

A Web-based Survey on British Pragmatics Acceptability of Japanese Refusals in English: From Cross-cultural to Intercultural¹

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Abstract

The primary focus of this paper is on British pragmatic acceptability of Japanese refusals in English in light of what I call intercultural pragmatics. The fundamental questions underlying this study are: “How acceptable is a given nonnative-like pragmatic strategy for native speakers of English?” “Is a given cross-cultural difference in pragmatics between L1 and L2 really problematic?” This research, taking a Japanese-English contrast in refusal as a focus, sheds light on acceptability issues in the following respects: (a) acceptability of British English speakers, (b) nationality differences between British and Americans, and (c) mode differences between web-based written and oral pragmatics acceptability questionnaires. What I have found is that Japanese refusal strategies are not always “unacceptable” and “problematic” resulting in a miscommunication between Japanese and British/Americans. Additionally, it is observed that there are complex “dynamic” interactions between NS and NNS conversational participants and between NNS prosodic and other-formal features such as semantic contexts and syntactic length. Based on the results and discussion, I would suggest that intercultural pragmatics should be important to fill the gaps of cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics.

The main purpose of this paper is to investigate British *pragmatic acceptability* for Japanese refusals in English in light of intercultural pragmatics (Fujiwara, 2004). This research is innovative in the following two respects: (a) *intercultural communication*, and (b) *web-based questionnaire*. In the first place, although there is a large body of cross-cultural information on pragmatics, mainly due to the contributions of cross-cultural pragmatics and interlanguage pragmatics (CCP/ILP respectively: see Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989; Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993; Spencer-Oatey, 2000), very few studies have investigated pragmatics acceptability for nonnative speakers’ use of English in intercultural communication (for a detailed critical discussion on CCP/ILP, see Fujiwara, 2004, 2005)². Specifically, we know there are cross-cultural differences between English and Japanese in speech acts such as requests, refusals, and so forth; however, we have little information on whether or not these differences are really problematic in intercultural communication. More directly speaking, the dominant research practice in CCP/ILP has intuitively (or by ‘selective’ anecdotes) speculated that the pragmatically nonnative-like behavior is a cause of miscommunication. To put it another way, researchers have not “empirically” investigated what really happens in an ongoing interaction (see also Fujiwara, 2004).

In contrast to this research, I proposed a relatively new research practice, intercultural pragmatics, of which the agenda is:

1. *consequences of the intercultural encounter: Is a given difference really problematic? What communicative effect does it have?* (Kasper, 1992 p. 221)
2. *NNS's attitudes: What attitude to NS norms do NNSs have? Do they violate the NS pragmatic rules intentionally or not?* (See Robinson, 1992; Pierce, 1995; Siegal, 1996; Cohen, 1997; Al-Issa, 2003; Fujiwara, 2004).
3. *NS's attitudes: How acceptable are NNS speech acts to NS? (McKay, 2002). If unacceptable, why?*

Based on this agenda, my previous study focused on American acceptability of Japanese refusals and found that they are generally more acceptable than generally thought (Fujiwara, 2004). However, as McKay (2002) suggests, "when an item could be judged acceptable in one context..., it might be unintelligible to many speakers of English and inappropriate in other contexts as well as incorrect in reference to a standard variety of English" (p. 63). Thus, this study will reveal whether the same observation is true of British acceptability or not.

In the second place, this research applies a *web-based* questionnaire as a data collection method for the primary purpose of exploring the "prosodic" effects on pragmatics acceptability. This is highly innovative not only because web-based research is still extremely rare in the social sciences, but also because prosodic effects have been relatively ignored in pragmatic research. The predominant practices in cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics have employed a contrastive approach to two different cultural groups by means of written discourse completion tests (See Kasper & Dahl, 1991; Kasper, 1999). In addition to this, my previous study also used a written-based questionnaire, which leaves much ambiguity about how research participants understand a given speech act by Japanese in their mind. Thus, it is important to consider the prosodic effects on pragmatic utterances in communication.

