Politeness, Power, and Directives in Academic Discourse: Corpus-based Insights from Learner English

Jonathon Reinhardt
University of Arizona
July 2009
IPrA Melbourne

International Teaching Assistants

• High number of international graduate students in the U.S. -- 50% of grads in Engineering and Sciences, 41% in math and sciences.
• ITAs are employed as teaching assistants, test graders, tutors for lower-level courses.
• ITAs often are in charge of Office Hours for a course, where they tutor students and answer questions outside of the regular course period.
• Students have complained about ITAs’ English comprehensibility.
• Since 1990, over 20 U.S. state legislatures have mandated that post-secondary institutions develop certifications of oral language proficiency for ITAs (spoken academic English placement tests).
• Universities have responded with courses for ITAs that teach language (pronunciation, academic English) and teaching (presentation, consultation) skills.
• ITAs come from academic cultures that are very different from Western academic cultures with regards to teacher-student relationships.

Project Overview

• Context: Office hours spoken discourse, as representative of spoken instructional discourse
• Research Question: What is the nature of directive language usage in office hours contexts in relation to the exercise of academic power?
• Purpose: to inform ITA and advanced ESL pedagogy
• Data: ITAcorp and MICASE corpora
• Mixed methods: grounded, corpus, genre, profiles, experimental
• Object of analysis: Directive language usage by learners (International Teaching Assistants: ITAs) and experts (practicing academic professionals), as representative of instructional language

Data

• Transcribed spoken Office Hours interactions
• Expert corpus: MICASE, Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (Simpson, Briggs, Ovens, & Swales, 2002)
  – Office Hours sub-corpus
  – approx. 40 interactions
  – 8 T participants, all expert speakers (1 NNS), balance of ages, gender, status, & fields
  – 120629 tokens (T and S roles together)
• Learner corpus: ITAcop, a corpus of classroom-based discourse, produced by ITAs in teaching/English preparation courses
  – 3 office hours role play activities: computer-mediated chat, face-to-face in class, final assessment
  – 2 semester cohorts, 7 classes, approx. 80 interactions
  – 72 T participants, all TOEFL 550+ but didn’t pass spoken academic English placement test, mostly E. Asian, male, variety of fields
  – 102806 tokens
  – transcribed using MICASE standards to maximize comparability
Mixed Methods Approach

1. Semi-grounded analysis of data portions to identify object (directive language) and unit (directive construction) of analysis
2. Contrastive corpus register analysis of directive construction usage in office hours
3. Genre analysis of the context and moves of office hours
4. Corpus-informed individual analyses of directive usage by 8 experts and 8 learners; detailed usage profiles of 3 learners supplemented by ethnographic & interview data
5. A pedagogical intervention of corpus-informed language awareness instruction, with experimental and control groups

Object of Analysis: Directive Language

- Directive Language is language with directive illocutionary force (Searle, 1979) used functionally for making suggestions or giving advice.
- In traditional frameworks (e.g. Palmer, 2001), directive language has primarily deontic qualities of obligative modality.
- In a systemic-functional framework (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004) directive language would be considered part of the MODULATION system, a continuum between obligation (what I want you to do) and inclination (what you want to do).
- In traditional politeness theory frameworks (Brown & Levinson, 1987), directives are potentially face threatening to the directed-listener’s negative face, depending on participant status relationship and context of use.
- In many ESL textbooks, directives are traditionally presented as series of modals & semi-modals (must, mustn’t, have to, should, ought to, need to, needn’t), and taught as ‘giving advice’ or ‘making suggestions’, with little or no discussion of politeness or power.

Grounded Analysis: MICASE (expert)

so first thing you do draw a picture... and you don't know the prices so just make some, downward sloping budget line. [S: mkay, this is what i want] and the only thing is on... a curve, a little careful cuz we know that, this is quasi-linear so the indifference curves actually, curve but hit the axes, <P:12> so if you wanna ' here let's a... this is one thing that it sounds like i'm being picky [S: mhm ] but you really have to be careful about this cuz this is subtle things that are gonna matter later. [S: okay ] so you... more, like that. (Economics Office Hours; OFC280SU109)

Grounded Analysis: ITAcorp (learner)

uh one is the lecture notes i have given you in the class, you can review it and see how you can begin the opening, there are some opening phrases you can try to write them try to practice with them [S: hm] how you can open with, you don’t need uh you don’t need a long opening, but you need to have something that is an opening, okay? [S: okay] and, also for th- for the same as closing and you’d better have the conclusion, [S: hm] yes and, I think you need to know what is in your mind, but you need to express it, and that is what you are going to do in the conclusion okay? okay [S: uh- huh] you can summarize and say it in the conclusion and, I think uh it’s better if you write everything uh, if you summarize in each paragraph of the body begin- in the beginning of the body of each paragraph okay? it will make the make the organization clear oh [S: uh-huh] yes? okay (Jiu C; Office Hours Role Play presentation; S063A213)
Results: What is Directive Language?

