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## 9. Discourse completion tasks

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**Abstract:** The present chapter examines Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs), a data elicitation method that generates large amounts of contextually varied and comparable cross-linguistic speech act data, used predominantly in cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics. It discusses different features of DCT design, including the formulation of scenarios, the incorporation of social variables and format choice. The chapter then reviews studies comparing DCTs to other data elicitation methods and to naturally occurring data. It shows that while the different data collection methods generate similar speech act realisation strategies, the reported differences – mainly regarding directness, mitigation, and politeness marking – are largely inconclusive, with the results depending on the speech acts and groups of speakers under study.

### 1. Introduction

The Discourse Completion Task (DCT) is probably the most widely used data collection instrument in cross-cultural pragmatics, a field of enquiry that compares different speech acts across languages, and in interlanguage pragmatics, which examines learners' pragmatic competence and development. What makes DCTs particularly valuable for these areas of investigation is that research aiming to establish culture-specific patterns in speech act realisation or the pragmatic features of a specific interlanguage needs to draw on large quantities of data, and the DCT is the only available data collection instrument that generates sufficiently large corpora of comparable, systematically varied speech act data. Since DCTs can be translated into any language and distributed to large groups of informants within a short period of time, they are the ideal instrument for the contrastive study of speech acts (Aston 1995: 62; Barron 2003: 85).

Although DCT responses do not fully resemble naturally occurring data, the administrative advantages make the DCT a valuable and effective data collection method (Johnston, Kasper and Ross 1998: 157; Billmyer and Varghese 2000: 521; Kasper 2000: 325; Barron 2003: 85), in particular for large-scale projects (Sasaki 1998: 479). DCTs can be designed to elicit multiple occurrences of any speech act across a variety of situations, thus documenting a wide range of semantic formulae by which a given speech act can be implemented (Beebe and Cummings 1996: 80; Johnston, Kasper and Ross 1998: 158; Kasper 2000: 325; Barron 2003: 84). This is particularly useful “when investigating languages which have not yet been

described pragmatically and for speech acts which have not been described in languages which are better documented” (Bardovi-Harlig 1999: 239). Accordingly, one of the main merits of DCT-based research is that it has generated a vast amount of cross-linguistic data and provided insights into the pragmatics of numerous languages and language varieties.

The next section of this chapter illustrates this by providing a brief overview of DCT studies that have been conducted in the areas of cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics. Section 3 discusses DCT design, with a focus on sociolinguistic variables (3.1.) and format choice (3.2.). Section 4 reviews studies comparing DCTs with other elicitation methods (4.1.) and naturally occurring data (4.2.), and section 5 concludes the chapter by evaluating the role of the DCT in contrastive pragmatic research.

## 2. The impact of the DCT

The largest and most influential DCT study to date, the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realisation Project (CCSARP), was conducted by an international team of linguists (Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper 1989). The project examined requests and apologies in five languages (Canadian French, Danish, German, Hebrew and English); with the last one represented by three varieties (American, Australian and British).

The framework developed in the CCSARP has been replicated in numerous speech act studies, resulting in a large body of comparable data from many more languages. Many DCT studies have followed the design of the project closely, and focused on requests and/or apologies. This was facilitated not only by replicating the CCSARP DCT – or a modified version thereof – but also by the availability of a detailed coding scheme for the two speech acts developed in the project.

As a result, the DCT has introduced many under-researched languages into the field of pragmatics, with studies analysing apologies and requests in South African Indian English (Bharuthram 2003), requests in Korean (Byon 2006) and apologies in Lombok Indonesian (Wouk 2006), as well as in Sudanese (Nureddeen 2008) and Tunisian Arabic (Jebahi 2011). Most DCT-based research, however, follows the cross-cultural design of the CCSARP, i. e. it compares different languages (mainly contrasting them with English), thus contributing to the debate on pragmatic universality vs. culture-specificity.

Apology studies have compared English with Hungarian (Suszczyńska 1994, 1999), Polish (Suszczyńska 1999, Ogiermann 2009a), Russian (Ogiermann 2008, 2009a), the South African variety of Setswana (Kasanga and Lwanga-Lumu 2007) and Jordanian Arabic (Bataineh and Bataineh 2008). Requests have not only been studied across languages such as French and Dutch (Van Mulken 1996) or English, German, Polish and Russian (Ogiermann 2009b), but have also been the subject of

study in variational pragmatics, where they have been contrasted across different varieties of English (e. g. Barron 2008), German (Warga 2008) and Spanish (Placencia 2008) *inter alia*.

Apart from apologies and requests, DCTs have been used to investigate a number of other speech acts, with the most popular ones being refusals, e. g. in Korean and American English (Kwon 2004) and Mexican Spanish and American English (Félix-Brasdefer 2008). There are also studies of compliments, e. g. Mulo Farenkia's variational study of Cameroon and Canadian French (2012), and compliment responses, e. g. comparing Mandarin with Australian English (Tang and Zhang 2009).

Another area where DCTs have been extensively used is the field of interlanguage pragmatics, which is closely related to cross-cultural pragmatics, in that interlanguage studies typically elicit three sets of data, allowing for a comparison between the native and the target language, as well as an examination of the pragmatic features of the interlanguage. Apart from examining learners' pragmatic transfer, thus documenting their difficulties in bringing across the intended illocutionary force of a given speech act, interlanguage studies using DCTs have also examined pragmatic development, albeit almost exclusively via a cross-sectional design (but see Barron 2003).