Although there has been, as far as I am aware, nearly no empirical research that focuses on "pragmatics" acceptability in relation to prosody, many researchers have touched on "phonological" acceptability by using a so-called matched-guise technique (Lambert, Hodgson, Gardner, & Fillenbaum, 1960; see also Giles and Powesland, 1975 for overview.) The conclusion derived from their research (Lambert et al., 1960) is that NNS varieties of English (i.e., French accent) are, in general, less acceptable than NS varieties (e.g., British). As for the Japanese case, Hatch (1992) speculated that their voices may sound "aggressive" due to a cross-linguistic difference of word-stress (J: initial vs. E: final) and timing (J: syllable-timing vs. E: stress-timing). Reflecting their initial word-stress and syllable-timing stress, most words may be pronounced in a staccato style, which results in a case where Japanese speakers of English sound unfavorable to English listeners. Considering these differences, we will focus on prosodic effects on pragmatics acceptability.

For the purpose of compensating for the gaps in CCP/ILP and the limitations of the previous ICP study above, the main aim of this paper is to empirically explore the following three research questions:

- Q1. *How acceptable are Japanese-specific refusals in a given context for British English speakers? If they are unacceptable, why?*
- Q2. *Is there any difference in acceptability between British and American research participants?*
- Q3. *Do prosodic features have a significant effect on acceptability?*

While focusing on the three questions above, this study will also examine how valid, reliable, and practical the innovative method which I call the Web-based Pragmatics Acceptability Questionnaire is. This questionnaire will be described in the next section.

Methodology

Web-based Questionnaire

The web-based survey is another important characteristic of this research. *Web-based questionnaire* (WBQ) is generally characterised as a data collection method—by means of Hyper Text Markup Language (HTML) and a common-gateway-interface programme (CGI)—that enables research participants to respond and submit “on line” (Smith, 1997; Coomber, 1997; Watt, 1997; Batagelj & Vehovar, 1998; Sills & Song, 2002). The use of the WWW for research purposes is still extremely rare in linguistics, however, Watt (1997) states, “if you haven’t done Internet survey research—you will.”

Comparing the classical and innovative modes of data collection, the benefit of WBQ is that both practicality and validity are enhanced remarkably. With regard to practicality, it is not at all surprising that the electric-based questionnaires are superior to the traditional “snail” mail in terms of geographical reach, speed, cost, easy modification and user-friendliness (Watt, 1997; Smith, 1997). In short, e-mail and WBQ offer an easy course for the research participant, as well as for the researcher, in terms of time, cost, and energy.

Turning to validity, the WBQ greatly exceeds the postal and electric mail by keeping higher anonymity, especially when informants use anonymous terminals (e.g., university libraries or computer labs). More specifically, high confidentiality probably makes informants feel free to give a sincere (i.e., valid) response even if a research issue is of a particularly sensitive nature like “the practices of drug dealers” (Coomber, 1997). In addition, validity regarding pragmatic acceptability would be considerably enhanced by multimedia use. Raters, by means of audio files, can evaluate an oral voice rather than written transcripts. As already noted, one of the aims of this research is to reveal the effect of prosody on acceptability. By using multimedia files on the web, it is obviously more valid to have participants hear voices and assess how acceptable a given utterance is. Although there are some disadvantages in WBQ: (1) sampling bias, (2) unrestricted control, (3) low response rate, and (4) technical problems (Smith 1997; Watt, 1997; Batagelj & Vehovar, 1998; Sills & Song, 2002), the advantages related to practicality and validity that were mentioned above persuaded me to use a web-based questionnaire.

Participants

For the written version of the questionnaire, the recruited research participants are 30 British people (15 males/15 females). They are mainly undergraduate students in Lancaster, England, whose average age is 20.97. None of them have ever stayed in Japan. For the oral versions of the questionnaires, the number of British participants, due to practical reasons, is reduced to 16 (10 males/6 females). They are mainly postgraduate students in the same place, whose average age is 27.84. Most of them have never stayed in Japan with two exceptions. One has less than, and the other has more than, one-year’s experience there. Half of them (N= 8) responded to low, and the other half to high, proficiency voices of oral questionnaires.

Data Collection

Pragmatic acceptability was operationally defined as “the probability with which a given L1 strategy will be acceptable relative to other L1 strategies” (Fujiwara, 2004, p. 80).

The *Web-based Written Pragmatic Acceptability Questionnaire* (WWPAQ) has two question parts. In the first part, British participants were asked how acceptable a given Japanese utterance is. This acceptability rate was assessed on a 7-point Likert scale (-3 = unacceptable, +3 = acceptable).

