THE PROBLEM OF ETHNOCENTRIC BIAS IN SPEECH ACT STUDIES: IMPLICATIONS FOR LANGUAGE TEACHING

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1   Introduction

Most language teaching specialists today hold the view that the aim of second language teaching should be to facilitate learners' acquisition of so-called "communicative competence". Leaving aside the many questions concerning the meaning and use of this term that are being hotly debated in the litera- ture, I will use the term "communicative competence" to refer to the system(s) of knowledge that underlie the ability to use a language both _accurately_, that is, in a grammatically correct way, and _appropriately_ in different social and situational contexts.[1] It is with the latter aspect of com- municative competence in particular, viz. the knowledge under- lying the ability to use a language appropriately in context, that this paper will be concerned. Let us call this aspect of communicative competence "pragmatic competence".[2]

Teachers, teacher trainers, curriculum designers and materials writers faced with the task of producing not only _grammatically_ competent, but also _pragmatically_ competent second language speakers, need answers to questions such as the following:

(1)   What does it mean to be pragmatically competent in a language?

(2)   What aspect(s) of pragmatic competence can be assumed to be universal and can therefore be expected to carry over from the learner's mother tongue?

(3)   How can the development of pragmatic competence in a second language be facilitated?

Providing answers to questions such as (1) and (2) in particular is a concern of linguistics, with linguistics being taken in a broad sense to include disciplines such as pragmatics, sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics. The third question, being a question about teaching practice, is perhaps not first and foremost a linguistic question. However, given that the answer to this question is, at least to a certain extent, dependent on the answers given to the first two questions, it is also, partly, a linguistic question.

The aim of this paper is to highlight the contribution that a field of linguistic research known as cross-cultural pragmatics has made and could potentially make to answering questions such as (1)-(3) above. The focus will be on question (2), the question of what aspects of pragmatic competence, if any, can be taken to be universal or non-language-specific. Some rather strong claims have been made in the literature regarding the putative universality of particular aspects of pragmatic competence. A number of these claims will be presented in section 3 below. However, the fact that these initial universality claims were based almost exclusively on evidence from English and languages closely related to English has given rise to the criticism that they reflect an anglocentric bias. As will be shown in section 3, this criticism is supported by the findings of a growing number of studies that compare the ways in which particular speech acts are performed in different languages and cultures. The results of these studies and the insights they offer into the way in which cultural differences are encoded in speech act performance, has important implica- tions for first and second language teaching in linguistically and culturally diverse societies. A brief look at some of these implications in section 4 should give an indication of the direction in which answers to question (3) must eventually be sought. Section 2 will deal, very briefly, with question (1) above, i.e. the question of what linguists are talking about when they use the term "pragmatic competence".

2   Pragmatic competence

Although different answers have been given to the question
of what kinds of knowledge constitute pragmatic competence
--- some more detailed than others --- there is broad con-
sensus among linguists that pragmatic competence includes
knowledge of what speech acts can be performed in the language,
what linguistic means and forms are available for encoding a
given speech act, and what the social and situational condi-
tions are for its appropriate performance.

To illustrate this point, we may ask what kinds of knowledge
a speaker needs in order to determine whether it is appro-
priate in South African English (SAE) to use the expression
Good evening, sir! (rather than, say, *Good morning!*, *Oh,
it's you again!*, *Hi!*, or *I bow my forehead*) to greet another
person.[3]   A recent answer to this question is the one given
in (Bachman 1990). Drawing on earlier descriptions of commu-
nicative competence by Hymes (1972), Munby (1978), Canale and
Swain (1980), Savignon (1983) and Canale (1983), Bachman de-
scribes pragmatic competence as comprising two kinds of compe-
tence: illocutionary competence and sociolinguistic compe-
tence. Illocutionary competence, according to him (1990:90),
is "knowledge of the pragmatic conventions for performing ac-
ceptable language functions". Looking at our greeting example,
we can say that the knowledge that the utterance of a linguis-
tic expression such as *Good evening, sir!*, *Good morning!*, *Oh,
it's you again!*, or *Hi!*, but not *I bow my forehead*, may count
as a greeting, is part of the illocutionary competence of a
speaker of a particular variety of SAE. The knowledge that
I bow my forehead can be used as a greeting, by contrast, forms
part of the illocutionary competence of speakers of Indian
English, according to Berns (1990:32).

