Dinkas Down Under: Request Performance in Simulated Workplace Interaction

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This study offers practical insights into the instruction needs of Dinka-background immigrants to Australia (and their teachers) and expands theoretical frameworks commonly used to investigate interlanguage requests. Data from 30 intermediate-level Dinka-background speakers of English and the same number of learners from other language backgrounds and native speakers of Australian English were collected as they negotiated complex requests in simulated workplace situations and analysed for evidence of stance as well as for the use of mitigation using a modified CCSARP (Cross Cultural Speech Act Research Project) framework. This analysis revealed that although both learner groups made fewer indirect requests and considerably fewer syntactic and lexical modifications than the native speakers, the Dinka used the least. Neither learner group made much use of preparators and disarmers to negotiate their requests, and the Dinka relied heavily on forceful reasons that were often repeated rather than reformulated. Overall, the Dinka were less successful in their use of empathetic and interpersonal markers and consultative devices, and although the native speakers tended to negotiate from a stance that established rapport and mutual responsibility, the Dinka more often took the role of supplicant. These differences appear to be motivated by both pragmalinguistic and sociocultural issues. Recommendations for instruction are given.

The Dinka have been arriving in Australia in increasing numbers as refugees from the civil war in Southern Sudan, and many have spent long periods in camps, where conditions were often very difficult. Although they constitute the largest ethnic group in southern Sudan, apart from some anthropological work on their traditional lifestyles (e.g., references available from the Sudanese Online...
Research Association, n.d.), very little information is available on the linguistic and cultural influences that may impact their learning and use of English or on requestive practices in Dinka. For settlement agencies and providers of the national Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) who work with them in the early phases of their settlement, this is unfortunate because communication difficulties have been reported, resulting in the development of unhelpful stereotypes that learners from this background can be insistent and abrupt.

Many factors may underlie the reports of such stereotypes. As studies from cross-cultural perspectives have amply demonstrated, different cultural expectations and understandings of speakers from different backgrounds may contribute significantly to such communication difficulties (for a recent overview, see Boxer, 2004). Studies from an interlanguage-pragmatic perspective have also highlighted the role of not only sociocultural but also linguistic issues relating to transfer, resistance, awareness, and proficiency (e.g., Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989; Hinkel, 1996; Houck & Gass, 1996; Siegal, 1996; Takahashi, 1996; Trosborg, 1995).

While the focus of this chapter is on the identification of such issues that may impact communication difficulties, it should be recognised that there are also larger social and political forces at play here. Dinka learners are highly visible in a country unused to migration from Africa, and as Piller (2007) warned, difficulties construed as cultural may conceal altogether more challenging problems of power relations and discrimination. Moreover, there are dangers in assuming the stability of categories of cultural membership because such categories can shift and mutate as we construct our identities through interaction. Ibrahim (2003), for example, illustrated the dynamics of shifting ethnic identity in response to the racism and other social pressures he experienced as a Sudanese refugee in North America. While in Africa, the fact that he was black was 'unmarked' so that different aspects of his identity were foregrounded, but this changed upon arrival in North America, where his blackness became more salient in his sense of self and in interaction. The constantly changing nature of identity highlighted in this example reinforces that care must be taken in extending generalisations about ethnic identity from one time to another or from individuals to groups.

A further difficulty with comparative studies of the kind reported in this chapter relates to the danger of constructing a deficit view of the learner group they are designed to assist. This danger is real but largely one of attitude and can scarcely be avoided where the aim is to discover what a group of learners may need in the way of instruction. Instruction that is targeted at areas of learner need is more likely to be useful in the learners' daily lives. From this perspective, comparative studies offer a kind of needs analysis that also provides practical insights to address communication difficulties, provided that the 'findings' they yield are used with caution. It is important, for example, that they do not perpetuate a 'deficit' view of speakers from other backgrounds, but rather that ensuing discussion should focus on providing insight into what native speakers do. Naturally, once this native-like behaviour is illuminated more clearly through empirical research, instruction, and reflection, the degree to which learners may adopt or adapt it for their own purposes is an entirely different matter. Learners must construct their own identities through their new language and chart their own communicative courses through the murky waters of hybrid existence.

The study reported here was designed to investigate and compare how Dinka-background adult learners of English and native speakers of Australian English approached the same task involving the negotiation of a request and to do this in a way that could provide direct evidence on which to base teaching and learning materials to help raise awareness among both the learners themselves and the teachers and other professionals with whom they interact. On a practical level, then, its importance lies in its usefulness for teaching and its accessibility to teachers of the features that it investigates. On a theoretical level, it expands a commonly used analytical framework through the inclusion of attention to stance or subject position. In both spoken texts and written texts, the stance (Hyland, 2005; White, 2003), or position (Davies & Harré, 1990), taken by speakers or writers can be identified through the linguistic choices that they make. An analysis of these selections can throw light on not only their attitudes to an issue, but also to how they regard themselves and their position in the world. Such dimensions can provide rich insight into the sociopragmatic underpinnings of complex requests negotiated over multiple turns and thus contribute to a more nuanced understanding of not only how but why speakers from different backgrounds may tackle these speech events in the ways that they do.