If they judged an utterance as “unacceptable (i.e. <0)”, they were asked to select the most fitting reasons out of five multiple choice options. While one was “other” for an individual’s own opinion, four options were carefully constructed in view of the reasons why a certain utterance might be problematical in the ILP studies (Takahashi & Beebe, 1987; Beebe, Takahashi, & Uliss-Weltz, 1990). Note that they could choose more than one.

In addition to the four targeted refusals, four distracters were used, which were also appropriated from the previous research (Beebe & Takahashi, 1989; Takahashi & Beebe, 1993) and face threatening acts (i.e., disagreement, chastisement response, and correction). All eight questions were then randomised.

Furthermore, the gender of the conversational participants was specified for the purpose of comparing the Web-based Oral Pragmatic Acceptability Questionnaire (WOPAQ). Obviously, gender should be specified since people’s voices naturally reflect gender. In allocating a role to either a female or male speaker, gender-balance was carefully considered so that there would be no bias when informants assessed the Japanese utterances. Indeed, the allocations are nearly neutral in gender, ethnicity, and status. See Table 1 below for the gender-specification, and see Appendix for all descriptions of refusal situations.

Table 1: Gender-specification

<i>Speech Acts</i>	<i>Situation</i>	<i>Status</i>	<i>Gender</i>	
Refusal	Request for pay raises	H → L	JP	BR
	Offer of broken vase	H → L	F	M
	Invitation to party	L → H	M	F
	Invitation to dinner	equal	M	M
			F	F

*1 → = flow of the utterance (e.g. H → L = a high-status person says to a low-status person.)

*2 JP = Japanese BR = British

The *Web-based Oral Pragmatics Acceptability Questionnaire* (WOPAQ) is mostly identical to the WWPAQ with the only difference being that research participants assessed acceptability after listening to actual conversations by means of audio files. The conversations, according to the gender specification above, were held on the web between both male/female British and Japanese research collaborators.

The WOPAQ was further divided into two parts: higher and lower proficiency versions. On the former (hereafter WOPAQH), roles of Japanese interlocutors were played by Japanese-English bilinguals. To insure that their prosodic features were nearly “educated native-like,” I would insist that they had stayed in England from 5 to 22 years and achieved a tertiary level of education there. On the other hand, the latter (WOPAQL) included voices of Japanese university students whose majors were not English. Their English was undoubtedly “nonnative-like” since none of them had either studied English as a major or stayed in any English-speaking countries. In comparing the WWPAQ with WOPAQH and WOPAQL, we can better understand how prosodic features affect pragmatics acceptability.

Analysis

In accessing the acceptability rate, the original values (from -3 to 3) on the rating scale were changed to the value from 1 to 7 for practical statistical purposes. Values greater than 4 are regarded as “acceptable” (>4) while less than 4 is “unacceptable” (<4).

Results

Reliability, Validity, and Practicality

Before turning to the results on (a) acceptability, (b) nationality differences, and (c) mode differences, it would be desirable to touch on reliability issues. Estimates of the inter-rater reliability were made using the split half rank order correlation between the odd- and even-numbered raters in the questionnaire. The half-rater correlation was then adjusted using the Spearman Brown correction formula to estimate reliability. Table 2 shows the estimated reliability of each of the three questionnaires. The WWPAQ showed particularly high estimates of inter-rater reliability, followed by the WWPAQH and WOPAQL.

Although all of the questionnaires have achieved a satisfactory level (>.8), there needs to be caution in regards to the reliability estimates of the two oral questionnaires due to the very small number of the samples (i.e., only 8). However, the oral version of pragmatics tests has proved to be highly reliable by using the WWW (Roever, 2001) as well as audio/visual recordings (Brown, 2001). Although it must be noted here that my criterion is “acceptability” rather than “NS-based appropriateness,” it may be reasonable to assume that there is also a satisfactory level of reliability in the WOPAQH/L.

It is important to remember here that the web-based technique is generally assumed to be more valid and practical than traditional methods. Thus, it is not too far away from the truth to say that both the web-based written and oral questionnaires are reliable, valid, and practical methods to assess pragmatics acceptability.

Table 2: Split-Half inter-rater reliability using Spearman Brown Correction formula

WWPAQ	WOPAQH	WOPAQL
0.9631	0.8441	0.8492

Acceptability

How acceptable are Japanese refusals for British English speakers?