Sociolinguistic competence, according to Bachman (1990:90), is
"knowledge of the sociolinguistic conventions for performing
language functions appropriately in a given context". Re-
turning to our example, then, we may say that the knowledge
determining the choice of the expression *Good evening, sir!*

rather than one of the available alternatives, depending on who is being greeted by whom and in what circumstances, is part of sociolinguistic competence. For example, the speaker has to know that in SAE the expression *Good evening, sir!* may be used to greet someone whom one encounters late in the after-noon, in the evening, or even late at night, but that it can-not be used to greet someone whom one encounters for the second time in the course of the same evening. This is know-ledge concerning the relationship between linguistic expres-sions and situational factors such as the time and circumstances of the encounter. The speaker also has to have knowledge of how social factors such as the relationship between him- or herself and the addressee, their respective ages, rights, obligations, etc. influence the choice of an utterance. Thus the utterance *Good evening, sir!* would normally be judged in-appropriate if used by an adult native speaker of SAE to greet a lover, a friend or a child, whereas *Hi!* would be judged quite appropriate.

As was mentioned earlier, an important question from the point of view of second language acquisition is whether and to what extent various aspects of pragmatic competence are universal. This question can now be made more specific, given Bachman's view of pragmatic competence as comprising two kinds of competence, viz. illocutionary competence and sociolinguis-tic competence. Firstly, with regard to illocutionary compe-tence, the more specific questions in (4) arise:

(4)   i.   Do all languages allow the same speech acts, or at least the same types of speech acts, to be performed? For example, do all languages have representative speech acts, such as asserting, claiming, saying, reporting, etc.; directives, such as ordering, requesting, suggesting, etc.; commissives, such as promising and threatening; and a number of other types that have been pro-posed in the literature?

      ii.   Are the pragmatic strategies available for realizing a given speech act the same across languages? For example, is it possible in all languages, as it is in English, to request that the addressee do something by questioning his or her ability to do it, as in *Can you give me a hand?* or by stating a desire that the addressee should do it, as in *I'd appreciate it if you'd give me a hand?*

      iii.   Do all languages make available the same linguistic options for encoding the various pragmatic strategies by which a given speech act may be realized? For example, do all languages offer their speakers a choice between the indicative and the subjunctive mood (i.e. the equivalents of *can you ...?* and *could you ...?* in English) for encoding the request strategy of questioning the addressee's ability to do whatever is being requested?

Secondly, as far as sociolinguistic competence is concerned, the general question (2) above gives rise to more specific questions such as those in (5):

(5)   i.   Is the relationship between contextual factors and the choice of specific speech act strategies the same across languages and cultures? For example, do speakers across languages and cultures choose more polite strategies when addressing requests to older people, people of higher status, strangers, etc.?

      ii.   Is the relationship between social norms and the choice of particular speech act strategies the same across languages and cultures? For example, are speakers across languages and cultures motivated by a desire to be polite in choosing indirect rather than direct strategies to realize directive speech acts such as requests?

In the next section we will consider some of the claims and counterclaims that have been made in the literature in response to questions such as those in (4) and (5) concerning the possible universality of aspects of pragmatic competence.

3 The question of universality

3.1 Illocutionary competence

As was pointed out in section 2, a first set of questions that bear on the issue of universality in the domain of pragmatic competence are questions about aspects of illocutionary competence, viz. knowledge of what speech acts can be performed and of the pragmatic and linguistic means available for performing them. The first question, formulated as (4i) above, is whether all languages allow the same speech acts, or at least the same types of speech acts, to be performed. According to Schmidt and Richards (1980:138), most researchers assume that the same basic types of speech acts (representative, directive, commissive, expressive, etc.) occur in all languages and cultures. In an often quoted paper, Fraser, Rintell and Walters (1980:78-79) go even further, claiming that every language makes available to the user the same basic individual speech acts, such as requesting, apologizing, declaring, and promising. They do make provision for the existence, outside the "basic set of speech acts", of acts such as baptizing, excommunicating, doubling at bridge, etc. that they take to be culture-specific and often highly ritualized.

In a recently published monograph, Anna Wierzbicka takes issue with Fraser et al.'s claim. She (1991:150ff) points out that

> "English words such as *question, command* or *blessing* identify concepts which are language-specific. They embody an English folk taxonomy, which, like all folk taxonomies, is culture-specific".

She (1991:152ff) goes on to illustrate the non-universality of

speech acts such as *asking, warning* and *thanking* by showing
that there are cultures in which the concepts encoded in these
words do not exist. For example, the Japanese concept encoded
in the word *satosu*, which is normally considered to be the
Japanese equivalent of the English word *warning*, includes com-
ponents of meaning that are absent from the concept encoded
by the word *warning*. These components include "an assumption
that the speaker has authority over the addressee, the inten-
tion of protecting the addressee from evil, and good feelings
towards the addressee". The concepts of authority, responsi-
bility and care do not form part of the concept encoded by the
English word *warning*, according to Wierzbicka (1991:153).