As with cross-cultural studies, apologies and requests are among the most researched speech acts in interlanguage pragmatics. DCT studies have examined apologies produced by Thai (Bergman and Kasper 1993), Jordanian (Bataineh and Bataineh 2006), and Catalan (Sabate i Dalmau and Curell i Gotor 2007) learners of English. Some other studies involved a wider range of participants, such as Al-Zumor's study (2011), which examined English apologies produced by learners from five different Arab countries. While English continues to be the most researched target language, there are also studies of apologies offered by Americans in Russian (Shardakova 2005), Austrians in French (Warga and Schöhlberger 2007) and by English learners of Greek (Bella 2014).

Request studies have investigated the pragmatic competence of English learners from countries as varied as the Netherlands (Hendriks 2008), Spain/Basque country (Cenoz 2003), Turkey (Otcu and Zeyrek 2008), Greece (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2009), Iran (Eslami and Noora 2008), Jordan (Al-Ali and Alawneh 2010), and Germany and Japan (Woodfield 2008). Marti (2006) examined pragmatic transfer in Turkish requests produced by Turkish/German bilinguals and Byon (2004) analysed American speakers' requests in Korean. Pinto (2005) studied the acquisition of requests of English learners of Spanish, and Bella's work on requests (2012a, 2012b) examines the pragmatic development of learners of Greek from a variety of L1 backgrounds.

Barron (2003) conducted a longitudinal study of Irish speakers' acquisition of German, focusing on requests, offers and refusals. Interlanguage studies using DCTs to investigate refusals have also looked at Iranian (Allami and Naeimi 2011)

and Japanese (Beebe, Takahashi and Uliss-Weltz 1990) EFL learners. The pragmatic competence of Japanese speakers of English was also studied on the basis of complaints (Nakabachi 1996), as was that of Korean English learners (Murphy and Neu 1996) and learners of Hebrew (Olshtain and Weinbach 1993).<sup>1</sup>

While the above review allows only a small glimpse into the wealth of DCT studies and the broad variety of languages they have investigated, it illustrates the international scope of the fields of cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics.

### 3. Designing a DCT

The DCT evolved from discourse completion exercises developed by Levenston and Blum (1978), which were designed for the study of L2 lexical acquisition. One of the advantages of these exercises was that they enabled researchers to compare the performance of learners and native speakers or learners at different proficiency levels. Participants completing the exercises were instructed to fill in a blank with *one* word. The provided “discourse” was designed “to restrict as far as possible the number of acceptable alternatives” (1978: 5) and consisted of one or maximally two sentences.

Adapting this data collection instrument to investigate speech act realisation (Blum-Kulka 1982) involved expanding the “discourse” to provide more context and elicit complete conversational turns. Accordingly, DCTs consist of a number of scenarios<sup>2</sup> (typically between 8 and 12) describing different situations to which the participants are asked to react, e. g.:

*You are on your way to work but your car won't start. You see your neighbour get into his. He notices you and waves, so you decide to say ...*

The length of the scenarios varies across studies, with longer ones providing more contextualisation and shorter ones having the advantage of being easier to process. DCTs with particularly detailed descriptions of the scenarios (and more space for responses!) are bound to produce longer responses, but their length does not seem to affect speech act realisation (Billmyer and Varghese 2000).

The DCT usually contains instructions requesting the participants to respond spontaneously, without much thinking or to write down the first thing that comes to mind. There are, of course, limitations to how spontaneous one can be when

<sup>1</sup> For an extensive list of cross-cultural and interlanguage speech act studies, including many using DCTs, see the webpage of the Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition: <http://carla.umn.edu/speechacts/>.

<sup>2</sup> Strictly speaking, each scenario constitutes an individual Discourse Completion Task, which is perhaps why alternative terms have been proposed to refer to this data collection instrument, such as Discourse Completion Test or production questionnaire.

instructed to respond to hypothetical situations in written form. The spontaneity and authenticity of the responses are also likely to be affected by the length of the scenarios and the amount of detail to be processed.

In general, researchers agree that completing a written task involves different cognitive processes than speaking (Cohen and Olshtain 1994: 148). It requires participants to “recall pragmatic information from memory and report rather than use it” (Barron 2003: 85). One of the main arguments against DCTs has, therefore, been that the responses do not necessarily reflect what the speakers would say if they found themselves in the presented situations, but rather what they *think* they would say (Aston 1995: 62; Schneider 2011: 18). This, however, does not necessarily invalidate DCT findings, given that the aim of cross-cultural pragmatic studies is to establish general, culture-specific patterns of language use. Whether the participants would use exactly the same expressions once they found themselves in the described situations is not crucial as long as they regard their responses as socially and culturally appropriate.

### 3.1. Incorporating sociolinguistic variables

With the focus of cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatic studies being on *pragmalinguistics* (the linguistic formulation of illocutions) as well as *sociopragmatics* (their contextual variation) (Leech 1983), DCT scenarios are designed to contain certain social variables. Correlating these variables with preferences for particular speech act features can establish how they impact on strategy choice and politeness marking (Barron 2003: 85, Schauer and Adolphs 2006: 131). In order to investigate their impact on speech act realisation, the variables under study are varied systematically and, ideally, those not examined are kept constant across scenarios.