Overall, Japanese refusals were proved to be highly acceptable for British-English speakers. This is not only because the total average is more than the operationally acceptable level (i.e., $4.917 > 4$), but also because the median and mode are an equally high number (both values are 6). The results indicate that the potentially problematic refusal strategies of Japanese speakers are generally perceived to be “acceptable” for British people. This result coincides with the previous findings on American speakers’ acceptability judgments (Fujiwara, 2004). The descriptive statistics in total including mean, mode, and so forth are presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics on RPR, OBV, ID, IP, and Total

	RPR	OBV	IP	ID	Total
Mean	5.800	5.633	5.067	3.167	4.917
SEM	0.200	0.260	0.377	0.198	0.164
Median	6	6	6	3	6
Mode	6	6	7	3	6
Std.Dev	1.095	1.426	2.067	1.085	1.794
Variance	1.200	2.033	4.271	1.178	3.220
N	30	30	30	30	120
Confidence	0.392	0.510	0.740	0.388	0.321

Table 3 shows descriptive statistics regarding four individual cases: (1) request for pay raises (RPR), (2) offer of broken vase (OBV), (3) invitation to a party (IP), and (4) invitation to dinner (ID). For the full description of all the cases, see Appendix. The results reveal that Japanese refusals in all cases, except for the ID, are highly acceptable for British research participants. For the RPR, OBV, and IP, all means of acceptability are more than 5 (i.e., 5.80, 5.63, and 5.07 from 1-7). The median and mode values are also high enough to achieve a tolerable level (all values are 6 or more). The data suggest that the three cases are likely to be accepted.

For the ID, on the contrary, the acceptability average rate is lower than 4 ($X = 3.17$); this utterance is judged to be unacceptable. The values of median and mode are also less than 4 (both values are 3). One other point to notice is that there is a slight possibility that the IP case is regarded as unacceptable. The reason for this is that the distribution could be bimodal: there are two modes with one on 7 and the other on 3. This tendency suggests that there is a “double interpretation”: one is acceptable whereas the other is unacceptable. Another problem in this case, as variance and confidence values show, is that the IP is not as reliable as the other cases; there is less consistency in acceptability judgments (see Table 3). Although the majority of research participants regard the IP case as acceptable, it is worth examining why it can be unacceptable. The reason why the Japanese refusals in the ID and IP are unacceptable will be taken up in the next section.

Why are they unacceptable?

First, the main reason why the utterance in the ID case would be unacceptable is unquestionably “unspecific”. This reason occupies two-thirds of whole shares (66.7%). This is expected since the previous research demonstrates that Japanese refusals are generally unspecific to English-speakers’ ears (Takahashi & Beebe, 1987; Beebe et al., 1990).

Second, the main reason why the utterance in the IP would be unacceptable is ‘other’ (90.9%). Of these responses, the most predominant reason given is that the Japanese refusal in this case sounds to their ears “over the top” (55.6%). One female participant, for example, states, “Giving a reason why they can't go is fine but he goes way over the top with his apology....” Therefore, this utterance is regarded as unacceptable not because it is unspecific and does not have a positive opinion, but because it is too “over the top.”

Nationality Difference

Is there any difference in acceptability between British and American research participants?

The results of nationality differences between British and American informants can be seen in Table 4. Overall (all cases except for the ID), British acceptability rates are higher than American ones. According to the one-tailed T-test, there are significant differences in British and American acceptability in the RPR, OBV, and IP case ($p < .1$ / $p < .05$ respectively) with the higher value on the former. With regard to the ID case, British acceptability, on the contrary, is lower than the American equivalent. The *t*-test with one-tail shows that this difference is also statistically significant ($p < .05$).

Table 4: Nationality differences in RPR/OBV/IP/ID between British and American

Situation	BR (N =30)		AM (N=10)	
	\bar{X}	\bar{X}	T-Value	P
RPR	5.80	4.90	1.795	.0812*
OBV	5.63	4.50	1.686	.0239**
IP	5.07	3.70	1.686	.0362**
ID	3.17	4.50	1.795	.0294**

** $P < .05$. * $P < .1$

Mode Difference

Do prosodic features have a significant effect on acceptability?

Prosodic features have a remarkable effect on acceptability for Japanese refusals, but this effect probably does not meet our expectations. If we compare voices from those who have a lower English proficiency with voices from those who have a higher proficiency, it is generally reasonable to suppose that the latter can achieve higher acceptability than the former due to their “native-like” suprasegmental features including stress, intonation, and so forth. In fact, the previous research, as noted above, supports this notion (Lambert et al., 1960).

