# Preference for Offers over Requests :
# Speech Acts as Pragmatic Formula & CA Actions

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This paper starts by outlining the basic analytical framework for conceptualizing the speech act as a unit of analysis. Following this will be a brief explanation of how speech acts function within Interlanguage Pragmatic (ILP) research. A proposition will then be made for the utility of Conversation Analysis (CA) methods and findings － by way of an analysis of a stretch of talk － as an additive approach to addressing how best to present discourse practices to second language (L2) learners. Focus for the analysis will be on how CA notions of preference shape on-going talk. The excerpt reveals how participants display an orientation toward offers over requests within the organization of a speech event. The importance, in regards to pedagogical motives for instructional pragmatics, is that this behavior is visible not at the utterance level but at the level of the speech event.

**Key Words :** Conversation Analysis, Interlanguage Pragmatics, Speech Acts, Request, Offer

### Speech Act Background: Classifying Requests

Traditional speech act analysis of discourse conceptualizes a *form* to *function* role for distinct utterances, associating particular formulaic constructions that operate as illocutionary force indicating devices (IFID) (Austin, 1962). This means that *compliments*, for example, are understood as having been performed when utterances designed for that purpose are employed. In English, *I like your shirt* is an utterance packaged in such a way as to be interpreted as doing the job of a compliment; it is an IFID, and when received by a hearer creates a illocutionary effect such that the speaker's intention becomes realized or comprehended.

Likewise, *requests* are designated actions performed when and only when request-shaped formulas are uttered. The following conventionally indirect request *Would you mind if I sat here?* is taken not to be an opportunity to investigate if an individual is vexed by the dilemma of whether or not a particular person will sit in a particular place. Speakers rely upon conventional expressions to do the work of conveying meanings of an often non-literal manner. The view then is that the phrase *I like your shirt* is not produced to mean that your shirt is but one of many pleasing items the world has to offer me and I appreciate it － just as I do chilled glasses of mint julep on hot evenings, or the silence that comes when my children are asleep. These phrases do particular acts when spoken and are heard as such due to their formulaic constructions. The actions are bound to cultural conceptions implicit within the language itself, rather than being of universal significance across languages. *I like your shirt* may, in a language other than English, serve the purpose of a request IFID, rather than as a compliment IFID, and produce in a hearer the intention that the speaker would like to literally take the shirt off their back.

This view of IFIDs encased within conventional utterances that constitute non-literal intentions is somewhat problematic. Vague conditions exist for how any given expression may or may not be designated as a specific IFID (Aijmer, 1996). Gricean maxims covering the cooperative principle in regards to *quality, quantity, relation*, and *manner* account for the basic rules by which speakers behave, but fail to justify by what means any utterance is interpreted by a hearer; rather, a host of factors hold claim as potential sources for cause, including "properties of the structure of the utterance and paralinguistic properties, perception of the present

situation, knowledge of the speaker, knowledge of the superstructure or form of the episode, the relevant propositions and presuppositions, rules and norms and other knowledge of the world" (Aijmer, 1996, p. 125). Speech act theory, then, relies upon a prescriptive (i.e., etic) view of speaker intent and hearer interpretation that portrays speech acts as "meaning packages" (i.e., pragmalinguistic structures) that perform a range of accepted and perceptible actions within conversations. How successfully any formula functions within talk is contingent upon contextual influences (i.e., sociopragmatic features) that play an inherent role in what amounts to a message transfer conceptualization regarding how talk essentially reflects thought.

The cooperative principle relates as well to response patterns given as follow-ups to speech acts like compliments and requests. *I like finding money under couch cushions* is understood as being an unrelated response to *I like your shirt*. It therefore violates the maxim of relation — for compliments are given not as a means of sharing likes and dislikes but as serving an additive social function (e.g., prior to issuing requests, social cohesion, as part of or in place of a greeting, c.f., Manes & Wolfson, 1981; Wolfson & Manes, 1980). Response patterns, just as with initial speech act utterances, are packaged in formulaic ways so as to be understood as relational to one another. *Thank you* is therefore taken to be an appropriate response form following a compliment, and *sure* as a follow-up for a request. Recently, Corpus-based analysis, such as the approach employed by Aijmer (1996), has started to build frequency-based representations of how speech acts are most commonly produced within various genres.