Teaching practice has not always kept up with research in interlanguage pragmatics. Although the pragmatic bases of cross-cultural miscommunication have been well documented (see Boxer, 2004), these insights have not always found their way to teachers in a useable form, and teaching materials still frequently lack precisely those features that speakers use to modulate what they say (McCarty & O'Keefe, 2004). Even ESL teachers, who are used to interacting with speakers from other cultural and linguistic backgrounds, may lack a detailed awareness of exactly what may underlie misunderstandings in an interaction (Yates & Wigglesworth, 2005).

Moreover, issues of stance and the use of solidarity strategies have been largely overlooked in previous interlanguage-pragmatic studies. Through quantitative and qualitative analyses, this study contributes insights into how native speakers of Australian English make use of both solidarity and deference-oriented strategies in routine situations and the kinds of stances that they take, and therefore into some of the assumptions they may be bringing with them as they interact. By using data collection techniques that relate directly to appropriate curriculum tasks, it is hoped that the insights from this study can be
Requests are likely to pose a particular communicative challenge: They are potentially face-threatening (Brown & Levinson, 1987), and both sociocultural and pragmalinguistic expectations and behaviour seem to vary enormously across different languages and cultures, making them a perilous undertaking in any cross-cultural situation. In addition, they pose particular challenges for learners, as the literature amply demonstrates (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989), even, or perhaps particularly, for those who are relatively proficient (e.g., see discussion in Dippold, 2006; Kasper & Roever, 2005). Learners of English not only have to understand the particular roles, rights, and obligations expected in any situation in which they find themselves, including the level of formality, jocularity, and so on expected, but also have to learn to understand the force of, and manipulate a wide range of, syntactic and lexical devices. This is a formidable task for any speaker and particularly demanding for refugees half a world away from anything familiar.

Although there has been considerable research on requests, there are still gaps in the literature. First, many studies from a speech-act perspective have looked at requests in terms of a single, initiating move, rather than as negotiated over several turns (but see Newton, 2004; Taleghani-Nikazm, 2006; Wigglesworth & Yates, 2007; Zhang, 1995 for some counterexamples). Although this has allowed detailed examination of the range of syntactic and lexical devices used to mitigate a principal request, it has left somewhat out of focus a range of other moves and factors that may contribute to the success of an interaction. In particular, the issues of the stance taken by the requester and how solidarity strategies are used to lubricate requests have received less focus than they deserve (but see Newton; Yates, 2005). The relative neglect of the role of rapport in the mitigation of requests has been encouraged by the hierarchy of politeness strategies suggested in Brown and Levinson's (1987) model of politeness. This may be a particularly important omission in relation to Australian culture, which has been argued to draw particularly heavily on values of egalitarianism, solidarity, and mateship (Goddard, 2006b; Wierzbicka, 1997). There seem to be real differences in both the communicative values and the way acts are performed in different varieties of English, and while American English has been much investigated, Australian English has been much less so (but see Achiba, 2003; Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Yates; Yates & Wigglesworth, 2005).

Moreover, the workplace context is one that has particular importance in the lives of migrants and offers many opportunities for long-term misunderstandings that can seriously impact job prospects (Boxer, 2002), particularly if speakers are perceived as inappropriately assertive or abrupt. Because intuition is a notoriously unreliable source of information about what speakers in a culture actually do in a situation, there is a need for rigorous studies that provide evidence-based insights and models that can be used in the development of teaching and learning texts and activities. Although there has been increasing investigation of
requests in professional and employment settings (e.g., Aronsson & Säterlund-Larsson, 1987; Bilbow, 1997; Koester, 2002; Newton, 2004) and some work on workplace interactions in Australia (e.g., Clyne, 1994; Willing, 1992), these have focused on a range of acts, and we still lack the kind of detailed descriptions of how complex requests are negotiated in workplace-related contexts in Australia that are useful for instruction. Such descriptions need to come out of empirical evidence from situations that are routine in the workplace and illustrate not only how devices and strategies are used in combination over several moves, but also provide some insight into the larger sociocultural issues of how interlocutors approach situations and the stances they take with one another.

However, although many studies have been motivated by applied concerns in inter-cultural communication and language learning and teaching, the crossover between the worlds of research and the applications of the fruits of that research has not always been either happy or speedy. Despite the plethora of studies on requests, therefore, there is nevertheless very little good teaching material that can be used in classrooms to explicitly address the sociocultural underpinnings of communication in different cultures or pragmatic aspects of requestive situations in various contexts within those cultures. Many textbooks still offer dialogues that are fully scripted and acted and that lack features of spoken language that are routinely used by expert users to mitigate their speech, such as vague language and hedges (Burns, Joyce, & Collin, 2001; McCarthy & O'Keefe, 2004; but see Good, 2006). An important aim of this study, therefore, was to provide descriptions and insights into the negotiation of complex workplace-related requests in a form that would be accessible to teachers and that could feed directly into the development of teaching and professional-development materials.