A second example comes from an Australian Aboriginal language.
In the language of the Yolngu people, according to Wierzbicka
(1991:158), it is impossible to express what in English is
termed "thanks". This is because, in the culture of the
Yolngu, people do things for one of two reasons only: either
because they want to, or else because they have a kinship-
based obligation to fulfil. So, if you should give one of
these people a lift in your boat, he or she automatically as-
sumes that you wanted to do so. You should not, therefore,
expect an expression of "thanks" in the English sense of the
term.

Examples such as these, according to Wierzbicka (1991:151),
provide clear evidence that speech acts are not necessarily
language- and culture-independent natural conceptual kinds,
to which different languages merely attach different labels.
As to the question whether the assumption holds that all lan-
guages at least have speech acts belonging to all the proposed
basic types, viz. representatives, directives, commissives,
etc., the answer still has to be the one given by Schmidt and
Richards (1980:138): "... in fact there has been no ethno-
graphic research carried out to confirm or disprove the as-
sumption".

Let us turn to the second question, (4ii) above, which is
whether the pragmatic strategies available for realizing a

given speech act are the same across languages. What is meant
by "pragmatic strategy"? The term "pragmatic strategy" refers
to an utterance type by means of which a given illocutionary
force can be conveyed (or, in other words, by means of which a
given speech act can be realized).[4] For example, there are
nine possible ways in which a request can be realized, according
to the researchers participating in a project known as the
Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP), a
research project set up in the early eighties by linguists re-
presenting five languages and seven different cultures to in-
vestigate intralingual and cross-cultural variation in the real-
ization of two speech acts, viz. requests and apologies.[5] They
assume that a request can be realized by producing an utterance
of one of the following types:

(6)   i.   an utterance in which the grammatical mood of the
verb (viz. the imperative mood) signals the illo-
cutionary force, e.g. *Leave me alone!*;

     ii.   an utterance in which the illocutionary force is
explicitly named, e.g. *I am asking you to clean
up this mess*;

     iii.   an utterance in which the naming of the illocu-
tionary force is modified by hedging expressions,
e.g. *I want to ask you to give your presentation
a week earlier*;

     iv.   an utterance in which the hearer's obligation to
carry out the act is stated, e.g. *You'll have to
move your car*;

     v.   an utterance in which the speaker's desire for
the act to be carried out is stated, e.g. *I real-
ly wish you'd stop bothering me*;

     vi.   an utterance in which it is suggested that the
hearer carry out the act, e.g. *How about cleaning
up this mess?*;

     vii.   an utterance containing reference to the prepara-
tory conditions (such as the hearer's ability or
willingness to do the act) for the successful per-

formance of a request, e.g. *Can you clear up the kitchen for me?*, *Would you mind moving your car?*;

viii. an utterance in which partial reference is made to an object or element needed for the implementation of the act, e.g. *You have really left the kitchen in a mess!* uttered as a request to the hearer to clean up the kitchen; and

ix. an utterance in which no reference is made to the request or any of the conditions for its successful performance, but which is interpretable as a request by virtue of the context, e.g. *It's cold in here* uttered as a means of getting the hearer to close the window/door.

[Adapted from Blum-Kulka et al. 1989:18]

Each of these nine types of utterances represents a pragmatic strategy for making a request. The strategies are ordered from more transparent, or direct, ones such as (6i)-(6iii) to more indirect ones such as (6viii) and (6ix). That is, whereas in (6i)-(6iii) the requestive force is explicitly signalled by the presence of linguistic indicators such as the imperative mood or the presence of the verb *ask*, there is no overt indication of requestive force in (6viii) and (6ix). In the latter case, there is heavy reliance on contextual clues to indicate the intended illocutionary force of the utterance. Utterances of the type exemplified in (6vi) and (6vii) are taken to represent conventionally indirect strategies for realizing a request. That is, they are standardly, or routinely, taken to be potentially ambiguous between a question reading and a request reading. Utterances such as (6iv) and (6v) are sometimes considered to represent direct strategies (cf., e.g., Blum-Kulka et al. 1989:18) and sometimes conventionally indirect ones (cf., e.g. Blum-Kulka 1982:33, Searle 1975:60).

To what extent, then, are pragmatic strategies universal? Fraser, Rintell and Walters (1980:78-79) have made the strongest claim, hypothesizing that all languages make available the same

set of strategies for performing a given speech act. There-
fore, according to them (1980:79),

> "if one can request, for example, in one language by
> asking the hearer about his ability to do the act
> (*Can you do that?*), by expressing one's desire for
> the hearer to do the act (*I'd really appreciate if
> you'd do that*), or by explicitly announcing what you
> intend (*I request that you do that*), then these same
> semantic formulas --- strategies --- are avail-
> able to the speaker of every other language."