## Speech Acts in SLA - ILP

Within the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) speech act research has been the primary conceptualizing tool for what is now the study of pragmatics, known as Interlanguage Pragmatics (c.f., Kasper, 2004). Essentially, the view taken is that pragmatics is both a knowledge base (e.g., comprised of the declarative knowledge of what constitutes a *suggestion* or *invitation*) as well as a skill-set (e.g., the procedural knowledge to produce a contextually appropriate suggestion), and covers the range of speech acts from *offers* and *apologies* to *requests* and *promises*. The goal of teaching pragmatics as such is to make accessible (i.e., both as comprehensible input as well as performable actions) to second language (L2) learners much of the routine language functions

competent speakers of a speech community employ on a daily basis as a means of maintaining social bonds.

As a sub-discipline within SLA, the instruction of pragmatics is known as Interlanguage Pragmatics (ILP; cf. Kasper & Rose, 2002, for a definitive coverage of ILP), and as such is concerned with core research goals connected to acquisition: attention, noticing and awareness; memory storage and retrieval; time-on-task and other issues of input exposure and uptake; grammatical and lexical complexity; and learning styles involving issues of motivation, engagement, and determination. The purview of ILP research extends to defining the types and variations of speech acts within a target language (TL), conducting empirical research into the nature and role of instructional contexts in developing learner awareness and performance of speech acts and implicature, and, to an ever increasing extent modeling valid means of assessing pragmatic competence through various testing formats.

To ILP researchers, L2 learners, especially those in the foreign language learning environment, primarily rely upon pragmalinguistic forms and sociopragmatic practices from their first language (L1) when performing routine language practices in their TL. This is due to the limited amount of explicit instruction language curriculum and instructional materials devote to interlanguage pragmatic development in the classroom (c.f., Ishihara & Cohen, 2010, for an in-depth review of the rationale for instructional pragmatics). Outside the classroom, in conversational situations, the types of feedback that might normally be offered L2 learners in regards to lexical or syntactic problems do not always extend to addressing pragmatic failures. This means that learners of a second language may walk away from conversations having unwittingly left a less than flattering image of themselves in the opinion of their interlocutor. Returning to the *I like your shirt* example discussed previously, it becomes clearer how cross-linguistic breakdowns in communication can occur when formulaic utterances fail to find identical functions in the L2 (i.e., an utterance issued as a compliment is received as a form of request).

Classroom research (as well as the arm of ILP studies dedicated to the role of emersion within the TL environment) has focused much of its attention on how, and to what degree, learners acquire native-like use of pragmalinguistic forms given norms of appropriacy regarding sociopragmatic features (c.f., Kasper & Rose, 2001, for a full review of ILP research). Learner production of the speech

act under investigation, therefore, is a requisite condition for assessing the level of acquisition (i.e., how grammatically well-formed the utterance is, as well as the appropriacy of its use within the social conditions established for its elicitation). Returning to the request example introduced previously, *Would you mind if I sat here* as a target utterance contains two distinct and separate means of assessing how well a learner has produced it. The first is in regards to its grammatical shape; and as such this bi-clausal *if*-construction described as a "consultative device" (House & Kasper, 1981) has been characterized as being relatively more difficult to acquire the use of than the "simpler" modal-fronted mono-clausal structure using *would*, *could*, or *can I* (Bardovi-Harlig, 2003). The second issue applies to the appropriacy of using one phrase structure (i.e., bi-clausal) over the other (i.e., mono-clausal) within a given context, with previous research basing such a comparison on native-speaker (NS) base-line data (c.f., Bardovi-Harlig, 2003). The notion therefore is not simply whether or not learners can produce utterances of these syntactically different difficulties, but also how well those productive behaviors mirror a representational native-speaker population. Such a notion, in and of itself, is contentious within the field, as there exists no idealized native speaker whose declarative and procedural knowledge of speech act realization comprises the sum extent of pragmatics within that language (Davies, 2004; Kasper, 2006).