Table 5 shows the means and standard deviations of the written and the two types of oral questionnaires. Against our expectations, the result surprisingly shows that NNS-like proficient voices have achieved higher acceptability than NS-like ones. Without any exceptions, the utterances characterised as “Japanese-like” prosodic features are much more acceptable than those characterised as “NS-like.” The IP case is a notable example since the acceptability rate, which can keep an acceptable level in the written and oral/low questionnaires (5.07, 4.38 respectively), finally falls right down to an “unacceptable” level in oral/high format (2.75).

Although I am aware of the problem that the sample size in each of the two oral questionnaires is noticeably small, the mean differences between three questionnaires were statistically tested by using one-way ANOVA. The significant differences were obtained in the RPR and IP cases. Consider Table 6 below.

The RPR and IP cases were then subject to the Bonferroni multi-comparison analysis. The results can be seen in Table 7 below. This procedure reveals that there are significant differences (a) between the written and oral/high ($P < .01$), the oral/low and oral/high questionnaires in the RPR ($P < .01$), and (b) between the written and oral/high formats in the IP ($P < .05$). Although the number of differences found are quite small, please notice here that there are significant differences not between the written and the oral/low format (All

differences between them are “null”), but between the written and oral/high or between the oral/low and oral/high questionnaires with the lower acceptability values on the oral/high one.

In addition to these quantitative differences, there are also qualitative differences in disfavour of the oral/high questionnaire. Some research participants, hearing Japanese-English bilingual voices, refer to the prosodic problems ironically, saying “the words are correct but the speaker does not sound his tone of voice” (extracted from the IP). Additionally, it is surprising that none of them mention the same suprasegmental problems in the oral/low format.

In sum, the finding regarding prosodic effects is that the order for means of acceptability in total, from top to bottom, is (1) written, (2) oral/low, and (3) oral/high.

Table 5: Media Differences in means of acceptability in RPR/OBV/IP/ID between written, oral/low, and oral/high questionnaire results

	Written (N=30)		Oral/low (N=8)		Oral/high (N=8)	
	\bar{X}	SD	\bar{X}	SD	\bar{X}	SD
RPR	5.80	1.10	5.88	1.36	3.88	1.64
OBV	5.63	1.43	5.75	1.75	5.00	1.41
IP	5.07	2.07	4.38	2.13	2.75	0.89
ID	3.17	1.09	3.38	1.19	2.25	0.89

Table 6: Differences in means of acceptability between written, oral/low, and oral/high by using ANOVA

		SS	DF	MS	F-value	P
RPR	BG	24.928	2	12.464	8.053	.001**
	WG	66.550	43	1.548		
	SUM	91.478	45			
OBV	BG	2.948	2	1.473	.671	.517
	WG	94.467	43	2.197		
	SUM	97.413	45			
ID	BG	6.371	2	3.186	2.765	.074
	WG	49.542	43	1.152		
	SUM	55.913	45			
IP	BG	34.171	2	17.086	4.556	.016*
	WG	161.242	43	3.750		
	SUM	195.413	45			

** P<.01. * P<.05

Table 7: Multi-comparison in RPR/IP by using Bonferroni

	(I) Group	(J) Group	Mean (I-J)	SEM	P
RPR	W	OL	-.0750	.4950	1.00
		OH	1.925	.4950	.001**
	OL	OH	2.000	.6220	.007**
IP	W	OL	.6917	.7705	1.00
		OH	2.3167	.7705	.013*
	OL	OH	1.6250	.9682	.302

** P<.01. * P<.05

Discussion

In this section, I will try to interpret the results on (1) acceptability, (2) nationality difference, and (3) mode difference.

Acceptability

With the exception of the ID, Japanese refusals proved highly acceptable for British English speakers. The same observation applies to the previous finding that with the exception of the IP, they were equally tolerable for American English speakers (Fujiwara, 2004). Whereas there are some exceptions and differences according to the native varieties of English, there is much truth in saying that most Japanese refusal strategies are much more acceptable than has been thought for both English native speakers.

I am very aware of the risk of overgeneralizations due to the small number of situations and research participants. However, the important point to remember is that all Japanese speech acts in this study have been extracted from the ILP studies, where they have been stigmatised as “deviant”, “pragmatic failure”, or “negative transfer”—typical problematic sources. In short, the Japanese refusals have been assumed to be a serious cause of miscommunication in the intercultural encounter.