A similar hypothesis concerning the universality of request-
ing strategies is entertained by researchers working in the
framework of the CCSARP. For instance, Blum-Kulka (1989:47)
claims that all languages make available direct as well as
conventionally and nonconventionally indirect request strate-
gies. Moreover, the conditions that have to be satisfied for
an utterance to count as a request are claimed to be essen-
tially the same across all languages. An example of such a
condition is the one that stipulates that an imperative ut-
terance can count as a valid request only if the hearer is
in fact able to perform the desired act (so that, e.g., *Come
here!*, but not *Drop dead!*, would count as a valid request
in English). It is claimed by Blum-Kulka (1982:32) that the
rule holds for all languages that allow the use of the impera-
tive to make direct requests.

As far as conventionally indirect request strategies are
concerned, Blum-Kulka (1989:64) partly concurs with the
claim by Fraser et al. and with an earlier, equally strong
claim by Searle (1975:60). She hypothesizes that all lan-
guages share at least a basic set of strategies for realizing
indirect requests, viz. those strategies that can be described
in quite general terms as having something to do with the
preconditions necessary for making a request: strategies
such as that of questioning the hearer's ability or willing-
ness to perform the act, or stating the speaker's desire for
the act to be performed. However, she (1989:64) cautions that

> "the suggestion [made by Searle and Fraser et al.
> --- CleR] that all types of conventional indi-
> rectness are systematically linked to precondi-
> tions, such that it is possible to formulate
> 'generalizations' ... that will specify the exact
> possibilities available in all languages for in-
> direct requesting, is not confirmed ... ."

Her caution appears to be well-justified. Numerous counter-
examples to Fraser et al.'s and Searle's claims have been
cited in the literature. Thomas (1983:101) reports, for
example, that the Russian equivalent of the utterance
Would you like to read?, used by a teacher to a student, tends
to be interpreted not as a request, but as a genuine question
about the student's preferences. Similarly, Wierzbicka (1991:
34) points out that in Polish

> "one could perform requests, or acts closely re-
> lated to requests, by ostensibly 'asking' about the
> addressee's ability to do something, or about his
> goodness (or kindness): ... *Could you ...?*,
> ... *Would you be so good as to ...?*, ... *Would you
> be so kind/gracious as to ...?* But ... pseudo-
> questions which ostensibly enquire about the ad-
> dressee's desire and which in fact are to be inter-
> preted as requests *(Would you like to, Do you want
> to)* seem particularly odd and amusing from a Polish
> point of view ... ."

It would seem, then, that even if it could be maintained that,
in very general terms, the same kinds of strategies for real-
izing a request are available in all languages, it is still
the case that the specific realization of these strategies
differs from language to language. So, too, does the subset
of conventionally indirect strategies which are considered to
be the standard or preferred ones for performing requests in-
directly in a particular language. According to Wierzbicka
(1991:26), the claim that all languages share exactly the same
strategies for realizing speech acts indirectly is just one
more example of the mistaken assumption that Anglo-Saxon con-
ventions hold for human behaviour in general.

Having said that, we have in fact, also partly answered the
third of our questions concerning the universality of illocu-

tionary competence (cf. (4iii) above), i.e. the question of
whether all languages make available the same linguistic
options for encoding the various pragmatic strategies by
which a given speech act may be realized. As we have just
seen, the answer to this question must be negative, at least
as far as conventionally indirect strategies are concerned.
There is abundant evidence in the literature that, even when
closely related languages share an indirect pragmatic stra-
tegy, it may be the case that they encode this strategy
differently. A comparison of the different linguistic forms
by which the indirect request strategies of questioning the
addressee's ability or willingness to perform the desired act
are encoded in English and Hebrew, according to Blum-Kulka
(1982:34-35), will serve to illustrate this point.

(7)   a.   Ability questions

English	Hebrew
i. *Can you do ...?*	i. *Ata yaxol ...?* (= Can you do ...?)
ii. *Could you do ...?*	ii. ——
iii. ——	iii. *Ata tuxal ...?* (= Will you be able to do ...?)

b.   Willingness questions

English	Hebrew
i. *Do you want to* *do ...?*	i. ——
ii. ——	ii. *Ata muxan ...?* (= Are you ready/pre- pared to do ...?)

In (7) above a dash ("——") in a given box means that an ut-
terance with the linguistic form concerned cannot be used to.
realize a request in that particular language. It should not

be taken to mean that such an utterance is not a possible utterance in the language. *Will you be able to do X?* (cf. (7 a iii)), for example, is a possible utterance of English, but it will not be interpreted by speakers of English as a request to do X. Rather, it will be interpreted as a genuine question concerning the addressee's ability to do X, illustrating that an utterance with a particular conventional illocutionary force in one language may lose this force when translated into another language.