The contextual variables that have been examined in cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatic studies are mainly those proposed by Brown and Levinson ([1978]1987), i. e. social distance, social power and the degree of imposition; as well as sex and (rarely) age. Social distance and power define the relationship between two interlocutors. In the context of a DCT, the relationship is between the character (the hearer) described in a given scenario and the participant filling in the DCT (the speaker).

Social distance (D) has been defined as a symmetrical variable which indicates the degree of familiarity and frequency of interaction between two interlocutors. In DCT studies, this variable is generally represented on three levels: strangers (high D), acquaintances (medium D) and friends (low D). Social power (P), on the other hand, is an asymmetrical variable indicative of the degree to which a speaker can impose his or her will on their interlocutor. As with social distance, this allows for three constellations, with the interlocutors being either of equal status (S=H), the DCT character being more powerful than the participant (S<H) or vice versa (S>H).

Accordingly, a DCT consisting of eight scenarios could contain four situations featuring status equal interlocutors (S=H) who know each other well (low D), resulting in interactions between friends, and four situations combining high social distance (high D) with equal status, which is generally assumed between strangers (see Ogiermann 2009a: 83 for further discussion).

Assigning the same sex to all characters and keeping the degree of imposition constant across all scenarios can then render results showing the impact of social distance on speech act realisation, while distributing hearer sex symmetrically across the two types of scenarios (see table 1) can provide additional insights into how sex influences strategy choice. The more scenarios per category are included in the DCT, the more reliable the findings regarding the impact of social variables on strategy choice.

*Table 1.* Distribution of social variables across scenarios

	Social Distance	Social Power	Hearer Sex
Scenario 1	[low D]	[S=H]	Male
Scenario 2	[low D]	[S=H]	Male
Scenario 3	[low D]	[S=H]	Female
Scenario 4	[low D]	[S=H]	Female
Scenario 5	[high D]	[S=H]	Male
Scenario 6	[high D]	[S=H]	Male
Scenario 7	[high D]	[S=H]	Female
Scenario 8	[high D]	[S=H]	Female

While the identity of the characters and their relationship with the participant are described in the scenarios, information about the participants, such as their age and sex are usually among the biographic information elicited through the DCT, along with their native language. DCTs used in interlanguage studies also contain questions regarding the participants' proficiency in the tested L2. Demographic information on the participants can thus serve for further comparisons, for instance establishing differences between responses provided by male and female participants or across different proficiency levels.

The vast majority of subjects in DCT studies are university students, and in most studies they retain their identity when responding to the scenarios. This generally restricts the choice of scenarios to students' everyday life, though it also has the advantage of increasing comparability across studies. However, since the chosen situations need to be realistic, the power constellation (S>H) is under-researched; students do not often adopt powerful roles so few studies use scenarios where the described characters are of a lower status than the participants.

Some studies require the participants to adopt a range of different roles. For instance, in the CCSARP, the students were asked to act out the role of a professor, police officer, waiter and even characters of both sexes (Rintell and Mitchell 1989: 252). The extent to which students can actually reproduce the pragmatic features of these people's speech will vary, but generally they are likely to resort to stereotypes, which reduces the authenticity of the results. Ultimately, "if social roles were interchangeable and anybody could act like anybody else, there would be little need for sociolinguistic research" (Ogiermann 2009a: 77–78).

Another problematic aspect of DCT design is that although experimental data collection methods allow for controlled variation of contextual factors, in the end, all the situations are different and include additional factors influencing strategy choice. Clearly, the most reliable way of determining the variable responsible for the use of particular linguistic items would be by using different versions of the same scenario, varied by one variable only, for instance: apologising for stepping on a female stranger's, male stranger's, and a female friend's and a male friend's foot. This, however, would give away the design of the study and the responses could easily become mechanical.

Although this could be resolved by distributing the four scenarios over as many versions of the DCT, to be distributed to parallel groups of participants, this is not practiced in cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics. What makes such a design problematic is that the interactions we have with our interlocutors tend to reflect the kind of relationships we have with them. Apologies between strangers, for instance, are generally limited to space offences; and there are things that we would only request from people we are close with. Hence, although using the same scenario while varying one contextual variable would increase the comparability and reliability of the findings, it would also considerably restrict the range of situations that could be examined.

Furthermore, a careful analysis of responses to DCT scenarios shows that the sociolinguistic variables incorporated into them are often insufficient when it comes to interpreting the described context and that additional factors may impact on how participants respond as well. The impact of P and D<sup>3</sup> can be affected by other situational factors; interacting with one's boss in a professional setting will be different from talking to him or her privately. Formal settings will differ from informal ones, private from public ones, and even third parties present during an interaction could make a huge difference to how we express ourselves. The par-

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<sup>3</sup> It has also been argued that the variables of social distance or power are too broad. For instance, it has been suggested that social distance is made up of affect/liking as well as familiarity (Slugoski and Turnbull 1988; Brown and Gilman 1989). Interacting with somebody who we know and like well will clearly be different from talking to somebody we know well but dislike.



ticipants are also likely to be guided by their interpretations of certain situations, based on their previous experiences in similar contexts.

Ultimately, it may not always be possible to fully determine which situational factors have brought about the use of a particular strategy or politeness formula. Therefore, DCT scenarios need to be carefully designed and subjected to thorough pilot testing before data can be collected – and analyses correlating particular sociolinguistic categories with strategy choice need to carefully examine the responses and look beyond the incorporated factors.

