –direct, conventionally indirect and nonconventionally indirect– are also found in the CAT data. Moreover, the data provide an identical range of subcategories within the three main directness levels: no examples of performatives were found for either of the two language groups, while all other subcategories were represented.

In general, there are no big differences between the distribution of strategy types for the GB and CAT groups. Although GB speakers use direct strategies slightly less than CAT speakers, the difference is not as great as might have been expected and is certainly not statistically significant. There are, though, some differences in the specific proportions in the choice of strategies depending on the situation set. For situation set 4 (+SD x>y) for example, the CAT speakers choose to use more direct than indirect strategies, whereas the GB group shows the reverse tendency. The IL groups also differ in their behaviour in this particular situation set. IL-A rely, as they do most of the time throughout the data, on the conventionally indirect strategy. Learners cannot construct native-type discourse unless they possess the linguistic means to do so (Ellis 1994). This, together with the fact that request strategies with *can* and *could* (conventionally indirect) are taught at the initial stages of English language course, possibly account for the fact that this strategy is used so much by the lower level students. IL-B behaves similarly to CAT, while IL-C are closer to GB performance (showing their higher level of pragmalinguistic sophistication). IL-B's results could be attributed to transfer from the speakers' L1. Although IL-A could have been expected to show some transfer from their L1 as well, as Ellis (1994) points out, learners have to develop a satisfactory level of linguistic competence before transfer of complicated L1 strategies and routines becomes possible. It is for this reason that IL-B is the group which shows a closer behaviour to the CAT group than IL-A. Situational variation is related to the *context external features* (House 1986) of the situations in the DCT, namely social distance and dominance. More specifically, –SD, and x>y and x<y dominance situations were found to be statistically significant.

NNSs' performance also shows that the type of situation affects the choice of directness level. The different proficiency groups showed differences in some of their answers to the DCT. IL-A produced more conventionally indirect strategies than direct ones for all the situation sets. They also used few nonconventionally indirect strategies throughout. This could be due to their limited pragmalinguistic

ability given by their low level of proficiency in English. This is corroborated by the fact that it is IL–C, the group with the highest proficiency level, which is closer to NS performance when nonconventionally indirect strategies are concerned.

I have shown how, as the learners' linguistic ability increases, so does their pragmatic competence in the foreign language. However, higher levels of proficiency may cause overconfidence on the learners and lead them to overshoot target language norms in occasions, as it is the case of the use of direct requests by group IL–C. The fact that there are learners whose L2 proficiency is advanced but are still pragmatically unsuccessful is the most compelling evidence that instruction in pragmatics is necessary.

Kasper argues that pragmatic competence as such cannot be taught, as "competence is a type of knowledge that learners possess, develop, acquire, use or lose" (1997: 1). However, she adds that, in second language teaching, learning opportunities can be arranged in such a way that they benefit the development of pragmatic competence in L2. She gives evidence from different studies which supports the view that pragmatic ability can indeed be systematically developed through planned classroom activities. She provides a list of useful activities for pragmatic development which she classifies according to whether they are aimed at (a) raising students' pragmatic awareness (e.g. observation, sociopragmatic, and pragmalinguistic tasks), or (b) offering opportunities for communicative practice (referential and interpersonal communication tasks).[10] Implementing some of these learning activities in the foreign language classroom can help students become more effective and successful communicators in L2.

Finally, it has to be borne in mind that conclusions about learners' pragmatic competence based on their elicited performance can only be tentative as responses to questionnaires may not be representative of actual language use. Further research should be done looking at naturally occurring data from learners and perhaps doing a longitudinal study to find out about the acquisition and development of pragmatic competence in a foreign language.

REFERENCES

Blum-Kulka, Shoshana 1985: "The multifunctionality of disocourse markers: the case of requests". *Theoretical Linguistics* 12: 213-29.

———, Brenda Danet, and Rimona Gherson 1985: "The language of requesting in Israeli society". *Language and Social Situation*. Ed. J Forgas. New York: Springer Verlag. 113-39.

---

[10] See Kasper (1997) for a more detailed description of all these tasks and how they can be implemented in the language classroom.

———— and Juliane House 1989: "Cross-cultural and situational variation in requesting behaviour". *Cross-cultural Pragmatics: Requests and Apologies*. Eds. Shoshana Blum-Kulka, Juliane House and Gabriele Kasper. Norwood, NJ: Ablex. 123-54.