In spite of this assumption, these empirical studies revealed that those NNS-like behaviors are, more or less, regarded as “acceptable.” To put it the other way round, they are less likely than thought to be a problem of “culture clash.” Thus, it is important to revisit the previous CCP/ILP findings in light of intercultural pragmatics to confirm whether differences in different speech acts between different cultural groups are really problematic or not.

Nationality Differences

With regard to the nationality difference, this study found that in all cases, there are significant differences in acceptability judgments between British and American participants. With the exception of the ID, British acceptability rates are significantly higher than American acceptability rates. The ID is, however, the opposite case where British people regard the Japanese refusal as unacceptable while Americans regard it as acceptable. The IP is also an interesting case which is generally acceptable for British, but not at all for American judges. These differences are the findings of this research on the nationality.

Unfortunately, it is very difficult to interpret with much certainty why there are significant differences between the two varieties of native English speakers, because we have very little definite information on the “cross-cultural” comparison between native English speakers. Although we might have some intuitions or anecdotes on this issue, such information sources, as the study shows, are ultimately untrustworthy.

The only account which I could find is Takahashi and Beebe’s continuum with one end as “status-sensitive” and with the other as “familiarity sensitive” (1987; Beebe et al., 1990). They argue that there is a cross-cultural difference between Japanese and American refusals in terms of the direction of sensitivity: Japanese is comparatively status-sensitive while American is familiarity-sensitive (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Kitao, 1990). More specifically, Japanese appear to change their behavior according to the relative social power; i.e., they may use more cautious speech for their boss, and less for subordinates. Americans, however, seem to change their behavior along with social distance; i.e., they may use more cautious speech for intimates, but less for strangers. If we assume that this argument has

considerable validity, it may be that the British are located somewhere between the Japanese and Americans.

Such a hypothesis makes it possible to give a full account of the difference in the IP. As far as this case is concerned, one may say that Japanese super-polite expressions toward a boss (i.e., “I’m terribly sorry, but I have a previous engagement. Next time, I’ll go to your party, I promise. I feel awfully sorry to say no to your wonderful invitation”) is more acceptable for British than American people since the former put a certain amount of emphasis on social status while the latter would rather emphasize familiarity. As a result of the differences in terms of sensitivity, the majority of British judgments are acceptable, but the opposite is true in the American case.

Yet, this explanation cannot hold in all other cases (RPR/OBV/ID). Indeed, it cannot give adequate answers for the following questions: “Why is the statement of empathy in the RPR more acceptable for British than American speakers? I.e., an employer refuses her employer’s request for pay raises by beginning with the statement, ‘I understand your situation.’” “Why is the statement of philosophy in the OBV more tolerable for British than American speakers? I.e., an employer refuses his housekeeper’s offer of broken vase by saying ‘things with shapes eventually break.’” The most difficult case to explain is the ID: “Why is the unspecific excuse so problematic for British, but not so much for American speakers?” “Don’t these differences come from the Japanese-American English contrast?” We really do not know the answers yet.

One thing, however, is certain: there are differences in pragmatic acceptability judgments between NS varieties. Thus, there is much room for investigation on the cultural differences between NS varieties such as British, American, Australian, and so forth.

Mode Differences

It is observed in the preceding section that the rank order for obtained means of acceptability, from top to bottom, is (1) written, (2) oral/low, and (3) oral/high questionnaires. This result is surprising because it contradicts not only our general assumption, but also the previous findings. We generally assume that the voice of a person with higher language proficiency, owing to their “NS-like” prosodic features, can achieve higher acceptability than that of a person with lower language proficiency. This notion, as touched on above, is endorsed by researchers’ speculations (Hatch, 1992) and empirical findings on language attitude (Lambert et al., 1960). The result of this study is, however, the opposite: NNS-like prosodic features achieved higher acceptability than NS-like ones.

To explain this unexpected result, please recall the distinction between *phonological* and *pragmatic* acceptability. Although a great deal of research (Lambert et al., 1960; Giles & Powesland, 1975) has given us much insight into how we perceive NS or NNS varieties of English, what it lacks is that it has investigated NS/NNS attitudes focusing mainly on phonological features, while paying little attention to context, “something which might be defined or negotiated by participants” (Culpeper, 2001, p. 15). Their findings, thus, cannot adequately explain this result in the “dynamic” interaction with which pragmatics is concerned (Thomas, 1983).