**Study**

The design of the study reported here draws on the comparative tradition used in cross-cultural and interlanguage-pragmatics studies that grew out of work done in the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). As Yuan (2001) noted, there are drawbacks to various kinds of data-gathering techniques, and indeed, they may not capture or measure exactly the same phenomenon (Sasaki, 1998), so it is important to match the techniques used with the research questions addressed. The study reported here was designed to provide qualitative as well as quantitative insights into both the negative politeness and solidarity strategies used, and into the stances taken in the interaction in ways that would be useful for instruction. Roleplay was used rather than discourse completion tasks (DCTs) because roleplays offer the opportunity for acts to be developed over time and to be co-constructed. However, they also have their drawbacks. People react differently to the roleplay situation, and the value of using elicited data at all has been questioned.

Although naturally occurring data collected from particular targeted contexts (e.g., Clyne, 1994; Newton, 2004; Yates, 2000, 2005) or from language corpora (e.g., Koester, 2002; Terkourafi, 2005) may give the clearest insight into what actually happens in a situation, they, too, have disadvantages, as McCarthy and O'Keefe (2004) noted. In addition to the difficulty of collecting exactly the kind of data that is required, that is, collecting enough examples of the target act or function to make any sort of comparison meaningful, the very naturalness and authenticity of such data impact their usefulness. Because naturally occurring language is dynamic and contingent, such data will also reflect factors relating very particularly to the contexts in which they were collected (e.g., whether the interlocutors like each other, the past history of interactions between them or the institutions they represent, how tired they are feeling) as well as factors such as contingency and urgency and their interactional manifestations (Curl & Drew, 2008; Thomas, 1995; Tsui, 1994).

In contrast, elicited roleplay data are more likely to reflect a more generalized sense of what is appropriate in a situation. They therefore offer models that are less affected by such considerations and thus more useful for instruction because they represent at least an attempt to capture what actually happens in a situation, they, too, have disadvantages, as McCarthy and O'Keefe (2004) argued. Although these data are less affected by such considerations, they are still not perfect. People react differently to roleplays, and some people may not perform the same complex negotiation task and to provide insights that
would be directly relevant to the production of materials for learning and teaching in the AMEP, data were collected using two workplace-relevant tasks taken from the national curriculum, the Certificates of Spoken & Written English (CSWE), Level III. This choice had the pedagogical advantage of providing direct insight into a situation that students are likely to encounter in their lives and for which instructive sequences could then be developed within the curriculum at the appropriate level. The two tasks involved the making of requests for which some negotiation was needed, a request for annual leave (Task 1) and for changing the appointment for a job interview (Task 2; see Appendix A for the role cards).

Three groups of individuals were recorded performing each of these tasks with a teacher from the AMEP, 30 learners from varied (non-Dinka) language and cultural backgrounds, 30 native speakers of Australian English (NS group), and 30 learners of English with Dinka backgrounds. The latter group all spoke Dinka, a language indigenous to Southern Sudan, and most also spoke Arabic and other languages common in the region. The data from the mixed background learners (MBL group) and the NSs had been collected in previous studies (Wigglesworth, 2001; Yates & Wigglesworth, 2005), and the Dinka-background (DBL group) data were collected specifically for the study reported here. The participants were from a range of sociocultural backgrounds, and all of the learners were at Level III in oracy in the CSWE (that is, intermediate). Although the participants in the MBL and NS groups were balanced for gender, it was not possible to do this in the DBL group because there were insufficient numbers of Dinka women with significant prior education and therefore intermediate levels of English. The Dinka ranged in age from 20 to 59 years old, and most had between 10 and 16 years of education (see Appendix B). Table 1 shows how the participants were distributed across the tasks.

Table 1. Distribution of participant categories and tasks (total of 180 dialogs)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Task 1</th>
<th>Task 2</th>
<th>Task 1</th>
<th>Task 2</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>NNS</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NS</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>DS</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each dialog was transcribed and analysed using the qualitative software program Atlas. Four principal types of mitigation were coded using an adapted and updated version of the framework developed by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989). The original framework was expanded to include an additional category of request form, interlocutor formulation. This was used to code those requests that were formulated by the interlocutor, usually because the requester was vague or unclear about what he or she wanted:

S14: But must be a...I'm coming I'm thinking good thinking I have good idea for this interview because I have problem before in some interview in first job. I don't come in like fresh I don't have good question and good answer about something in the job

Int: Right, so you've got an interview tomorrow at two I think isn't it, your interview, um but what are you saying you want to change the time to another day or something?

(See Appendix C for the coding framework.)