### 3.2. Choosing a DCT format

While all DCTs consist of a number of scenarios in response to which the participants are expected to produce different realisations of the speech act(s) under investigation, the exact format of the scenarios varies across studies. DCT scenarios can be open, simply presenting the participant with a situation (e. g. Beebe and Takahashi 1989; Ogiermann 2009a), often including a prompt or an initiating line of dialogue in direct speech (e. g. Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford 1993), or they can be closed, i. e. providing the hearer's response to the speech act to be elicited (e. g. Blum-Kulka 1982, Blum-Kulka 1989). Some researchers have used longer dialogues, with multiple slots to be filled in by the participant (e. g. Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz 1990), while others asked the participants to construct an entire dialogue between two speakers (e. g. Barron 2003; Schneider 2008).

Hence, DCT scenarios minimally consist of a description of a particular situation, such as:

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*Your flatmate is about to go to the grocer's and asks you if you need anything. You realise that you have run out of toothpaste.*

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This scenario specifies the relationship between the speakers (flatmates: S=H, low D), describes the situation (flatmate goes shopping, participant needs toothpaste), and contains an offer inviting a request, i. e. the speech act under investigation. Adding a prompt, such as "What do you say?" can provide additional guidance on what is expected from the participants, e. g. reminding them that a *verbal* turn is required. The addition of "What do you say to her?", on the other hand, also specifies the hearer's sex.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The character's sex can also be made explicit by including a pronoun in the description (e. g. "and she asks you"), though this is more likely to be overlooked than a pronoun at the end of the description. Some studies have also used first names (e. g. "your flatmate Fiona") to mark the sex of the hearer.

DCTs used across different studies tend to differ in terms of the explicitness of the instructions they provide. While some researchers prefer not to reveal the speech act under study, with merely instructing the participants to “react” (e. g. Ogiermann 2009a), others provide much more specific information. In Barron’s study (2003: 90), for instance, the participants were explicitly told to produce a refusal. The rationale behind this was that Barron was interested in eliciting refusals to offers, and not making the focus explicit may have resulted in some participants accepting rather than refusing (see e. g. Gass and Houck 1996). Hence, more explicit instructions may be needed in studies aiming to elicit a specific type of a reactive speech act, e. g. a dispreferred rather than a preferred response.

Whether to make the aim of the study explicit or not is also often a decision between ensuring that sufficient instances of the studied speech act are elicited vs. keeping the data maximally authentic. Clearly, using prompts such as “How do you apologise?” or “How would you complain?” presumes that the participants would indeed want to apologise or complain in the described situations.

Those stressing the importance of authenticity insist that the responses should not be unnecessarily constrained, by allowing the participants to produce whatever response they see fit, including a non-verbal response, as well as to opt out (e. g. Eisenstein and Bodman 1986, see also Bonikowska 1988). Leaving it open for participants to opt out may require asking them to provide a reason for doing so, in order to be able to distinguish genuine instances of opting out from scenarios being left blank for other reasons. This information can generate valuable meta-pragmatic data, allowing additional insights into participants’ politeness norms.

Guidance on how to respond can also be provided indirectly, by embedding the turn to be elicited in a dialogue. The use of direct speech following the scenario has the advantage of not only clarifying what is required, but also considerably reduces the risk of participants *describing* what they would say or do instead. In studies of rejections of advice (Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford 1993; Bardovi-Harlig 1999), for instance, the advice to be rejected was given in the form of an initiating turn by the rejection recipient:

*Your advisor suggests that you take a course which you would rather not take because you think that it will be too difficult for you.*

*Advisor: If you are registered in our program you must take Syntax.*

*You say:*

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(Bardovi-Harlig 1999: 242)

The inclusion of conversational turns preceding the turn to be elicited helps prompt the targeted reactive speech act, but it may not be feasible if the speech act under study is an initiating one. On the other hand, not all reactive speech acts require a verbal first pair part (FPP). Apologies, for instance, may but do not have to be preceded by a (verbal) complaint. The complaint becomes superfluous when both

parties are aware of the offence and the offender recognises the need for an apology. More importantly, in many situations, a complaint would not only sound unnatural but may even make the offender less inclined to apologise (see Owen 1983: 51).

In the “classic” DCT used in the CCSARP, the scenarios were constrained even more, as they were followed by an initiating and a closing line of dialogue (also referred to as a *rejoinder*):

*A student has borrowed a book from her teacher, which she promised to return today. When meeting her teacher, however, she realizes that she forgot to bring it along.*  
Teacher: *Miriam, I hope you brought the book I lent you.*

Miriam: \_\_\_\_\_

Teacher: *OK, but please remember it next week.*

(Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper 1989: 14)

Since the final turn expresses agreement, indirectly accepting the apology to be elicited, it does not allow the participant to opt out or produce a different speech act. When the apology has been accepted “it seems logical that the speaker has previously offered an apology and/or assumed responsibility for the offense” (Rose 1992: 53). Hence, a design like the one used in the CCSARP can produce findings on how people apologise in different languages but not whether they do or do not apologise in comparable situations.

Some DCT studies have expanded the dialogue even further, by including several turns requiring the respondents to provide two answers. This design is more likely to be used for the elicitation of speech acts that tend to evolve over several turns. Invitations or offers, for instance, when rejected, may be reiterated to provide the hearer with another opportunity to accept. The DCT used in Beebe, Takahashi and Uliss-Weltz’s study of offer refusals (1990), for instance, consisted of a four turn dialogue, with two offers and two slots made available for refusals.