————, Juliane House, and Gabriele Kasper, eds. 1989: *Cross-Cultural Pragmatics: Requests and Apologies*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Ellis, Rod 1994: *The Study of Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Fraser, Bruce, and William Nolen 1981: "The association of deference with linguistic form". *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 27: 93-109.

House, Juliane 1986: "Cross-cultural pragmatics and foreign language teaching". *Probleme und Perspektiven der Sprachlerhrforschung*. Eds. K.R. Bausch, F.G. Könings and R. Kogelheide. Köningstein: Scriptor. 281-95.

Kasper, Gabriele 1981: *Pragmatische Aspeckte in der Interimsprache*. Tübingen: Gunter Narr.

———— 1989: "Variation in interlanguage speech act realisation". *Variation in Second Language Acquisition. Volume 1: Discourse and Pragmatics*. Eds. S. Gass, C. Madden, D. Preston and L. Selinker. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd.

———— and Merete Dahl 1991: "Research methods in interlanguage pragmatics". *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 13: 215-247.

———— and Soshana Blum-Kulka, eds. 1993: *Interlanguage Pragmatics*. New York: Oxford University Press.

———— 1996: "Introduction: Interlanguage pragmatics in SLA". *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 18: 145-48.

———— 1997: "Can pragmatic competence be taught?" NFLRC Net Work #6. Second Language Teaching and Curriculum Center. [WWW Document] Retrieved Jan 16, 1998 from http://www.lll.hawaii.edu/nflc/NetWorks/ NWG/.

Rintell, Ellen 1979: "Getting your speech act together: the pragmatic ability of second language learners". *Working Papers on Bilingualism* 17: 97-106.

Searle, John R. 1976: "The classification of illocutionary acts". *Language in Society* 5: 1-24.

Yu, Ming-chui 1999: "Universalistic and culture-specific perspectives on variation in the acquisition of pragmatic competence in a second languag"e. *Pragmatics* 9: 281-312.

APPENDIX

Questionnaire in English to be completed by the NSs of English.

Age: _____   Sex: (tick the appropriate box)   male   female

Mother tongue (if not English): _____

University Studies: _____

Instructions

Twelve situations are described below. Please read the description of each situation and write down what you would say (if anything) in that situation in the quotation marks ("   ") as if you were speaking. Say as much or as little as you wish –you may also choose to say nothing.

You are not going to be given a "mark" on your responses. There are no right or wrong answers, and sometimes more than one answer might be appropriate.

It is important that you understand the situation fully. If there is something you do not understand, ask your teacher and he will explain it to you. Thank you for participating in this study!

Situations

9. Martyn is playing tennis at the College tennis courts one afternoon with a friend. Unfortunately, he is just a beginner and is not very good. At one point during the game, he accidentally hits the ball over the fence into the next court where some children are playing. He needs the ball back. Imagine you are Shane. What do you say to one of the children playing in the next court to get them to give the ball back to you?

"
_____
_____"

Questionnaire in Catalan to be completed by the NSs of Catalan.

Nivell: _____   Professor/a: _____

Llibre de text: _____   Edat: _____   Sexe: _____

Llengua materna:_____

Quants anys fa que estudies anglès? _____

Per què aprens anglès? _____

Has estat mai a Gran Bretanya o en algún altre país de parla anglesa? _____

En cas de resposta afirmativa a la pregunta anterior, durant quant temps? _____

Estudis universitaris: _____

Instruccions

A continuació es descriuen dotze situacions. Si et plau, llegeix la descripció de cada situació i escriu, en català, el que tu diries (si és que diries alguna cosa) en cadascuna d'elles dins l'espai que se't dóna. Pots escriure tant o tan poc com vulguis –fins i tot pots optar per no dir res.

És important que entenguis completament la situació. Si hi ha alguna cosa que no entens de la situació, demana-m'ho.

Gràcies per la teva participació en aquest estudi!

Situacions

9. En Martí està jugant a tennis a les instal·lacions del SAF amb un amic. Desgraciadament, en Miquel és un principiant i no en sap gaire. En un moment del joc, llança la pilota accidentalment per sobre la reixa i l'envia a la pista del costat on hi ha uns nens jugant. Imagina que ets en Miquel. Què dius als nens de la pista del costat perquè et tornin la pilota?

" _____
_____ "