Tokens of each category of the framework were coded, counted, and totalled for each group. In negotiated tasks of this kind, more than one request was frequently present in each event, and because all requests are likely to impact how the speaker is perceived, all were counted. Care was taken to code items that might have more than one function in context according to the function that they had in the event. A sample of the data was double-coded by two different researchers, and any disagreements were resolved.

The quantitative investigation was supplemented by a qualitative exploration of various types of mitigation used and the sequence of acts in each event. The use of greetings and address forms and the level of formality were taken as evidence of relational work and therefore as clues as to the tone of the interactions, the stances taken by the interlocutors, and the sociocultural values underpinning them. In addition, after they had completed the roleplays, the DBL group members were asked by the researcher why they had approached the tasks in the way that they had, and these data were used to provide additional insight into issues of stance and the approach taken to the request. Because this additional data collection task was included in response to feedback from presentations based on a comparison of the two earlier datasets (MBL and NS), these insights are only available for the DBL group.

As there was the same number of participants in each group, the results for the use of different features is given in raw numbers for each group. The differences between the groups were not tested for significance because there was frequently more than one token of any particular feature in the data from any one individual. Because of the gender imbalance in the Dinka group, averages were also calculated for male and female groups to see if there were any differences. These calculations are given in Appendixes D through G. In most cases, the tendencies reported were not greatly different for the female and male groups, but exceptions are included in the discussion of the relevant findings.

Findings and discussion

The findings revealed a number of differences, not only between the learner and NS groups, but also between the DBL and MBL groups. First, as shown in Table 2, the DBL group used more direct, apparently assertive, that is, direct
requests (e.g., "I want...") than either the MBL or NS groups (84, 39, and 47 requests for the DBL, MBL, and NS groups respectively) and fewer apparently negotiable requests (e.g., "Can you..."), although the differences here were less dramatic (51, 68, and 66). None of the NSs used any apparently advisory requests, although the learners used a few (3 and 4 for the DBL and MBL groups). An interesting finding was that the members of the DBL group left it to their interlocutor to clarify the request through a reformulation (coded as an interlocutor formulation) more often (17) than either the MBL (5) or NS (1) group. This pattern does not seem to be related to proficiency alone because the DBL group members were, if anything, at a slightly higher level of grammatical competence than the other learners in the study (see below). Rather, it may be part of a strategy that deliberately avoids spelling out completely a request that may be perceived as an imposition. Because only 1 of the 6 Dinka women used this strategy, but 14 of the 24 men opted out in this way (2 of them in each of the two tasks), there may be a difference here for gender (see Appendix B, averages for gender).

Table 2. Level of directness of request

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>DBL</th>
<th>MBL</th>
<th>NS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>interlocutor formulation</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>apparently negotiable</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>apparently advisory</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Use of syntactic mitigation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>DBL</th>
<th>MBL</th>
<th>NS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>past</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>modal</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>continuous</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>embedding</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As shown in Appendix E, there was a gender difference for the DBL group's use of modals in that the females, on average, used twice as many as the males, but the numbers are too small to make any strong claims here. There was also a gender difference among the NSs: the females averaged 6.5 modals, whereas the males averaged only 4.8. The NS females also used more past modifications than their counterparts in the MBL group.

Table 4. Use of lexical mitigation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>DBL</th>
<th>MBL</th>
<th>NS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;just&quot;</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>understater</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hedge</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>consultative device</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>empathetic marker</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>interpersonal marker</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As far as the use of lexical mitigation is concerned, as can be seen from Table 4, the DBL group, like the MBL group, used fewer tokens of "just" and understaters than the NS group ("just": 11, 19, and 68, respectively; understaters: 7, 6, and 22) and used hedging slightly more than did the MBL group, but considerably less often than the NS group (42, 34, and 72). They also used empathetic (7, 26, and 65) and interpersonal markers (17, 34, and 41) less often than the MBL group and considerably less often than the NSs. Their usage was roughly balanced for gender (see Appendix F). Examples of these devices are given below:

- "I'm just wondering if we can change it to 2 o'clock the day after? ("just")
- is it possible to ah maybe juggle the time perhaps? (understaters)
- I ahm I'm kind of hoping that we'll be able to ah (hedging)
- I realise how hard it is (empathetic markers)
- it's just like um you know like I said (interpersonal markers)

For example, NSs used "you know" as an interpersonal marker relatively frequently to highlight a connectedness with their interlocutors (Trosborg, 1995). This had the effect of reinforcing a more egalitarian stance that established...
shared responsibility and from which requests appear to be more a matter of negotiation than suppletion, as in the examples below:

- It's just like um you know like I said
- you know I don't mind working
- working extra extra time you know during Christmas and that

In these NS examples, “you know” is used to draw the interlocutor into what is being said in a kind of complicity (Schiffrin, 1987). In contrast, although some DBL group members seemed to be trying to use “you know” in this way, they were not always successful in making an appeal to alignment; that is, their use of “you know” did not increase the connection between the speaker and hearer, as in the following example (which was not, therefore, coded as an interpersonal marker):

- as you know you are my manager.

