On the implementation of pragmatic awareness in teaching English as a foreign language

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First things first: what is pragmatics?

Definitional tendencies/overtones in the last 50 years:

• pragmatics is the study of meaning created/reflected in the use of language
• pragmatics is the study of meaning in context/linguistic interaction
• pragmatics is a function-focused study of all aspects of human communicative behavior
• etc., etc.
‘Too many’ approaches, so eventually two schools recognized (Bublitz & Norrick 2011):

Anglo-American (component view; e.g. Levinson 1983)

- pragmatics is a core element of a theory of language, like phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics
- pragmatics possesses a set number of objects of investigation (speech acts, deixis, implicature, presupposition, etc.)
- pragmatics involves a clear, visible relation between objects and methods of analysis
European-Continental (perspective view; e.g. IPrA line, Verschueren 1999)

- pragmatics is NOT a distinctive element of a theory of language, but a functional perspective on virtually all aspects of human communication
- the pragmatic perspective may extend on, potentially, infinite number of objects of investigation (traditionally studied within their mother disciplines such as morphology, syntax or phonology)
- adoption of the pragmatic perspective may lead to reinterpretation of the original findings within these disciplines (‘extra output’)
- a ‘function-then-form’ view/approach
Benefits of the perspective view of pragmatics (also for L2 instruction):

- a pragmatic inquiry can be carried out by not only ‘pragmaticians’, but potentially all other scholars looking to obtain an extra (functional) focus on a phenomenon (e.g. syntactic; e.g. in teaching practice)
- promoting interdisciplinarity and research/academic dialogue: the perspective approach prioritizes function over form, thus looking to define a repertoire of linguistic resources realizing a specific conversational function (or discursive macro-function) – these resources are to be found within different linguistic sub-disciplines
Implementing pragmatic awareness in L2 instruction: diagnosis

- (Ishihara & Cohen 2010: ix): ‘[there is] a gap between what research in [interlanguage] pragmatics has found and how language [...] is taught’
- Interlanguage pragmatics empirical studies in e.g. speech act realizations across different languages (e.g. Kasper & Rose 2002, papers in *Intercultural Pragmatics*), but results rarely applied to L2 classroom
- If applied, then in the form of rule sets for performing acts in L2 (e.g. promise, warning, apology). Rule sets finite, imposed on a learner to realize an idealized, generalized function. Legacy of the Anglo-American formal approach?
Implementing pragmatic awareness in L2 instruction: diagnosis

One of the biggest challenges:

• problem areas in L2 grammar
• involving constructions non-existent in L1
• taught at advanced level (e.g. university)
• having no history of pragmatics-based explanation

Cases of interest in English grammar instruction at advanced/proficiency levels: 1) inversion, 2) putative should, 3) passive, 4) cleft sentences
Case 1: SV inversion in declarative clauses

a. ‘Never before did it happen to me to fall asleep during a lecture’

b. ‘Little did we imagine that Croatians would make it to the final’

c. ‘Such was his fear of the exam that he fainted right at the doors’

d. ‘So successful has been their recent production that they are making plans for another season next year’
Conventional accounts (Quirk et al. 1985; Bywater 1990; Graver 1998; Swan 2005; etc.)

- Rule 1 (syntax-based): SV inversion applies after negative adverbs (forefronted for emphasis)
- Rule 2: SV applies after ‘certain positive openings’ / ‘certain other expressions’ such as: [a table to learn follows]

Problems:
- R1-R2 cover two heterogeneous categories of inversion triggers. R1 allows learner to self-generate correct items, under R2 items must be memorized.
- Theoretical problem: ‘positive=not-negative’. But according to what criteria? Also: what about less explicit negation markers? (never, not vs. seldom, only occasionally, occasionally…
Alternative syntax-pragmatic account, inspired by pragmatic research in negation (e.g. Roitman 2017)

a. ‘Never before did it happen to me to fall asleep during a lecture’
b. ‘Little did we imagine that Croatians would make it to the final’
c. ‘Such was his fear of the exam that he fainted right at the doors’
d. ‘So successful has been their recent production that they are making plans for another season next year’

- propositions expressed by a,b,c,d are all negative, in the sense that
- they all involve acts underrepresented in the standard course of affairs presupposed in the respective sentences
- degree of underrepresentation differs; it is up to the speaker (learner) to decide if it is substantial enough to trigger inversion
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• Thus, speaker (learner) in charge, making his/her choice from a repertoire of linguistic items (forms) to realize an intended function (emphasize uniqueness, extremize a feeling, etc.). Grammar as an arsenal of means to perform discourse functions.