No linguist, to my knowledge, has defended the claim that if one language uses a particular syntactic structure to encode a given indirect speech act strategy, all languages may be expected to do so. But what about direct strategies? Do all languages, for instance, make use of the imperative to signal directive illocutionary force directly and explicitly? And do all languages have verbs for explicitly naming speech acts, such as *ask*, *request*, *order*, *command*, *plead*, *etc.*? Apart from acknowledging that one is not likely to find equivalents for exactly the set of English speech act naming verbs in all languages, most of the studies that I have been referring to assume that direct speech act strategies are encoded in essentially the same way in all languages, viz. by the grammatical mood of the verb and by the use of speech act naming verbs.[6] However, this is clearly an empirical question, as is the question of what other illocutionary force indicating devices languages make available to their speakers.[7] Answers to these questions will have to await further research.

3.2   Sociolinguistic competence

We turn now to the second set of questions that were raised in section 2: questions concerning the universality of aspects of sociolinguistic competence, or knowledge of the relationship between what and how on the one hand, and when and to whom on the other hand. The first question to be considered (cf. (5i) above) is whether the relationship between contextual factors

and the choice and linguistic realization of speech act
strategies is the same across languages and·cultures. To
make this question more concrete, consider the options avail-
able to a speaker of English who wants to make a request in
a given situation. The speaker first of all has to make a
choice from among nine different pragmatic strategies ranging
on a scale of directness from direct and explicit, through
conventionally indirect, to highly indirect, as shown in (6)
above. Having chosen a strategy, the speaker then has to
decide on the precise linguistic form by which the ·strategy
is to be encoded. For example, having chosen to realize the
request by means of an ability question, the speaker has to
decide whether the question should be phrased by means of
can you or *could you*, whether to address the hearer as *sir*,
or *old chap*, whether or not to use slang, etc.

The question, then, is whether and to what extent the rela-
tionship between pragmatic choices such as those outlined
and aspects of the context within which a speech act is per-
formed can be assumed to be constant across languages and
cultures. This question is perhaps the easiest one to
answer: no speech act theorist that I know of has been pre-
pared to deny that languages and cultures differ signifi-
cantly with respect to both <u>what</u> speech acts ought to be,
ought not to be, or may be performed in what contexts, and
<u>how</u> a given speech act is to be performed in a given context.
Factors such as the sex, age, status and authority of the
speaker and addressee, their familiarity with each other,
whether the speech act is performed publicly or privately,
orally or in writing, the topic and the actual setting all
influence the ways in which speech acts·are realized. But
the precise way in which each of these factors influences the
realization of a given speech act differs from society to so-
ciety, and from one culture to the next.

For example, in a comparison of the requests of speakers of
British English and those of Spanish speakers, Rintell (1981:
15) found that Spanish speakers, but not English speakers,

were significantly more deferential when making requests of
addressees of the opposite sex than when making requests of
addressees of the same sex. A study by Beebe (1985) of re-
fusals in Japanese and American English, respectively, has
shown that the status of the addressee has a much stronger
influence on the form of refusals in Japanese than in American
English.[8]

Examples of studies showing that different pragmatic choices
reflect the assignment of different weights to the same
social and situational variables in different languages and
cultures can be proliferated. However, I can do no more here
than to refer the interested reader to the extensive overview
provided in (Wolfson 1989:ch. 4, 7).

The fact that the conventions determining the choice of stra-
tegies and forms for the realization of particular speech
acts in particular situations are undoubtedly language- and
culture-specific have not deterred linguists from hypothes-
izing that, underlying these surface differences, there may
be universal norms or motivating principles to which parti-
cular pragmatic choices are systematically related across
languages and cultures. This, of course, brings us to ques-
tion (5ii) above: Is the relationship between social norms, or
principles, and the choice of particular speech act strategies
the same across languages and cultures? Let us consider one
particular norm, or principle, that has been hypothesized to
be universal and therefore capable of explaining aspects of
the speech act performance of speakers cross-linguistically
and cross-culturally, viz. the principle of politeness. The
content of the notion 'politeness' is not as clear as it
would seem at first blush. However, as the content of the
notion is highly theory-dependent, a full clarification would
take us far beyond the scope of this paper.[9] I will there-
fore concentrate on one particular account of politeness.