At times, even when their use was syntactically appropriate, their delivery tended to give too much prominence to the phrase, which had the effect of emphasizing its literal rather than pragmatic interpersonal function.

Similarly, the NS group more frequently used empathetic markers, that is, phrases such as “I realise,” to introduce an expression of empathy with the interlocutor’s position (65 and 7 uses for the NS and DBL groups respectively). In contrast, the few used by the DBL group more often introduced propositions that simply described the current state of affairs rather than expressing their concern about it. Such statements are liable to be interpreted as unsympathetic, especially if they are not delivered with an appropriate intonation. Compare the following examples from NSs:

- I realise how hard it is
- I know that it's not a lot of ahhm ahhh notice

with these examples in which members of the DBL group used “I know” to introduce apparent statements of fact:

- You know, I know I know we are so busy now, I know
- I know you are busy, all are busy

Thus, the NSs used “I realise” and “I know” to emphasise their empathetic understanding of the difficult general circumstances surrounding their requests and thus build a stance from which to negotiate, whereas the use of “I know” in the DBL examples almost has the opposite effect because it conveys acknowledgement of their boss's difficulty without managing to convey an appropriate degree of empathy.¹⁰ In contrast to the use of interpersonal and empathetic markers discussed above, the DBL group used consultative devices (i.e., devices that appear to consult, such as “is there any chance that...”), more often than the MBL group and at frequencies similar to those of the NSs (23, 8, and 26, respectively). Qualitative analyses of these, however, showed that, again, there was often a difference in the functions of the markers used by the DBL group. The NSs used them to appear to consult about the matter in question or make an offer to alleviate the situation, as in the following examples:

- okay is there any way I could make that later in the day
- how about if I tried to organize something with one of the staff members

The DBL group, however, more often used them to ‘pass the buck,’ that is, to leave the responsibility with the boss or the system, as in the example below:

- could you mind to arrange for me

Table 5. Use of propositional mitigation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>DBL</th>
<th>MBL</th>
<th>NS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>greeting/title/name</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reason</td>
<td>163</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>preparator</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>context</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rapport</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>disarmer</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thus, although the NS group's use of consultative devices was oriented towards negotiation as a more egalitarian partner as part of a stance in which they shouldered some of the responsibility for a solution to the problems caused by their requests, the DBL group more often used them as a device to signal deference.

As can be seen from Table 5, the DBL group used reasons more than any other group (163, compared to 111 and 107 by the MBL and NS groups) and context (i.e., extra information to clarify the background to the request) as frequently as the NS group (37 vs. 40) and slightly more often than the MBL group (31). In this, both learner groups may well be illustrating the 'waffle phenomenon' (Edmondson & House, 1991), that is, the tendency of some L2 speakers to use reasons to justify their requests and ensure comprehension and compliance in compensation for other strategies and devices that they have less control over. Moreover, a qualitative analysis of the reasons used by the DBL group revealed that whereas the NSs used a range of reasons, including holidays, family, and personal reasons, the DBL group tended to use powerful family reasons, which exerted strong emotional pressure on their interlocutors. Thus, although the NSs often cited the need for a break or to get away with their partner, the DBL group often invoked the illness of a very close relative, childbirth, or study as reasons for their requests. These latter two reasons did not occur at all in the NS data. This may well reflect culture-specific assumptions related to the rights and obligations in a workplace situation and inexperience with the concept of paid leave and what it can be used for in an Australian setting.
to the task with a different perception of the relationship between the boss and employee and work and home life based on their cultural experiences in Africa. Also observable in the NS requests but not in those of the other groups was the tendency to develop the reasons behind the request slowly over several turns rather than repeating the same reason, which may lessen the pressure on the interlocutor, as in the following example:

A: ...as you know um my house went up for sale...  
B: yeah that's right yeah  
A: ...and the settlements actually in a um weeks time...I have to move um and the thing is I'm moving out of the house cause I've sold my house and settlement day I've...

The DBL group’s use of preparators was similar to that by the MBL group (27 vs. 33), but they used disarmers slightly less frequently (20 vs. 29). This usage was noticeably different from that of the NSs, who used twice as many preparators (53 vs. 27) and nearly four times the number of disarmers (76 vs. 20) as the DBL group. The NSs frequently used availability checks such as “are you busy?” to prepare the way for the principal request. Examples are given below:

Look just ahm sorry to disturb you (preparator)
look [name] I know this is a bit sudden but (disarmer)

However, the DBL group used twice as many rapport moves as the MBL group and almost twice as many as the NSs, although these were all simple greeting routines. An the exception was two moves that emphasized the hierarchical difference between the groups, for example:

and with your personal consent maybe you change this time for me to be today

The MBL group only used greeting routines (10). In contrast, the NSs used humour and self-deprecation in 4 of their 11 rapport moves (see the example below). No speakers from the other groups used these strategies.