This summary of what constitutes the main portion of the agenda within ILP research in relation to its adoption and application of the speech act as a primary *unit for analysis* raises the question of how effective such a means of conceptualizing language in use is, and what might be a potential shortcoming that exists for teaching discourse in action to L2 learners from such a construction of the speech act. Raising this question is not meant to *throw the baby out with the bathwater* as it were by attempting to unhinge the speech act as the primary *unit of analysis* from ILP research. Rather, the following analysis is an attempt to incorporate methods and findings from Conversation Analysis (CA) research into how speech acts might be presented as an instructional framework for acquisition that is additive in nature to ILP notions of speech acts as pragmalinguistic forms (i.e., syntactic utterances of varying degrees of difficulty in regards to acquisition) bound to notions of appropriacy vested in sociopragmatic features (e.g., gender social status, degrees of imposition, and social distance; c.f., Ishihara & Cohen, 2010, for more detailed discussion).

## CA Notions of Preference and Action: To self request or to initiate other offer

At the core of CA research are the notions of normative behavior localized within the sequence structure of turn-taking, the organizational conditions set forth by adjacency pairs, and the sense that certain turns are produced as a result of what is known as preference (c.f., Schegloff, 2007, for complete discussion). The goals of the analysis to follow is 1) to demonstrate how *requests* are conceived in CA terms, and 2) to highlight an additional notion of what it might mean to be communicatively competent missing from "speech act research" (Kasper, 2006) in ILP research.

According to Wong & Waring (2010), "[p]reference is a structural organization in which the alternatives that fit in a certain slot in a sequence are treated as nonequivalent (i.e., preferred vs. dispreferred)" (p. 62). The importance of this notion to the present analysis is how participants orient to the on-going structure of talk in such a way as to reveal how a request is or, more importantly, is *not* produced, and that this communicative resource is made apparent by both participants within the transcripts. Continuing with Wong & Waring, "[f]or instance, as first pair-parts, offers are preferred over requests. Requests are often withheld to maximize the possibility that someone will do the offering" (p. 62). This notion of how participants routinely, and for cause, "withhold" producing requests is missing from speech act research, which relies upon L2 learners producing for analysis utterances deemed as requests.

In excerpt one to follow, the conversation between Joyce and Stan starts as Stan initiates a pre-closing sequence in lines 02-04 of a telephone conversation (published in Schegloff, 2007). The lines of interest evolve over extended turns of talk from 07 to the final line at 38. This will be the request speech event of interest for the remainder of the paper. Immediately clear is a fundamental difference between how CA research conceptualizes an action such as a request (as occurring over multiple, sometimes extended, turns at talk) compared to how ILP research works from the utterance level. What is also important to point out from the start is that nowhere do we find occurrences of what constitutes as conventionally indirect speech acts employing the *can*, *could*, or *would* mono-clausal or the bi-clausal *would you mind if* type structure. Instead, we have an instance of a directive using the quasi-modal verb *need* in line 27 with Joyce stating, "and so I need somebody 'ta drive me to the airport."