- focuses on a main action (verb) with the addressee (you) as the agent (you should go, sometimes implicitly ‘Have a seat. I would take that one’)
- is often intensified or hedged (you really do need to: you might want to)
- often includes an obligatory modal or periphrastic modal or modal-like verb phrase (must, have to, got to, should, had better, need to, have got to, want to)
- a command (don’t get caught up, please spend a day in weekend to study)
- conditional, involving irrealis (what I would probably do, if you go over the lectures, you can do the homework)
- a let’s, how about or why don’t construction (let’s first go through: how about trying to find, why don’t we write the X)
- a verb, noun, or adjective that semantically indexes obligation
  - first person as subject with verb (I strongly advise that you)
  - it as subject with adjective/participle (It’s not necessary for you)
  - noun as subject or object (my suggestion is that)

Results: Modal & P-modal Constructions (selected)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>all learners</th>
<th>all experts</th>
<th>log-1</th>
<th>t vs. E</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>you can (unlit)</td>
<td>536</td>
<td>52 137</td>
<td>340</td>
<td>7.162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you had better</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>2 919</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you should</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>10 019</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>3.876</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you want you to</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0 875</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.479</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you don’t need to</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1 654</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>-5.148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you have to</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>5 150</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>-2.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you need to</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>3 955</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>6.968</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you would</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0 875</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>-4.779</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0 095</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>-45.528</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you want to (unlit)</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1 656</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>-7.584</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you have got to (ve gotta)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0 000</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you must</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0 584</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* A plus sign indicates learner success, while a minus sign indicates learner underuse in comparison to the experts. A log-likelihood greater than 3.84 indicates a p-value less than .05, and thus, a significant difference between learner and expert production of this construction. Statistical difference was not calculated for constructions whose combined experts/learner frequency were less than 1 per 10K.

Method: Contrastive Corpus Register Analysis

- Corpus register analysis (Biber, 2006)
- Contrastive interlanguage analysis (Granger, 2002) involves the quantitative comparison of usage data in a learner corpus with baseline data in a genre-comparable expert corpus
- Used with a variety of theoretical frameworks: genre theory (Upton & Connor, 2001), cognitive linguistics (Waara, 2004), Relevance Theory (Hasselgreen, 2002), developmental sequence theory (Housen, 2002), systemic-functional APPRAISAL theory (Flowerdew, 2003), and sociocultural theory (Belz, 2004)

Method:
1. Determined frequency of all DL constructions in the two corpora (L: learner office hours in ITAcorp; E: expert office hours in MICASE)
2. Eliminated combined frequencies of less than 1 per 10 000
3. Used log-likelihood statistical analysis to determine significant difference

Unit of Analysis: Directive Construction

- Directive construction: a social-functional device comprised of one or more separate, lexico-grammatical units that index directive illocutionary force. It contains at the minimum a core lexical device, which may be a modal or p-modal, directive vocabulary, or imperative. Peripherally, a directive construction may include the subject, usually a pronoun (e.g. ‘you’ or ‘we’), and often an adverbal adjunct, which may influence the illocutionary force or politeness of the directive.
- Similar to systemic-functional mood element, which contains the subject, finite, and mood adjunct of a given clause, and as such "carries the burden of the clause as an interactive element" (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004)
- Comparable to formulaic sequences or lexical bundles, but functionally based
- Concordant with constructional grammar approaches (Fillmore, Goldberg) and usage-based perspectives on language cognition and development (Langacker, Tomasello, Hopper)
Results: Directive Vocabulary & Imperative Indexicals (selected)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>construction</th>
<th>all learners</th>
<th>all experts</th>
<th>log-L E vs. E</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I suggest</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I recommend</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Indexicals (selected)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>indexical</th>
<th>all learners</th>
<th>all experts</th>
<th>log-L E vs. E</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>please...</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>don’t worry</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>than</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>don’t... (2)</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>let’s... (1)</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6.223</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(1) not including “see” (2) not including “worry”

Corpus Analysis: Results

- In office hours, ITAs use ‘you can’, ‘you had better’, ‘you should’, ‘I suggest’, ‘I recommend’, and ‘please’ significantly more frequently than experts.
- In office hours, experts use ‘you could’, ‘I would’, ‘you want to’, and ‘let’s’ significantly more frequently than learners.
- Adjunct analysis (not shown): learners use adjuncts, but they use both mitigators and intensifiers less frequently and from a smaller repertoire than experts.
- Learner use can be typified by the construction ‘I think you should’, while expert use by ‘you might want to’.