One good explanation for this unexpected rank order is given by Thomas (1983):

Once alerted to the fact that S [speaker] is not fully grammatically competent, native speakers seem to have little difficulty in making allowances for it... If a non-native speaker appears to speak fluently (i.e., is grammatically competent), a native speaker

is likely to attribute his/her apparent impoliteness or unfriendliness, not to any linguistic deficiency, but to boorishness or ill-will. (p. 97, italics added).

Although it seems to me that her insights are mainly concerned with fluency and the “syntactic” rather than the “phonological” domain of grammatical competence³, we see, hinted in this extract, how grammatical and pragmatic features interact with each other, influencing NS acceptability judgments. That is, the lower proficiency NNS speakers’ voices in the study are judged to be more tolerable in a pragmatic domain than the higher proficiency ones due to their NNS-like prosodic features.

To synthesise the points I have made above, it might be possible to build up one hypothesis. This hypothesis is that “a given NNS utterance can be pragmatically more acceptable for NS if there is a ‘consistency’ between prosodic and non-prosodic linguistic features.” Indeed this hypothesis enables us to explain all cases of both the oral versions of the questionnaires and the previous findings (Lambert et al., 1960).

It seems to be that the interaction between prosodic and other formal contexts (e.g., semantic contents or syntactic length) influences the pragmatic meaning conveyed to a hearer. For instance, if an utterance’s prosodic and formal characteristics are NS-like, then, it is strongly assumed to be pragmatically acceptable. The example for this is the usual conversation between NSs.

The second case is likely to be pragmatically less acceptable, where NNS show conformity to the NS phonological norm, producing, however, NNS-like formal features. The reason for this is that an NS could be bothered or confused since the NNS’s NS-like phonology may bring the NS an ‘in-group’ sense (Thomas, 1995): the NS, because of an NNS’s competent skill in prosody, would assume that the NNS is using a target language according to the same NS pragmatic principles. Therefore, NNS-like formal characters such as semantic content could be more unexpected and intolerable for the NS. The clear example for this is the oral/high questionnaire results.

The third case is likely to be less acceptable, where NNS’s utterances are formally the same, but phonologically different from that of NS. As the research on language attitude shows, if a context can be ignored, NNS-like prosodic features are socially less acceptable than other NS varieties (Lambert et al., 1960; Giles & Powesland, 1975).

Finally, the fourth case could be pragmatically more acceptable where both prosodic and formal characteristics are “consistently” NNS-like. The reasons might be partly because NNS-like prosodic features show incompetence in a target language and prepare the NS to have a sense of allowance for NNS-like pragmatic contents (Thomas, 1983), and partly because the NNS-like linguistic features alert the NS that the NNS is behaving with different pragmatic principles. This notion is supported by the results that the lower proficiency voices have achieved higher acceptability.

In sum, the first and the fourth cases are likely to be accepted in a pragmatic sense because there is a “consistency” between prosodic and semantic features. As far as the results and previous findings are concerned, there is a considerable validity to this hypothesis. However, it should not be pushed too far before future research can confirm it more rigorously.

Conclusion

The primary focus in this study is on the following questions: *How acceptable is a given NNS pragmatic strategy for NS? Is a given cross-cultural difference in pragmatics*

between L1 and L2 really problematic? This research, taking a Japanese-English contrast in refusal as a focus, has indicated that NNS-like pragmatic strategies by Japanese are not always “unacceptable” and do not always result in a communication breakdown between NNS and NS. Additionally, it has been observed that there are complex “dynamic” interactions between NNS prosody and other-formal features such as semantic contexts and linguistic length.

Intercultural pragmatics, I believe, should attract the attentions of theoretical linguists and practitioners since acceptability as well as intelligibility is becoming more important because of the emerging notion of English as an International Language (EIL) (Smith, 1987; Widdowson, 1994, 1997; Crystal, 1997; Hino, 2001; Jenkins, 2006). I am very aware that it is debatable whether EIL is just a tool for international communication or rather a form of English Imperialism (e.g., Phillipson, 1992, 2000; Pennycook, 1994). However, if English is, in a real sense, a useful tool for international communication, there are three points to keep in mind. First, the English language should be “deculturalised” to be neutral for all users: native speakers should no longer be “custodians” for this language (e.g., Widdowson, 1994, 1997). Second, a pragmatic failure is a failure “only when there is enough lack of tolerance to make it one” (George, 1978, p. 9). In other words, this deficit is not based on a given objective truth, but on human subjective judgments which might be often flexible or negotiated (Fujiwara, 2004, 2005). Finally, the existing diversity of English users in the world strongly recommends to us that the subjective tolerance for NNS varieties of English should be extended (Brutt-Griffler, 1998). On these grounds, acceptability in intercultural pragmatics is worth exploring in order to find a common ground between English users regardless of “nativeness”.