*You are at a friend’s house for lunch.*

Friend: *How about another piece of cake?*

You: \_\_\_\_\_

Friend: *Come on, just a little piece?*

You: \_\_\_\_\_

(Beebe, Takahashi and Uliss-Weltz 1990: 71)

This design requires the participants to produce at least one refusal, not leaving them the choice to accept in the first turn. While the second turn could result in acceptance of the offer, a study focusing on refusals is likely to explicitly instruct the participants to refuse the second offer as well.

While providing an extended dialogue as the one above acknowledges the interactive character of speech acts such as refusals, this design does not necessarily

allow for a cross-linguistic comparison of their sequential organisation. Previous research has shown that the number of turns involved in accepting an offer is highly culture-specific and can range from prompt acceptance, e. g. in north European contexts, to extended rituals of rejecting and re-offering, in particular in Arabic-speaking contexts (see e. g. Grainger, Kerkam, Mansor and Mills 2015). A DCT scenario with two offer turns, therefore, while having the advantage of eliciting two instances of refusing, is unable to capture the most salient culture-specific feature of offer-refusal sequences, namely their length and the amount of negotiation required to make an acceptance acceptable in a particular socio-cultural context.

The constraints imposed by the format used by Beebe, Takahashi and Uliss-Weltz have led Barron (2003) to develop an alternative format, the so-called Free Discourse Completion Task (FDCT), which “requires respondents to write both sides of an open role play” (2003: 90). In Barron’s study both offers and refusals were elicited by providing a blank space of eight centimetres and asking the participants to write as much as they deemed necessary (within the space provided). This format then captures the sequential organisation of offers and refusals as it requires the participants “to interact with an imaginary interlocutor until an appropriate compromise is found” (2003: 91).

Schneider (2008, 2011) adopts a similar approach in that his Dialogue Production Task (DPT) requires respondents to adopt the role of both interactants. His work lies within variational pragmatics and the DPT has been employed to compare the ways in which Irish, English and American speakers engage in small talk when meeting a stranger at a party. One of the examples he provides runs as follows:

- 1 A: This party is real cool, don’t you think?
- 2 B: Yeah, it rocks!
- 3 C: What’s your name?
- 4 B: I’m called Joan, what’s yours?
- 5 A: I’m Dorothy, but you can call me Dotty.
- 6 B: Anyway I’ll maybe see you later.
- 7 A: Bye.

(Schneider 2008: 108)

This design, as well as the choice of a longer, more flexible and yet highly recurrent interactional unit, allows Schneider to demonstrate that while speakers of all varieties of English resort to the same range of moves, there are systematic differences in the order in which they appear.

However, while the DPT has the advantage of capturing the sequential properties of speech acts and eliciting schematic knowledge about entire speech events, it moves away from the concept of a discourse *completion* task. As Schneider (2011) himself states, the creation of dialogues is comparable to (and requires the skills necessary for!) playwriting. It seems, therefore, that the high language proficiency

required to perform such tasks makes this instrument unsuitable for most interlanguage pragmatic studies.

And while the DPT comes closer to capturing the ways in which naturally occurring conversations evolve than does a DCT, it requires imagining several turns in advance, while turns in naturally occurring conversations evolve locally, with speakers re-assessing the context at every turn and adjusting their responses accordingly.

The above overview has illustrated that the different DCT formats that have been used in cross-cultural, interlanguage and variational pragmatics reflect the needs of the particular studies employing them. The choice of the most suitable format will depend on the type of speech act under investigation; whether it is an initiating (e. g. request) or a reactive speech act (e. g. refusal), whether it is formulaic (e. g. thanking) or involves a wide range of formulations (e. g. complaint), and whether it is generally performed in one turn (e. g. apology) or likely to be negotiated over several turns (e. g. offer-refusal sequences).

Those who place emphasis on eliciting spontaneous, maximally authentic responses will prefer vague instructions asking for people's reactions, whatever they are. They will also prefer open-ended scenarios over closed ones, given that closing turns create an artificial setting which provides responses to turns that have not yet been produced. They are also more likely to require the informants to react to the scenarios as they would, rather than adopting different roles, so as to elicit responses reflecting their politeness norms.

However, while this flexibility helps increase the authenticity of the data, it inadvertently reduces its comparability. Among the elicited responses, there may be other speech acts, instances of description of non-verbal behaviour and opting out. Keeping the instructions explicit and restricting the respondents' choices, on the other hand, not only produces more instances of the desired speech act, but has also been shown to facilitate the task for learners (e. g. Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford 1993). Hence, more structured DCTs may be the better option for interlanguage pragmatic studies. In fact, there is an extensive pool of literature comparing different types of DCTs and DCTs with other data elicitation instruments, which shows that non-native speakers' responses tend to be more affected by the different elicitation methods than native ones.

#### **4. Methodological comparisons**

##### **4.1. Studies comparing different types of DCTs and DCTs with other elicitation methods**

Research revealing that the different DCT formats used in cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics affect the findings has triggered an abundance of publications

comparing different DCT formats, as well as DCTs with other elicitation methods, such as oral role plays or multiple choice questionnaires.