### Excerpt One: Joyce & Stan

Joyce & Stan

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01    Joyce:      [°Mm,
02    Stan:       [.hhhh we:ll okay: at's about all I wannid tuh
03                (0.7)
04                bug you with, (tod[ay).
05    Joyce:                        [uhhahhahh hh Okay Stan:,
06    Stan:       So are   you okay?
07    Joyce:      Yeah, (0.4) um: (0.2) whatta ya doing like: s: late
08                Saturday afternoo:n.=
09    Stan:       =.hhhh Well late Sa- I pra- a friend a' mine just
10                called me a little while ago: an' he: uh:
11                (0.7)
12                he wannid' a do something. <so I said well:, it's a
13                (   ) Saturday night why don't we go: uh: you know
14                (le's) (us) catch a movie: er: ge[t something
15    Joyce:                                       [Mm
16    Stan:       to ea:t er: ballgame >er somethin' like tha[t<
17    Joyce:                                                  [°Mm
18                .hhhh but S:aturday a:fternoon if it's not too:
19                la:te I don't think [I (   )
20    Joyce:                          [No it'll it'll be like six.
21                o'clock.
22    Stan:       Oh: why what's happening?
23    Joyce:      Because I'm going down to San Diego.
24                (0.3)
25    Joyce:      An' I'm gonneh- fly:.
26                (.)
27    Joyce:      And so I need somebody 'ta drive me to the airport.
28                (0.4)
29    Joyce:      And uh: Ma said she might but  yih know,
30                (0.9)
31    Joyce:      She'll tell me [la:ter;
32    Stan:                      [Oh I might be ableta manage it
33                I'll see:, but don't count on me, yih[know?
34    Joyce:                                           [Arright well
35                I'll try an[d get someone else.
36    Stan:                  [Av: I wouldn' I wouldn' have a really
37                good idea until: uh tomorrow or Saturday.
38    Joyce:          Yeah, o[kay.
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From an ILP research perspective, line 27 would be the position of most relevance, as this is the location of the request, shaped as it is in the form of a directive rather than in the form of a conventionally indirect construction (e.g., *can*, *could* or *would*). The utterance would necessarily be framed in relation to the sociopragmatic features evident from the discourse, that of the relationship between the speakers, indications of any social status, and the imposition of the request. Namely, these indicators would be that the relationship of these two individuals as siblings (evidenced in line

29 from Joyce's use of "Ma") and as such would have a close relationship and would be lacking in any noticeable social inequality. The level of imposition of this request would be considered high in regards to expenditure of time, use of a vehicle, cost of fuel, and being asked at apparently short notice. The utterances is delivered with slight mitigation for the level of imposition, using *I need* rather than a construction such as *if you weren't doing anything I was wondering if.* Here is where framing the speech act as the primary *unit of acquisition* becomes problematic. Simply locating evidence of the request

fails to account for the utterance structure as such (i.e., why a request of noticeable imposition would be delivered without more mitigation, as is assumed would be the case) or the fact that sequencing plays a part in understanding directness. Wong & Waring (2010) make this point when speaking about ILP research's focus on within-turn construction rather than across-turns: "[t]he notion that indirectness may be achieved sequentially has not yet received much attention within applied linguistics" (p. 82).

This is not to say that the utterance shaped by the quasi-modal *need* does not signify a request speech act utterance, but that Joyce employed this only after structuring the talk in such a way as to elicit an offer on the part of Stan. Failing to allow for a full analysis of how participants engineer their participation within talk based solely on the on-going sequences of utterances results in a means of categorizing occurrences cleaved from their situated meaning. The speech act request is therefore removed from what was produced in prior turns, all of which then are considered inessential to understanding the role the speech act eventually plays. Raymond (2003) states that what is primarily of importance for researchers of discourse "is not to dismiss what can be gleaned from the linguistic structures of sentences, utterances, or bits of discourse; rather … because language is primarily used in temporally unfolding, sequentially organized interactions, analyses (and theories) of language that fail to take this into account risk producing impossibly inert accounts of human conduct" (p. 941). Instead, what needs to be included within the analysis of this request is an understanding of preference and how pre-sequences are employed to shape talk. Language learners should understand how talk unfolds rather than how utterances are produced if they are to become successful in using their knowledge of formulaic speech act constructions.

To present to learners a fuller picture of how to position their use of speech acts, it is important to begin the analysis at line 07 where Joyce uses a pre-sequence expansion that solicits a reporting from Stan.

### Excerpt Two: Pre-Sequence Expansion to Solicit Reporting

The job of a pre-sequence is to recognizably project what is known as a *base sequence*, which relates to the first pair-part (FFP)/second pair-part (SPP) base adjacency pair structure for such actions ― offer, invitation, request, announcement. This is not to say that all pre-sequences result in the base sequence being produced, and at times, the pre-sequence does the job of resolving whether or not a preferred response will be granted for the projected action (e.g., whether or not someone would be likely or available to accept an invitation). In line 07, the pre-sequence Joyce employs ― *whatta ya doing like: s: late Saturday afternoo:n.=* ― is of such a generic nature that it is uncertain what it is a preliminary base sequence to. Regardless, in line 22, Stan orients to this as being a pre-sequence to some action when he states ― *Oh: why what's happening?*, an indication for Joyce to proceed or go-ahead with the FPP. But Stan has done more than simply acknowledged that Joyce may be intending to invite him someplace, offer to do something during that time, or request some type of assistance; Stan has also produced a reporting of potential plans that could forestall his being able to accept the projected action. Schegloff (2007) states, "[o]ne key thing which pre-sequences are designed to do is to help prospective speakers of base first pair parts avoid rejection, or, to put it more interactionally, to help the interaction avoid a sequence with a rejected base FPP" (p. 31). Joyce