• Speaker (learner) in charge to assess – against discourse goals – the applicability of inversion in borderline cases (e.g. occasionally)
Case 2: Putative *should* 

a. ‘It is ridiculous that academics should earn so little’

b. ‘How should I know?!’

Conventional (semantic) account: ‘*should* can be used, after expressions of emotions, to give extra emphasis to the unacceptability of the situation depicted in the sentence’ (Bywater 1990: 65)

Problem: account incomplete, too little/general explanation provided for the speaker (learner) to *himself* apply putative *should* in the service of a specific discursive function
Alternative semantic-pragmatic account, inspired by pragmatic research in modality (e.g. Depraetere 2017)

a. ‘It is ridiculous that academics should earn so little’
b. ‘How should I know?!’

• *Should* (derivative of *shall*) carries potential for discursive objectivization
• The objectivization involves all aspects of reality that the agent (as in a,b) is part of and thus subordinate to (de-agentization)
• On this account: a,b are comments on the power exerted by the ‘world’ upon the sentence agent
• The comments realize the function of expressing the impropriety of an (objective or institutionally sanctioned) state of affairs
Alternative semantic-pragmatic account, inspired by pragmatic research in modality (e.g. Depraetere 2017)

Analytic reading of a. ‘It is ridiculous that academics should earn so little’:

A’: It is ridiculous that the current reality (which I the speaker belong to, as does the entity (academics) commented on) is such as to sanction / allow for the situation that academics earn (so) little

Analytic reading of b. ‘How should I know?!’

B’: How can one expect me to know, given the objective circumstances to which I am subordinate
Case 3: The passive

a. (?) Cristiano Ronaldo got off the plane and the reporters immediately besieged him.

b. Cristiano Ronaldo got off the plane and was immediately besieged by the reporters.

Conventional account: ‘be the need, the passive can be used to avoid an awkward change of subject in the middle of the complex sentence’ (Graver 1998: 112)

Problem: account imprecise, too little/general info provided for the speaker (learner) to himself apply passive transformation
Alternative SFL-pragmatic account, inspired by research in discourse information structure (Halliday 1994; Zeevat 2016)

a. (?) Cristiano Ronaldo got off the plane and the reporters immediately besieged him.

b. Cristiano Ronaldo got off the plane and was immediately besieged by the reporters.

Explanation in terms of theme and rheme pragma-syntactic categories

**Theme:** point of departure of clause as message; local context of clause as piece of text (initial position in the clause)

**Rheme:** where the presentation moves after the point of departure; what is presented in the local context set up by Theme (position toward the end of the clause)
Alternative SFL-pragmatic account, inspired by research in discourse information structure (Halliday 1994; Zeevat 2016)

a. (?) Cristiano Ronaldo got off the plane and the reporters immediately besieged him.
b. Cristiano Ronaldo got off the plane and was immediately besieged by the reporters.

The proposition expressed in the underlined clause in b. contributes to discourse dynamics; the event instigator (reporters) placed at the end becomes sentential focus. Shift of the verbal element (besieged) to the left for dynamics; the sentence as a whole ‘picks up speed’ to picture a dynamic/chaotic/uncontrollable event. On this account, theme-rheme configurations belong to the catalogue of syntactic choices available to the speaker (learner) to realize a (superordinate) pragmatic function.
Many more cases...:

- Pleonastic *it* for time-allowance in strong attitude expressions
- Cleft sentences for individualization of responsibility/credit
- Etc., etc.

The ‘pragmatic awareness’ enhances speaker/learner autonomy:

- does not offer ready-made lexico-grammatical solutions; instead, makes one search for best linguistic choices to realize a pre-planned functional goal
- redefines grammar – not a constraint, but an instrument to obtain goals
- thus, makes learning grammar an attractive undertaking
- Don’t overdo, though – for best economy of instruction, function- and form-based learning must be balanced (cf. Loewen 2015)
THANK YOU 🙃

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