In this account, Brown and Levinson (1987) define politeness
as the manifestation of respect for and consideration of
another's face. "Face" is defined both positively as the

desire of the individual to be liked and approved of, and
negatively as the individual's desire not to be imposed upon.
Some speech acts, such as directives, are considered to be
intrinsically imposing and therefore threatening to the face
of the addressee. The seriousness of a face-threatening act
is determined by the interplay of three independent and cul-
ture-sensitive variables: (i) the social distance between
the speaker and hearer, i.e. their degree of familiarity and
solidarity, (ii) the relative power of the speaker with re-
spect to the hearer, i.e. the degree to which the speaker can
impose his or her will on the hearer, and (iii) the ranking
of the size of the imposition, i.e. the degree of the hearer's
conventionally recognized obligation to provide the goods or
services, or to perform the actions concerned, the right of
the speaker to impose, and the degree to which the hearer
welcomes the imposition. The choice of certain strategies
rather than others to perform potentially imposing, and
therefore face-threatening, speech acts is seen, then, as an
attempt by the speaker to reduce the threat to the hearer's
face, or to "soften" the imposition on the hearer. For
example, and English speaker saying *I would appreciate it if
you would shut the door*, rather than *Shut the door!*, impli-
cates not only a request, but also the desire to be polite.

The question, now, is whether there is a systematic relation-
ship between the choice of specific speech act strategies
and the desire to be polite, and whether this relationship
holds universally. Searle (1975:64) maintained that

> "... ordinary conversational requirements of polite-
> ness normally make it awkward to issue flat impera-
> tive sentences (e.g. *Leave the room*) or explicit
> performatives (e.g. *I order you to leave the room*),
> and we seek therefore to find indirect means to our
> illocutionary ends (e.g. *I wonder if you would mind
> leaving the room*). In directives, politeness is the
> chief motivation for indirectness."

The implication of Searle's claim is that there is a systema-
tic and universally stable relationship between a speaker's
desire to be polite (and a hearer's recognition of this desire),

on the one hand, and the degree of (in)directness of the
strategy chosen to realize the speech act. Given the scale
of directness for requesting strategies proposed by Blum-Kulka
and her associates --- see (6) above --- nonconvention-
ally indirect strategies such as hinting would have to be the
most polite means for realizing a request if Searle's claim
was correct.

Brown and Levinson (1987:132ff) have argued, however, that
conventional indirect strategies for realizing speech acts are
universally the most polite ones; more polite, therefore,
than nonconventionally indirect ones (such as hints in the case
of requests). The reason for this, they claim, is that the non-
literal (requestive) interpretation is conventionalized, hence
readily accessible. Thus, the inferencing process is short-
circuited and the hearer is saved the trouble of having to
work out the intended meaning as he or she would have to do in
the case of nonconventionally indirect strategies. But, at
the same time, the speaker has indicated a desire to be polite
by being indirect. Reporting on the results of a study con-
ducted within the framework of the CCSARP project, Blum-Kulka
(1987:132) confirms Brown and Levinson's hypothesis concerning
the relationship between conventional indirectness and polite-
ness. However, she does caution that the nature of the rela-
tionship may differ across cultures.

Both Thomas (1983) and Wierzbicka (1991) have questioned the
validity of claims such as those that we have been examining.
They argue that claims such as those made by Searle and Brown
and Levinson reflect an ethnocentric bias: they are based
mainly on an understanding of the relationship between language
and Western or, worse, Anglo-Saxon social and cultural norms
and values and cannot be taken to hold universally. Thomas and
Wierzbicka's criticism is based on two lines of argument.
Firstly, Wierzbicka (1991:ch. 2 and 3) argues on the basis of
empirical evidence from languages such as Polish that direct
strategies (such as the use of imperatives or speech act indi-
cating verbs) are more polite in some languages and cultures

than indirect strategies. Secondly, both Wierzbicka (1991: 59ff) and Thomas (1983:106ff) argue that norms other than politeness may be the chief motivation for the choice of particular speech act strategies in other languages and cultures: norms such as cordiality, truthfulness or sincerity. The emphasis on politeness, defined as respect for another's face, reflects the high value placed on the autonomy of the individual in Anglo-Saxon culture, according to Wierzbicka (1991: 52). In the Polish culture, by contrast, attributes such as warmth, sincerity and affection are more highly valued than personal autonomy. Therefore, the choice of speech act strategies by speakers of Polish can never be adequately explained with reference to a norm such as politeness. Rather, a different norm must be used: one which reflects Polish cultural values rather than Anglo-Saxon ones.

3.3   Conclusion

I have tried to identify very briefly some of the claims that have been made regarding the universality of aspects of pragmatic competence.[10]   I have also trief to show that claims such as these may not be correct. In doing so, I focused on one particular line of argumentation against these claims and on the kind of evidence on which the argumentation is based. It was not my aim to be complete or balanced in my overview. This would have been impossible, given the limited scope of this paper.   Rather, I chose to concentrate on studies undertaken within the general theory of speech acts proposed by Austin and Searle, to the exclusion of valuable work done within other theoretical frameworks.   The choice was motivated by the fact that the Austin-Searle theory has generated such an immense body of research and is still considered a point of departure for work on speech acts even by those who have adopted a different framework.[11]

The general tenor of the line of criticism that I have been focusing on is that claims about the putatively universal

nature of aspects of pragmatic competence may reflect an
ethnocentric, specifically an Anglo-Saxon, bias. In presenting
this criticism, I am in no way intimating that I agree with it,
or that the arguments offered are valid arguments, or that it
is the only possible line of criticism. I have focused on this
line of criticism because it is important that language teach-
ers and others involved in language teaching take note of
views such as those expressed by Thomas, Wierzbicka and others.
Their views, if correct, have implications for language
teaching in a multilingual and multicultural society such as
ours. Some of these implications are considered in section 4
directly below.