Overall, the studies report a similar use of speech act strategies and mitigation across the methods, though differences have been found in length (with open formats generally eliciting longer responses), level of directness and the range of strategies. Comparisons of different DCT formats include Rose's (1992) study, which compares requests elicited with an open DCT with those elicited by means of a DCT with a hearer response, and Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford's study (1993), which compares DCTs with and without an initiating line of dialogue used to elicit rejections of advice.

While Rose found that both formats elicited very similar results (in terms of the choice of strategies and level of directness), the only difference being that the open format produced longer responses, the differences established by Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford were more striking. The DCT with an initiating turn of dialogue not only elicited longer responses, but they also contained more oral features – and the initiating turn seemed to facilitate the task for non-native participants (see also Rintell and Mitchell 1989, and Johnston, Kasper and Ross 1998). A crucial difference between these two studies, however, is that the former examines an initiating speech act, where the provided second pair part (SPP) confirms that it has been successful, whereas the latter looks at a reactive speech act, where the provision of the FPP helps contextualise the refusal to be elicited.

The impact of this difference has also been confirmed by Johnston, Kasper and Ross (1998), who compared the realisations of complaints, requests and apologies in three different DCT formats: open-ended, including a preferred, and a dispreferred SPP. Not surprisingly, they found that apologies “were most strongly affected by rejoinder type” (1998: 170), with a dispreferred uptake eliciting responses downgrading the offence.

Rose's later study (1994) compared Japanese speakers' use and perception of requests, using open-ended DCTs and multiple choice questionnaires (MCQ). It showed that the DCT responses were more direct than the MCQ responses, where the participants chose opting out and hinting more often. This led Rose to suggest that the DCT may not be suitable for studying speech acts in non-Western contexts. The results were confirmed in a follow-up study (Rose and Ono 1995), which also showed a reverse trend for speakers of American English, who were less direct on the DCT and more direct on the MCQ.

Hinkel (1997) conducted a similar comparison between advice elicited via DCTs and MCQs from American native speakers and Chinese speakers of English. Her results, however, are diametrically opposed to those established by Rose and Ono as she found her non-native speakers to be more direct in the MCQ than on the DCT; and the native speakers to be more direct on the DCT than the MCQ.

Comparisons between DCTs and oral role plays (Rintell and Mitchell 1989; Sasaki 1998, Yuan 2001; Félix-Brasdefer 2008, this volume), on the other hand,

all show that both instruments elicit similar expressions, but that oral responses tend to be longer and to contain a wider range of speech act strategies. Not surprisingly, oral role play responses have also been found to contain more features of spoken language. Written requests have been found to be more direct (Rintell and Mitchell 1989) while written refusals turned out to be more polite than oral ones (Félix-Brasdefer 2008, this volume).

On the whole, these methodological studies confirm that the choice and design of a DCT need to be adjusted to both the speech act and the groups of speakers under study. While this research has shown that written DCT responses are overall very similar to their oral counterparts, the comparisons with MCQs need to be treated with caution, given that MCQs test the perception and not production of speech acts.

#### 4.2. Studies comparing DCTs with naturally occurring data

Cross-cultural and interlanguage studies based on DCT data work on the assumption that DCTs elicit spoken language “indirectly through the written mode” (Sasaki 1998: 458); and while it is simply not possible for elicited, written responses to fully resemble naturally occurring talk, it has been shown that DCT data “accurately reflect the content expressed in natural speech” (Beebe and Cummings 1996: 75).

While there is no doubt that language use is best studied by analysing actual speech, it is also evident that the large quantities of comparable speech act data that can be obtained by means of a DCT could never be derived from recordings of naturally occurring data. It has been argued that “with exception of highly routinised and standardized speech events, sufficient instances of cross-linguistically and cross-culturally comparable data are difficult to collect through observation of authentic conversation” (Kasper and Dahl 1991: 245).

Studies comparing DCT responses with naturally occurring data are different from the methodological comparisons discussed above, since they are contrasting two types of data typically used in different disciplines and for different purposes. Most of these studies build on the authors’ previous research based on naturally occurring data. Collecting some additional DCT data related to the original project enables the researchers to conduct a methodological comparison. These comparisons tend to focus on features of natural data that are missing in the DCT data, thus illustrating the shortcomings of DCTs and their limited potential to represent naturally occurring conversations.

Although the main strength of the DCT is the amount of contextually varied data it can generate, these studies use relatively low numbers of participants and most of them only one DCT scenario in their comparisons. Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig (1992), for instance, compared rejections produced during 39 academic advising sessions with rejections elicited via a DCT, which was distributed to 24 participants (13 native and 11 non-native speakers). Golato (2003), on the

other hand, used the naturally occurring compliment sequences collected for her PhD thesis (2005) to design a DCT, allowing her to compare DCT compliment responses to spoken ones. The 50 tokens of compliment responses identified in 31 hours of recordings were contrasted with 20 DCTs.

Beebe and Cummings's study (1996) compared request refusals produced during eleven phone calls to an equal number of DCT responses. Similarly, Maíz-Arévalo (2015) collected disagreements from students engaging in an online group work assignment and derived one DCT scenario from this data. The 10 participants who responded to it produced 15 instances of disagreements.