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07    Joyce:     Yeah, (0.4) um: (0.2) whatta ya doing like: s: late
08               Saturday afternoo:n.=
09    Stan:      =.hhhhh Well late Sa- I pra- a friend a' mine just
10               called me a little while ago: an' he: uh:
11               (0.7)
12               he wannid' a do something. <so I said well:, it's a
13               (   ) Saturday night why don't we go: uh: you know
14               (le's) (us) catch a movie: er: ge[t something
15    Joyce:                                      [Mm
16    Stan:      to ea:t er: ballgame >er somethin' like tha[t<
17    Joyce:                                                [°Mm
18               .hhhh but S:aturday a:fternoon if it's not too:
19               la:te I don't think [I (  )
20    Joyce:                         [No it'll it'll be like six.
21               o'clock.
22    Stan:      Oh: why what's happening?
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23    Joyce:      Because I'm going down to San Diego.
24                (0.3)
25    Joyce:      An' I'm gonneh- fly:.
26                (.)
27    Joyce:      And so I need somebody 'ta drive me to the airport.
28                (0.4)
29    Joyce:      And uh: Ma said she might but  yih know,
30                (0.9)
31    Joyce:      She'll tell me [la:ter;
32    Stan:                      [Oh I might be ableta manage it
33                I'll see:, but don't count on me, yih[know?
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then has been warned, in a sense, that her base FPP might encounter problems. And this is what we see resulting in the turns to follow.

### Excerpt Three: Silence as Rejection

According to Wong and Waring (2010), "[r]equests tend to be delayed, mitigated, and accounted for" (p. 86). This is precisely how Joyce constructs her request in lines 23 and 25. Up to this point within the ongoing turns at talk she has yet to produce any utterance ILP research would categorize as constituting a request IFID. When the on-record request in line 27 occurs, Stan produces no immediate response, but rather allows speakership rights to remain with Joyce. Each instance where silence is shown — lines 24, 26, 28, and 30 — indicate possible transition relevant places where Stan could assume speakership and potentially initiate an offer of assistance. The pauses themselves reveal how Joyce is orienting to the preference for withholding requests for offers; and Stan essentially turning down the next-turn speakership in each pause reveals his orientation to a preference for agreement over disagreement. According to Wong and Waring (2010), "[a]ssessments, agreement and disagreement are not treated as equivalent by participants: agreement is preferred, and disagreement dispreferred. As a preferred action, agreement is typically done without delay, mitigation, or accounts" (p. 66). By producing delay (i.e., by not offering assistance at the first possible position available in line 24), Stan is furthering the initial projected rejection his reporting of potential plans performed in lines 09 to 14. By the time Joyce receives a response to her request in Stan's lines 32 and 33 the final rejection is shaped to follow the preference structure for stalling actual refusal until the last moment. Throughout the excerpt Joyce and Stan visibly orient to the roles prior turns at talk have in shaping talk to follow, even to the level of how pauses are employed as interactional resources.

We can see by this that preference structure operates beyond the utterance level, even to the extent that "[i]deally, the potential requester would not have to explicitly state the request at all" (Wong &Waring, 2010, p. 87).

### Conclusion

If it is true that in an ideal interaction requests themselves could be orchestrated instead as opportunities to produce other-initiated offers, language learners would benefit from having training in such strategies. CA analytic methods have much to offer ILP research in terms of expanding the potential benefits speech act studies provide for language learners. Instructional methods then should aim at combining both within-turn utterance acquisition in respect to the variety of speech act utterances (formulaic and otherwise) traditionally recognized within the purview of ILP research, but should also begin to address across turn preference organizational patterns so as to provide learners with a knowledge of the sequential organization of talk.

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