I know this sounds really silly but I'm an absolutely dopey Essendon supporter and I'm queuing up for tickets

Summary and interpretation of trends in Dinka-background and English NS negotiated requests

The list below summarises some of the trends emerging from the NS data that were less evident in DBL data. These features of NS requests could usefully be addressed in instruction.

- fewer apparently assertive request forms
- more frequent use of past, modal, and continuous forms to soften requests
- more embedding of requests in a polite frame using the continuous form
- more frequent use of “just” as a softener
- more frequent vocabulary choices that understated the impact of the speaker’s action
- more frequent use of empathetic markers to show understanding of the interlocutor’s side
- more frequent use of interpersonal markers to emphasise connection
- use of consultative devices to check a course of action or suggest a solution rather than to pass responsibility for the solution to the interlocutor
- more frequent use of preparators such as availability checks
- more frequent use of disarmers to address potential problems, sometimes with offers of help
- tendency to develop the reasons behind the request slowly over several turns rather than repeating the same reason so that the interlocutor does not feel too pressured

As can be seen from the summary, the NSs mitigated the assertiveness of their requests through their choice of request forms and more frequent use of syntactic and lexical mitigation. They also prepared their requests carefully through the use of preparators and signaled empathy and mutual responsibility through disarmers, empathetic markers, interpersonal markers, and consultative devices. These devices were used less often and in some cases less successfully by learners from both groups, but particularly by the DBL group. Rather, the DBL group relied heavily on the provision of reasons, context, and greetings (rapport moves) to mitigate their requests. Alongside these strategies, however, like the MBL group, they made little use of syntactic mitigation and lexical devices like “just.” Although they used hedges more frequently than the MBL group, they used them far less frequently than the NSs. They also made less use of preparators and disarmers than the MBL group and considerably less than the NSs and more often failed to articulate the requests clearly, but left it to their interlocutors to reformulate it.

These differences not only highlight those aspects of requesting behaviour in English in which Dinka-background learners may need awareness-raising activities but also suggest that they may be approaching the request in these workplace situations rather differently. Thus, although the NSs more often adopted a stance in which they signaled connectedness and mutual responsibility to their bosses, empathizing and offering solutions as they negotiated what they wanted, the DBL group sought to explain their requests as a supplicant.

As anticipated, the DBL group’s responses to the post roleplay question about why they had approached the requestive tasks in the way that they had revealed that, like many other speakers, they were largely unaware of the strategies and devices that they were using. However, they did provide some insight into their experiences of workplace contexts and thus into why they may have adopted this
rather different stance. A quarter of them had either never had paid employment at all or only casual employment, and those who had worked had often worked in very different environments in Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia (see Appendix B). This meant that the tasks and their underlying sociocultural conventions in Australia were unfamiliar to many of them. Many had little understanding, for example, of the notion of paid leave or a worker’s rights and obligations at work and had to check that they understood the concept with the research assistant before they undertook Task 1.

Moreover, comments such as the example below from P63 suggest that the DBL group may have had a very different understanding of the relationship between the workplace and the community and between themselves, their families, and their boss:

In Sudan if you give a reason such as you need to go and help your community, do something for your family, it is a very strong reason and the manager would be looked down upon if they refused. Work is not seen as being more important than doing something for your family or community... if for example you said your mother is in hospital your manager likely to offer to go and visit with you. (P63)

Although it would be unwise to make any conclusive claims based on the available data, such comments do suggest a greater blurring of distinctions between work and home, between one’s public, work self and one’s more private, family self than is common in many workplaces in the current, postindustrial Western world. Views of self in relation to community (e.g., Murphy-Berman & Berman, 2003) and the degree to which one’s sense of self is different in different contexts are by no means universal across cultures. Although no studies, to my knowledge, have tackled such issues from the perspective of Dinka culture, nevertheless, anthropological work on traditional Dinka lifestyles suggests a very strong sense of community and communal responsibility. Deng (1998), for example, argued that respect for others (atheok) and dignity (dheeng) are very important values in Dinka culture, and they do not come automatically with power and wealth but must be earned. Reciprocity and mutual dependence are salient features of these attitudes. Deng described cooperation within the group as critical and the promotion of one’s self interest above community interests as taboo in Dinka culture. It may well be, therefore, that such deeply held values influenced the Dinka participants’ perceptions of mutual rights and obligations in workplace relations and that these would be rather different from those expected in an Australian workplace.

Implications and recommendations for learning and teaching

The findings of this study have provided some insight into features that Australian NSs might expect to see in workplace requests. Comparing these with the ways in which learners approached the same requests can throw light onto the question of what kinds of devices and strategies should be tackled in instruction. As noted above, an underlying assumption here is that because teachers themselves frequently lack a sophisticated awareness of contextually effective pragmatic actions, materials developed on the basis of these findings can be instructive for teachers and students alike. They could, therefore, be helpful as the basis for professional development and instructional materials from which not only the learners, but also the teachers, benefit (e.g., Yates & Wigglesworth, 2005).