While other researchers involved higher numbers of participants, they still asked them to respond to only one scenario taken over from their naturally occurring data. Bou Franch and Lorenzo-Dus (2008), for instance, collected 60 student email requests directed at lecturers (30 in Spanish and 30 in English) and picked one of the recurrent requests to create a DCT scenario to which then 58 Spanish and 58 British speakers responded. Similarly, Economidou-Kogetsidis (2013) used requests for information received by a flight reservation centre to construct a DCT scenario which was then distributed to 86 people.

The most comprehensive study comparing relatively large amounts of DCT data to other types of speech act data is Turnbull's (2001) methodological comparison of request refusals derived from both written and oral DCTs, role plays, experiments, and naturally-occurring data. While the naturally occurring refusals were produced during 113 phone calls, the DCTs were distributed to 80 students. The telephone numbers used for the phone calls were provided by research assistants who obtained them from students who had expressed a general interest in participating in an experiment. The students whose refusals were used in Turnbull's study were, therefore, strictly speaking not aware of the study they were taking part in – and they were only informed retrospectively that they had been recorded.

Turnbull propagates the use of pragmatic elicitation techniques that generate data “in situations in which researchers can manipulate variables in the testing of hypotheses and speakers can talk freely and spontaneously without awareness that their talk is the object of study” (2001: 31). However, while his phone call data come close to fulfilling all these criteria, the procedure employed was not fully ethical, and while it has worked in the context of request refusals, it is difficult to see how it could be used to elicit other speech acts.

On the whole, the above discussed studies have confirmed that DCTs and naturally occurring data contain similar semantic formulae (e. g. Eisenstein and Bodman 1993; Beebe and Cummings 1996; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2013). DCT responses were found to be longer (Golato 2005) or shorter (Beebe and Cummings 1996), depending on the speech act under study. In some studies they were more formulaic (Golato 2005; Maíz-Arévalo 2015), in others more direct and less polite (Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig 1992), and in yet others the two types of data were similar in terms of directness and lexical modification (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2013).



In comparison to e-mail messages, DCT requests were described as bare (Bou Franch and Lorenzo-Dus 2008: 261) because they lacked the opening and closing sequences found in emails; though this was perhaps to be expected since the DCT scenario did not request the respondents to write an email, instead eliciting face-to-face requests. Some researchers found a smaller range of linguistic expressions in the DCT data (e. g. Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig 1992; Maíz-Arévalo 2015). However, since the numbers of DCT responses collected in these studies were rather low and the scenarios chosen for the DCT represented only a subset of the contexts found in the natural data, it is not surprising that the DCT responses contained a narrower range of linguistic formulae.

The main shortcoming repeatedly reported in relation to DCT data is that they lack the interactional and prosodic features found in naturally occurring conversations. Admittedly, written data cannot convey prosodic (e. g. pitch, intonation) or kinesic (e. g. gesture, facial expressions, posture) features, which can be crucial to the interpretation of the responses. It has been argued that only when working with video-recorded data “every element of the interaction (hesitation, laughter, silences, eye-contact, and body-movements) may be incorporated in the analysis” (Golato 2003: 111).

The type of analysis described by Golato is conducted predominantly in the discipline of Conversation Analysis, which takes a qualitative approach and examines relatively small amounts of data in great detail. Cross-cultural pragmatics, on the other hand, takes a quantitative approach and analyses large amounts of data in the search of general patterns.

Likewise, that a written data collection method designed to elicit one-turn-responses lacks interactive features (but see the DPT) should not come as a surprise. Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford’s comparison of recordings of advising sessions and DCT data on rejections has led them to conclude that DCTs do not “promote the turn-taking and negotiation strategies found in natural conversations” (1992: 47). DCTs have been declared to “obscure the sequential and co-constructed nature of talk” (Turnbull 2001: 35) and to be inappropriate for studies of “interactional rules and patterns of actual language use” (Golato 2003: 110).

Cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatic studies, however, do not study interactional rules. Speech act studies, even if they are based on interactional data, “isolate the focal speech act from its interactional environment, submit its linguistic design to scrutiny, and relate the identified meaning and form conventions to discourse-external context factors” (Kasper 2004: 125).

What also needs to be considered is that speech acts differ in the extent to which they are likely to be performed over several conversational turns; which makes the DCT suitable for studying some speech acts more than others. Refusals, for instance, have been shown to consist of “multi-turn responses involving negotiation, hedging and even reversal” (Houck and Gass 1996: 47). Compliments, in contrast, are “most frequently packaged as single-turn utterances with a simple,

short, highly formulaic structure” (Kasper 2000: 319), and apologies “constitute a complete segment of a speech event” (Coulmas 1981: 86).

As the above discussion has shown, research comparing DCTs with naturally occurring data tends to be biased towards the latter by stressing the disadvantages of DCTs and leaving their strengths unmentioned. What is generally taken for granted is that the DCT has been developed to generate large amounts of comparable data allowing for generalisations about speech act realisation patterns across groups – something that could not be accomplished with the naturally occurring data discussed.

While DCTs can elicit any speech act across a wide range of contexts, their frequency and predictability in naturally occurring talk varies greatly, which is why speech act studies based on recordings of authentic conversations tend to be restricted to a particular situation in which the speech act under investigation is likely to recur. Aston’s contrastive study of thanking in English and Italian (1995), for instance, is based on data collected during service encounters, with his insights into the speech act of thanking being restricted to this very specific setting. He admits that because of “their lack of situational variation” recordings of natural conversations appear “excessively restricted and routine” (Aston 1995: 64) in comparison to experimentally elicited data.