4   Implications for language teaching

In section 3 we saw that many aspects of pragmatic competence
which were initially hypothesized to be universal have since
been argued to be language-specific or culture-specific. The
question that now arises is why the issue of universality, a
linguistic issue, should be of interest to language teachers.
To answer this question, let us consider what consequences it
would have for second language learners if teachers wrongly
assumed aspects of pragmatic competence to be universal when
they were in fact language- or culture-specific.

A first possible consequence of wrongly assuming to be univer-
sal, aspects of pragmatic competence that are in fact lan-
guage- or culture-specific, is that the task of the second
language learner may be seriously underestimated. It may be
assumed, for instance, that a second language learner of Eng-
lish already knows what it means to request, to insist, to
hint, to suggest, etc., whereas this may not be the case.
Rather, it may be that these speech acts are not conceptualized
in the same way in the learner's language or culture as they
are in the target language. To take another example: it may
be assumed that the learner already knows the basic strategies
for realizing speech acts and that he or she merely needs to

learn how these strategies are linguistically encoded in the
target language. In fact, however, there may be considerable
differences between the ways in which speech acts are real-
ized in the learner's mother tongue and the ways in which
they can be realized in the target language. As for the
sociolinguistic aspects of pragmatic knowledge, learners may
wrongly be believed to operate with the same assumptions con-
cerning how to realize what speech acts when and to whom as
target language speakers. In fact, however, there may be
significant differences between the learner's mother tongue
and the target language, reflecting differences in the social
and cultural norms of the two groups of speakers.[12]

A second possible consequence of making wrong assumptions
about what aspects of pragmatic competence are universal, is
that learners may be negatively stereotyped by both teachers
and speakers of the target language. The danger is particu-
larly acute in the case of sociolinguistic aspects of prag-
matic competence, as this is the area of linguistic competence
which is most closely tied up with the personal, social and
cultural values of speakers. If teachers of English, for in-
stance, falsely believed Anglo-Saxon norms for the appropriate
choice and realization of speech acts to be universal, they
would tend to misunderstand the causes of second language
learners' deviations from these norms. As a result, they
would probably not be able to deal with such deviations in an
enlightened and effective way. To take a concrete example:
suppose that it was wrongly assumed, on the strength of stu-
dies such as the ones that I have referred to, that indirect
speech act strategies are universally associated with polite-
ness. Then a teacher of English could be inclined to con-
sider a Polish learner's use of the imperative to perform
directives in English to be evidence of impoliteness or boor-
ishness, whereas in fact the learner would probaly merely be
acting in accordance with the rules of his/her mother tongue.
The latter point can also be illustrated with examples more

relevant to those involved in the teaching of SAE as a second
language. Preliminary studies replicating those done within
the framework of the CCSARP, but using mother tongue speakers
of Setswana, Xhosa and Zulu respectively, have produced inte-
resting and remarkably similar results.[13]   According to these
(entirely unrelated) studies, the preferred strategy for re-
questing politely in all three languages appears to be a highly
direct one. That is, speakers tend to use an utterance in
which the illocutionary force is explicitly named, i.e. an ut-
terance which could be literally rendered in English as *I ask/
am asking ...* .   Should these speakers use the direct strategy,
which conveys politeness in their mother tongues, to realize
requests in English, teachers insensitive to the difference
between the learners' mother tongues and English could wrongly
consider them to be impolite.

Not only second language teachers, but first language teach-
ers too could benefit from being aware of the language- and
culture-dependence of pragmatic rules and principles. For, as
Wolfson (1989:15) has put it

> "... if there is anything universal about rules of
> speaking, it is the tendency of members of one
> speech community to judge the speech behavior of
> others by their own standards. It is exactly this
> lack of knowledge about sociolinguistic diversity
> which lies at the root of most intercultural mis-
> understanding."

In a linguistically and culturally diverse society all speak-
ers need to be made aware of the diversity of social and cul-
tural value systems and in the ways in which they are expressed
through language. In Thomas's (1983:110) words,

> "Helping students to understand the way pragmatic
> principles operate in other cultures, encouraging
> them to look for the different pragmatic or dis-
> coursal norms which may underlie national and
> ethnic stereotyping, is to go some way towards
> eliminating simplistic and ungenerous interpreta-
> tions of people whose linguistic behaviour is
> superficially different from their own."