As far as sociocultural issues are concerned, the findings suggest that it would be useful to tackle concepts relating to workplace conditions, rights, and responsibilities in Australia and the likely tenor of workplace interactions. 'Model' dialogs taken from the data and based on learners’ past experiences would be a useful starting point for reflection and comparison with cultures with which learners (and teachers) are familiar (see Yates, 2004; Yates, 2008). Particular attention could be drawn to the way in which assumptions about rights and responsibilities and cultural values in communication can be reflected in the stance taken towards an interlocutor in a context. Professional development materials for employers and other professionals could also usefully focus on these issues as well as on understanding cultural differences in the role of family/community and the potentially blurred distinctions between responsibilities in each domain that different community members might have.

The summary of NS patterns above suggests the kinds of pragmalinguistic topics that might be usefully targeted in materials. Examples of how these might translate into items for instructional focus are given below. An idea of how some of these can be incorporated into a sample dialog can be found in the short extract from materials developed by teachers using the findings from this study in Appendix H.11

- **Indirect request forms and mitigation of direct request forms, for example:**
  - Have you got a few moments for me to pop in... (indirect request form, understated word choice)
  - I’d really like to take 3 weeks annual leave now starting next week and I’m just wondering if we can arrange that? (direct request, mitigated using syntax)

- **Alternatives to repeated reasons for persuasion, for example:**
  - (developing rather than repeating a reason through providing more context)
  - the use of additional lexis, including “just,” and understated word choice to soften, for example:
    - Could I just have a quick word?
the use of disarmers, empathetic and interpersonal markers, and consultative devices to show connection and joint responsibility:

- I know we're really busy at the moment, and I know we are flat out at work, but... (disarmer)
- Yes I really understand that, but... (empathetic marker)
- How about if I... (consultative device used to make a suggestion/offer)

the mitigating function of past, modal and continuous forms:

- I wanted to ask if I could... (past/modal)
- I was hoping to catch you... (past/continuous)

the use of polite frames into which requests can be embedded:

- I was wondering if I could... (past/continuous/embedding)

It is unlikely that these features will be completely unfamiliar to learners at this level. However, they may be unaware of the mitigating functions of various forms or of how frequently they are used in everyday interaction. Although some of these may be quite complex (e.g., embedding frames such as "I was wondering if I could..."), they appear to be important in the negotiation of requests in Australian workplace contexts (as in some institutional contexts in British English, Curl & Drew, 2008), and they could be tackled as formulaic chunks. The importance of such sequences in the successful achievement of learners’ communicative goals, providing as they do "islands of reliability" (Dechert, 1983) from which they can navigate the sometimes perilous open sea of unstructured L2 production, has recently been reconsidered (Bardovi-Harlig, 2006, this volume; Bardovi-Harlig et al., this volume; House, 1996; Wray, 2000).

Such language features need to be related to the sociopragmatic values underpinning the informal interactive style suggested by the NS data. Thus, there should be a focus not only on individual devices such as consultative devices or empathetic markers, but also on why and how they are used to establish interpersonal connections during a negotiation and their role in the stance taken by a speaker in appearing to take an interlocutor’s feelings into account. The way in which disarmers are used to show this kind of joint responsibility and how requests can be prepared with preparators to prefigure and soften the request can also be highlighted. There is no space here to provide extended samples of the kinds of materials that can be developed on the basis of this research, but, as noted above, the short sample dialog in Appendix H illustrates what can be developed by teachers for their own use in the classroom, and further examples can be found in the works of Yates and Springall (in press) and Springall (2007).

In this study, I have not been able to relate performance in English directly to the language and cultural practices of the Dinka. It is my hope that future research will address this gap in the literature so that we may more fully understand the motivations underlying the patterns seen here. In the absence of such studies of L1 performance, the immigrants arriving from many different backgrounds to settle in unfamiliar English-speaking environments and their teachers must rely on comparative studies such as the one reported here for insight into what areas might be useful for instruction.

In conclusion, this study has provided practical insights into the range of strategies and devices that native speakers and learners might use to negotiate a complex request in a workplace-related context and provided language samples that can be used in instruction and an evidence base that can be used in professional development and instructional settings. There is no place here for a detailed discussion of particular teaching activities that might be used with the models and materials arising out of the study, but there is mounting evidence that such features can be both taught and learned (Alcón & Martínez-Flor, 2007; Rose & Kasper, 2001; Slade, 1997), and many sources can provide ideas on how instruction in L2 pragmatics may be approached (e.g., Burns, Joyce, & Gollin, 2001; Hall, 1999; McCarthy & O’Keefe, 2004; Yates, 2004).

On a theoretical level, by complementing the CCSARP framework with a focus on stance, this study has contributed to the analytical tools that can be used to highlight sociocultural factors in the study of interlanguage pragmatics. These are frequently glossed over in comparative and interlanguage studies of pragmatics behaviours because the search for categories that are identifiable across cultures and learners can leave emic perspectives out of account (Goddard, 2006a). Yet, as I hope I have illustrated here, factors such as stance are important in understanding how, why, and when pragmalinguistic resources are deployed in context.