Although this research has shed light on making meaning in a dynamic interaction in line with intercultural pragmatics, there is much room for further investigation. Referring to the findings in this study, I will summarize some future research directions.

1. ICP study regardless of languages and contrasts between NS and NNS.

The research findings indicate that with a few exceptions, Japanese refusals are more acceptable than assumed for British/American English native speakers. Extending this observation to all language learning contexts, I would suggest that it is important to revisit the existing CCP/ILP findings in light of ICP to confirm whether the differences in any given speech acts between any given cultural groups are really problematic or not. Needless to say, a problematicity-proved pragmatic strategy, such as a Japanese unspecific excuse to a friend in the UK, or an elaborate speech to a boss in the US, should be considered in the language classroom. When the target language is English, I also recommend the ICP study on nonnative-nonnative discourse as well as native-nonnative discourse. If English is used for the purpose of international communication, such a research direction will be naturally required in the near future.

2. CCP study on NS varieties

It has been found that there are significant differences in pragmatic judgments between British and American participants. Unfortunately I have failed to explain this difference due to a lack of trustworthy information on NS varieties in literature. Thus, it is

necessary to investigate NS varieties such as British, American, Australian and so forth in light of cross-cultural pragmatics.

3. Hypothesis testing study on the interactional effect on pragmatic acceptability between prosodic and other formal contexts.

This research has yielded the hypothesis that “a given NNS utterance can be pragmatically more acceptable for NS if there is a ‘consistency’ between prosodic and other formal features.” The important point in this hypothesis is that there are four variables that effect pragmatic meaning in a very dynamic way: (1) phonological (e.g., prosody), (2) semantic (various politeness strategies), (3) syntactic (linguistic length, etc) and (4) sociolinguistic (e.g., Japanese, British or American). It is strongly assumed that these four variables intricately contribute to the dynamic process in determining meaning in interaction between different cultural groups. However, much still remains to be done to confirm this hypothesis.

Further research is required in these directions.

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Appendix. Pragmatic Acceptability Questionnaire

Italicised utterances are supposed to be Japanese-specific refusals (Takahashi & Beebe, 1987; Beebe et al., 1990)

1. Request for pay raises (RPR)

You are a male employee at a bookstore. You ask to speak to your female boss in private about a raise.

You: As you know, I've been here just a little over a year now, and I know you've been pleased with my work. I really enjoy working here, but to be quite honest, I really need an increase in pay.

Owner: *I understand your situation. And I deeply appreciate your work. But financial matters are not so good. So, I'm really sorry to say I can't increase your pay.*

2. Offer of broken vase (OBV)

You are a cleaning lady working one afternoon. Your male employer arrives, and you go rushing up to him.

You: Oh God, I'm sorry! I had an awful accident. While I was cleaning I bumped into the table and your China vase fell and broke. I feel just terrible about it. I'll pay for it.

Employer: *That's okay. Everything breaks eventually. So, you can forget about it.*

3. Invitation to a party (IP)

You are a male top executive at a very large accounting firm. One day you call one of your male subordinates into your office.

You: Next Sunday my wife and I are having a little party. I know it's short notice but I am hoping all my top executives will be there with their wives. What do you say?

Subordinate: *I'm terribly sorry, but I have a previous engagement. Next time, I'll go to your party, I promise. I feel awfully sorry to say no to your wonderful invitation*

4. Invitation to Dinner (ID)

You (female) invite a female friend to dinner.

You: How about coming over for dinner Sunday night? We're having a small dinner party.

Friend: *I'm sorry, but I have something to do at home.*

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2. Following Spencer-Oatey's definitions (2000, p. 4), the term "cross-cultural" is defined as comparing "data obtained independently from different cultural groups," and the term "intercultural" as the observation on "data when people from two different cultural groups interact with each other."

3. The utterances voiced by Japanese monolinguals are "fluent" in terms of the speed of the speech and "correct" in a syntactic sense. This is simply because they read aloud the ready-made transcripts as if they were main players in a given conversation.