This is the task of those involved in language teaching. The
linguist's task is to undertake the research that is necessary
to ensure that those involved in language teaching are as well-
informed about pragmatic aspects of language as they are about
grammar.

NOTES

1. An excellent overview of different interpretations and
    uses of the term "communicative competence" is given
    in (Taylor 1988).

2. Throughout this paper a terminological distinction will
    be made between "competence" and "performance". The
    term "competence" will be used to refer to knowledge of
    (various aspects of) language, i.e. to what speakers
    know about language. The term "performance", by con-
    trast, will be used to refer to what speakers do when
    they use language, i.e. to the observable result of the
    application of knowledge of language. It is of course
    legitimate to ask whether grammatical competence and
    pragmatic competence are cognitive capacities of the
    same sort. This issue will not be addressed here. The
    interested reader is referred to (Chametsky 1992) for a
    discussion of different views on this issue.

3. I realize that, in practice, there may be differences
    between the varieties of English used by South Africans
    of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds and,
    hence, that the use of a term such as "South African
    English" to denote any one variety may be objectionable.
    However, not wanting to become entangled in this parti-
    cular controversy here, and for ease of exposition, I
    will continue to use the term "South African English"
    (SAE) to refer to the variety of English which is cur-
    rently assumed, rightly or wrongly, to be the standard
    and hence the target for English instruction in South
    African schools.

4.   Cf., e.g., Blum-Kulka 1982:34 for a definition of the
     term "pragmatic strategy". Synonyms for "strategy"
     offered by Blum-Kulka are "procedure", "technique" and
     "mechanism".

5.   The languages/cultures represented by the participants
     in the CCSARP are American English, Australian English,
     British English, Canadian French, German, Danish and
     Hebrew. Cf. Blum-Kulka et al. 1989 for an overview of
     research done within the framework of the CCSARP.

6.   Cf., e.g., Richards and Schmidt 1980:138-140 and Blum-
     Kulka 1982:32.

7.   Searle (1969:44) mentions word order, stress, intonation
     and punctuation, in addition to the mood of the verb and
     performative (i.e. speech act naming) verbs, as indica-
     tors of illocutionary function in English. Cf. also
     Blum-Kulka 1985, Blum-Kulka and Levenston 1987 and House
     1989 for discussion of the role of *please* in English and
     its equivalents in Hebrew and German as indicators of
     requestive force.

8.   The study is cited in (Wolfson 1989:101).

9.   Cf. Fraser 1990 for an extremely helpful overview of
     various accounts of politeness.

10. I do not claim to have considered all aspects of what is
     taken to be pragmatic competence on Bachman's (1990) or
     anybody else's view. Blum-Kulka (1982:31), for example,
     includes knowledge of "how to draw pragmatic inferences
     from context" in her conception of pragmatic competence
     and, moreover, maintains that this knowledge is universal.
     Brown and Levinson (1987:7), following Grice, are more
     specific in characterizing this knowledge as "some rational
     means-end reasoning" by which intentions (i.e. pragmatic
     meanings) are reconstructable (or recognizable) from ac-

tions (i.e. utterances). Brown and Levinson too con-
sider this knowledge to be universal. They (1987:9) do
point out, however, that the concept of an 'intentional
agent' presupposed by such an account of pragmatic in-
ferencing has been claimed not to be universal on the
basis of ethnographic and sociolinguistic studies of
non-Western societies --- see references in (Brown and
Levinson 1987:9-10).

11.   Cf., e.g., Brown and Levinson's (1987:10-11) position
       statement vis à vis the Austin-Searle theory of speech
       acts.

12.   Cf. Schmidt and Richards 1980:140-141, Thomas 1983:101-108,
       and Wolfson 1989:chapters 1, 2, 4 and 7 for insightful
       discussion of the difficulties involved in becoming prag-
       matically competent in a second language.

13.   The studies referred to are
       i.   an unpublished M.A. research paper entitled
              "Politeness in English and Setswana: the func-
              tions of *please* and *tsweetswee (thle)*", submitted
              to our department by H.J.M. Engelbrecht in Octo-
              ber 1991;
       ii.   an unpublished M.A. research paper entitled "A
              comparison of requesting behaviour in English and
              Xhosa by native speakers of Xhosa who are advanced
              learners of English", submitted to our department
              by G.N. Bangeni in February 1992; and
       iii.   a study referred to by Elizabeth de Kadt in a
              paper entitled "Multilingual schools and contras-
              tive linguistics" which was presented at the
              Stellenbosch Conference on Linguistics and the
              Language Professions in March 1992.

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