Politeness, Face, & Interaction

- Traditional (e.g. Brown & Levinson, 1987): binary, encoding/conduit model (polite/non-polite/impolite, positive vs. negative politeness)
- In contrast to these models, it may be that politeness and face are always in negotiation, ‘face’ is relational, interactional, and contextually emergent (Arundale’s Conjoint co-constituting model of communication)
- Other models: rapport vs. respect; connection face vs. separation face; involvement vs. independence (Scollon & Scollon, 1995; 2001)
- Multidimensional model (closeness <-> distance; hierarchy <-> equality) (Tannen, 1994): Western culture tends to equate distance w/ hierarchy, and closeness w/ equality, but these parameters are not necessarily on the same plane.

An Interactional Model of the Negotiation of Power through Directive Use
Instructional Directives Use & Negotiation of Power

- In instructional interaction, relational identities and distribution of power are dynamic, emergent, and continually negotiated through the use of directives.
- Instructional directives use is a means of institutional (situated) power reproduction (Locher, 2004; Wartenberg, 1990; Bourdieu, 1991).
- At the interpersonal level, a (T) director may appeal to or restrict the (S) directed's:
  - choice with some constructions (e.g. you must vs. you need to)
  - choice with adjuncts (e.g. you might want to vs. you really want to)
  - involvement with pronouns (e.g. exclusive vs. inclusive we, let's)
  - involvement with some constructions (e.g. I would or you want to)
  - knowledge of power source with explicit or implicit constructions (e.g. you have to vs. you must or I recommend vs. it is recommended).

Results Re-considered

- In comparison to experts, learners (ITAs):
  - make less use of involvement constructions that appeal to inclusion ('let's', 'we', 'I would', 'you want to')
  - make more use of choice constructions that restrict independence ('you had better', 'you should', 'I suggest', 'I recommend')
  - make less use of choice constructions that appeal to independence (mitigators)
- But, what does directive negotiation look like in actual, real-time interaction?

Genre Analysis

- Purpose: to balance corpus analysis of smaller lexico-grammatical items with consideration of interactional, emergent qualities of directive negotiation.
- At the textual level, directives are a genre move: office hours include openings, closings, topic ID, diagnosis, and directive moves.
- At the interpersonal level, negotiation occurs through framing and re-framing the directive with choice and involvement appeals.
- At the interactional level, negotiation occurs through framing and re-framing the directive with alignment moves, i.e. convergent or divergent student actions, whether past actions that are critiqued or praised, or future possibilities that are construed as undesirable or desirable.

Genre Analysis: Data Example

T: great, now um, you m, you might though i don't know i mean and this is not (directive begins) (choice-independence)
so important for the paper but, i think this introduction sounds really good. um, (choice-independence)
you, it's written really clearly and stuff. um, now i worry, whether you are (praise-convergence) (involvement-inclusion)
capturing by interviewing your grandmother, um, that you're capturing what people do in hawaii, or whether you're capturing an older, form of socializing. (future-convergence)
that still remains in hawaii especially among older people, um, so you might i it (critique-divergence) (choice-independence)
doesn't change your argument necessarily, but you might wanna qualify it in that (choice-independence) (directive finishes)
kinda way [S: ok you see what i mean?](involvement-inclusion)
Conclusions & Implications

- Directive language constructions include a variety of linguistic forms, including modals, adjuncts, pronouns, and irrealis forms.
- Directives index power and relational identities of the director and directed. They are negotiated dynamically in interaction.
- Int’l teaching assistants make less use of inclusive and independence constructions than expert teachers.
- Effective consultation and instruction may involve negotiation of choice (independence) and involvement (inclusion), but not one at the expense of the other. Similarly, they may also involve negotiation of both convergent and divergent alignment appeals.
- In discourse, directives are framed interpersonally with politeness (choice and involvement) appeals, and interactionally with alignment (convergence and divergence) appeals.
- From a constructional perspective (Ohara & Östman), a ‘genre’ like ‘Office Hours’ may be a conventionalized group of discourse pattern elements that emerge from directive construction use and negotiation.

Thank you

jonrein@email.arizona.edu

Presentation with references available after Aug 1 at: http://www.u.arizona.edu/~jonrein