Notes

1 The AMEP delivers a national curriculum throughout Australia through a range of providers. Between 510 and 910 hours, depending on circumstances, are available free of charge to new arrivals who do not have functional English.
2 The study was conducted in 2006 through the AMEP Research Centre and funded by a Special Research Project grant from the Commonwealth Government of Australia, to whom thanks are due.
3 The word ‘migrant’ is preferred over the term ‘immigrant’ in Australia to refer to those who arrive with the intention of settling.
4 The AMEP is taught at three levels. Level III learners are at a low intermediate to intermediate level.
5 Learners placed at Certificate III level on arrival have usually had significant prior educational experiences in English. There is considerable gender disparity in educational level among the Dinka.
6 My thanks to Merrill Swain for this suggestion.
I did not calculate the frequencies of tokens in proportion to the number of words as in, for example, Dippold’s (2006) study because my aim was to find out the number used by each speaker to achieve his or her aim, rather than in frequencies per se.

There were slight individual variations, but as these are not the particular focus of this chapter, they are not reported here.

Tokens of “you know” were counted as interpersonal markers where they had the function of a pragmatic marker inviting the addressee to align with the view expressed by the speaker (Schiffrin, 1987, p. 310).

My thanks to two anonymous readers for their insights on the use of interpersonal and empathetic markers.

References


Appendix A: Role cards

Task 1: Requesting annual leave

Participant card
You have 4 weeks annual leave available this year. You would like to take 3 weeks leave now, even though it is a busy time at your workplace. Talk to your manager about this situation, explain why you want to take the leave now and negotiate a solution.

Interlocutor card
You are the manager of a workplace. One of your employees has applied to take 3 weeks of their 4 weeks annual leave now. It is a particularly busy time at your workplace. Find out why he/she wants to take leave now. Explain that employees normally take leave at Christmas when things are quieter. Ask the employee to suggest ways to resolve the situation.

Task 2: Changing job interview

Participant card
You have an appointment for a job interview with an employment agency tomorrow. The time that has been arranged is not convenient for you. Go to the agency, introduce yourself and explain the situation. Try and arrange another time for the interview.

Interlocutor card
You work at an employment agency. A job seeker calls in and wants to change the interview time you have arranged for him/her tomorrow, claiming that it is not convenient. Find out why the time is inconvenient. Point out that there are a number of applicants for the job and a limited time set aside for interviews. Ask the job seeker to suggest ways to resolve the situation.

Appendix B: Participant profile

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<th>occupation</th>
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Appendix C: Summary of coding framework

Five levels of directness/assertiveness of requests (semantic formulae)

Apparently assertive (direct)
Example: I want to change the time.

Apparently advisory (conventionally indirect)
Example: Maybe I could take the extra week I haven’t had yet.

Apparently negotiable (conventionally indirect)
Example: So could we sort of do something about my leave now.

Nonexplicit negotiable (hints)
Example: I really need to know what leave is available to me.

Interlocutor formulation
Example: (Interlocutor) Right, so you’ve got an interview tomorrow at two I think isn’t it, your interview, um but what are you saying you want to change the time to another day or something?

Syntactic modifications of requests

Past marking
Examples: I just wanted ...; I was just wondering if I could have a minute of your time.

Modals
Examples: I’d like to take some annual leave. I was wondering if we might...

Continuous
Example: I’m really hoping...

Embedding
Example: I was just wondering if it would be possible

Lexical modifications of requests

Downtoner—“just”
Example: I just need these three weeks to finish that.

Understater
Example: I really would appreciate being able to...

Hedge
Example: Maybe I could take the days that I haven’t had yet.

Consultative device
Example: Would that be okay with you?

Appendix D: Average use of request formulae by gender

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Appendix E: Average use of syntactic mitigation devices by gender

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### Appendix F: Average use of lexical mitigation devices by gender

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### Appendix G: Average use of propositional mitigation by gender

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### Appendix H: Dialog 2

Toni: Hello Simon, have you got a few moments for me to pop in and have a word with you please?
Simon: Yes sure come in.
Toni: Look Simon, I know we’re really busy at the moment, and I know we are flat out at work, but I’ve got 4 weeks annual leave owing to me.
Simon: Yeah
Toni: I’d really like to take 3 weeks annual leave now starting next week and I’m just wondering if we can arrange that?
Simon: You know that it’s not a good time at the moment?
Toni: Yes I really understand that, but my mother has taken sick in New Zealand and I have to go home and help Dad look after her.
Simon: I’m sorry to hear that Toni but it’s a very awkward time...
Toni: Yes, I know it’s not a good time of the year but I really need to be there for my family.
Simon: Well, I guess we’ll have to work something out.
Toni: That would be great.
Thanks.