While CA studies examine the sequential organisation of talk, including that of speech acts, as, for instance, Robinson’s (2004) work on apologies, the focus has overwhelmingly been on the structural properties of “responses” to speech acts, such as compliment responses (Pomerantz 1978) or agreements and disagreements with assessments (Pomerantz 1984). An interest in the linguistic forms used to implement speech acts only developed in the late 2000s (with the notable exception of Wootton 1981, 1997), which saw the publication of numerous CA studies on requests in both institutional and everyday settings. The fact that the vast majority of these studies focus on requests reflects the ubiquitous and recurrent nature of this speech act. The available CA research covers a wide range of languages, such as Swedish (Lindström 2005), Danish (Heinemann 2006), British English (Curl and Drew 2008; Craven and Potter 2010; Antaki and Kent 2012), American English (Mandelbaum 2014), Italian (Rossi 2012) and Polish (Zinken and Ogiermann 2013). While most of them contrast the use of two request forms in the analysed settings, cross-linguistic CA speech act studies are exceedingly rare (but see Zinken and Ogiermann 2013).

What does seem to emerge from these studies, however, is that in comparison to research on requests conducted in cross-cultural pragmatics, the requests analysed in CA studies exhibit an overall higher level of directness than the requests elicited by means of DCTs, which show a very strong preference for conventional indirectness across all languages examined. This is, however, likely to be related to the types of requests examined in the two disciplines, with many of the CA request studies looking at low imposition requests for immediate actions, such as requests

for objects to be passed at the dinner table, or produced during collaborative activities where the outcome benefits the speaker and the hearer alike. DCT scenarios, on the other hand, almost exclusively depict requests solely benefiting the speaker and requesting favours that lie in the future.

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

As the above discussion has shown, the DCT has not only been extensively applied to the study of a wide range of speech acts in numerous languages, it has also been subject to scrutiny, variation, comparison with other methods, and ample criticism.

The comparisons between different data elicitation methods are largely inconclusive, with the results varying according to the speech act examined as well as the participants' linguistic backgrounds and proficiency levels. There does seem to be a general agreement, however, that DCT responses do contain a similar range of linguistic expressions to those found in other types of data. With the focus in cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics being on patterns of speech act realisation, the ability to elicit such realisations is the main criterion in choosing a data collection method. The DCT not only provides this, but also fulfils these disciplines' requirement for large amounts of contextually varied and comparative data – as no other data collection instrument does.

Even though DCT responses may differ from actual language performance, they represent “a participant's accumulated experience within a given setting” (Golato 2003: 92), and it has been argued that “it is precisely this more stereotyped aspect of speech behavior that we need for cross-cultural comparability” (Blum-Kulka 1989: 13). It is by “abstracting away the uncontrollable accidentalities and often inaccessible idiosyncrasies of actual performance” (Schneider 2011: 30) that the data become maximally comparable. Importantly, cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatic studies do not study prosodic features, non-verbal or sequential properties of speech acts; and research that does would never use DCT data.

What has perhaps negatively affected these two fields of enquiry is the perceived ease with which DCT data can be collected and analysed, resulting in a large body of “quick” studies which often do not go beyond quantifying and comparing speech act strategies. Designing a robust DCT is a laborious and time-consuming process. In order to generate valid and reliable findings, the construction process should start with observations of real-life interactions (see e. g. Eisenstein and Bodman 1993), also ensuring that they are likely to occur in all languages examined, and extensive pilot testing, ensuring that the incorporated variables have the desired impact.

The potential of the DCT to assemble large corpora of speech act data should be fully exploited, so that the results are indeed representative and generalisable. The quantitative analysis should ideally be backed up by statistical testing (see Ogiermann and Saßenroth (2012) for an overview of statistical tests used in contrastive

pragmatics), and complemented with qualitative analysis and careful interpretation of the findings within the relevant theoretical framework.

What complicates things is that the theoretical frameworks underlying cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatic studies have also met with ample criticism over the last few decades. Speech act theory as well as politeness theory have both been criticised for equating linguistic expressions with functions and overemphasising the role of the speaker. Separating the analysed speech acts from their sequential context (or placing them in a reduced context created within a DCT) means that the analysis cannot take into account the hearers' uptake, thus relying solely on the linguistic content produced by the speaker. While this is untenable from a CA perspective, where meaning is validated by the following turn, recent politeness research has also moved away from equating linguistic structures with politeness (e. g. Watts 2003). Politeness is increasingly viewed as something that is co-constructed and negotiable, with the focus shifting towards the hearer's evaluations of im/politeness. However, despite all the criticism directed at Brown and Levinson's theory and cross-cultural speech act research in recent years, no new framework suitable for a cross-cultural comparison has been proposed thus far.

Ultimately, one could argue that if hundreds. of speakers agree on using a particular speech act formulation in a particular context, this formulation is likely to be perceived as appropriate by these and other speakers of a language. And if hundreds of speakers of another language prefer a different strategy in the same context, then cross-cultural pragmatic differences have been established. The DCT cannot capture all aspects of spoken language, but it does provide valuable data on some of them. As long as we are aware what it can and cannot provide, and of other methods that enable us to analyse other aspects of interaction, and as long as those methods cannot provide us with large amounts of contextually varied, comparable data, the DCT has its place in pragmatic research.

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