

## Unlocking the promise of pragmatics

If the life of everyday language can be captured by any single domain of linguistic research, surely pragmatics must be among the top candidates for that honor. Casting its wide net around phenomena as diverse as intonational, morphological and syntactic variation with implications for social and interpersonal meanings, speech acts and their diverse realizations, discourses coherence and cohesion, epistemic and affective stance, identity, and more, pragmatics has expanded our understanding of almost every domain that has been studied in the interest of shedding light on the complex nature of human social contact. Yet even with this most impressive "resume", one must look carefully to find the footprint of pragmatics in the field of East Asian foreign language learning and teaching. It is indeed difficult to imagine any one area in this field – be it among works on FL classroom research or on FL instructional practice – that is so overlooked as pragmatics.

One often heard trope that may shed some light on this remarkable gap is the refrain that East Asian languages such as Chinese, Japanese, and Korean are "hard to learn" owing to their status as "truly foreign languages". This view is based on a decades-old rubric which values similarity of syntactic structures and overlap in cognate vocabulary (as well as familiarity with or ease of learning of the written form of the L2) as the crucial criteria involved in determining ease of learning. Explorations in second language pragmatics, however, suggest that developing communicative ability in at least the everyday spoken forms of these languages – the goal of most college-level classroom learners and the home front of pragmatics-focused teaching and research – may rely less on the production of grammatically complete and syntactically accurate utterances, and more on mastery of language use that is characterized by flexible word order, frequent use of ellipsis, and a high degree of fragmentation (such as is the case for Japanese and Korean), or alternately, by a degree of expressive terseness and morphologic economy that obviates the need for a word for "yes", and allows even a monomorphemic verb to stand as a "complete sentence" (such as is the case for Chinese). With the mythos of "foreign" and "difficult" swirling around the study of East Asian languages, it is no wonder that foreign language classroom teachers of East Asian languages, driven by an unspoken mandate to "cover the grammar and vocabulary" of their target language, sense that they face insurmountable odds in any effort they might make to incorporate pragmatics into their classroom instruction.

Yet, as the researchers in this volume so aptly demonstrate, despite the considerable complexity of the pragmatics of everyday conversation, pragmatics can be the focal point of Chinese, Japanese, and/or Korean FL classroom instruction and interaction, and to much good effect. In these FL instructional settings, the students consistently prove themselves to be ready learners, capable of making tremendous strides in their communicative ability and in their fundamental understanding of the ways of thinking and doing that are valued by members of the communities where the target language is spoken. For example, the mixed use of speech styles for expressing

a range of pragmatic functions, an area that consistently has been left out of lower level JFL instruction owing to – one must assume – the highly variable nature of this phenomenon, is demonstrated to be conducive to instruction, as shown in the paper by Ishida. Similarly, in her groundbreaking study on the use of *aizuchi* by intermediate and advanced learners of Japanese, Hatasa reveals that the learners attain a high level of proficiency across a broad range of interactional functions, previous research findings on the vast gap separating listener behaviors and response token use in English and Japanese notwithstanding. Tateyama's study of second year learners not only demonstrates the efficacy of explicit instruction for the students' pragmatic development in making requests, but she also finds that such focused instruction may provide critical opportunities for language socialization to a broader range of request strategies than is normally provided in the teacher's classroom talk. Iwai's research on first-year JFL students reveals the importance of acknowledging the complexity of pragmatic phenomena by raising learner awareness of this complexity. She finds that when pragmatically-valued conversational routines are introduced in a grammar-focused classroom setting, students do improve in their frequency of use and accurate production of these target items. However, learner use of these items results in an increased tendency to create socially awkward and interactionally jarring moments as the learner becomes overly reliant on these structures for sustaining conversational interaction.

The extent to which pragmatics-focused instruction can undercut longstanding perceptions of East Asian languages as inordinately difficult and different is again demonstrated in the papers by Aida, Wang, and Dai, respectively. Aida's study on the instruction of personal stories to lower level JFL learners finds that students are more than willing to invest considerable effort and overcome anxious moments in pursuit of developing their ability to tell a story about their own experiences. Wang, similarly, finds that focusing instruction on the negotiation of social meanings and interactional routines is motivating and facilitating for professional school learners as well. In her study of MBA students in the CFL classroom, she found that a pragmatics-focused approach to instruction was able to address the students' needs both as language learners and as business professionals in training. Dai's paper highlights the importance of exercising extreme caution in labeling pragmatic routines as "different" – starting from observations regarding a common leave-taking formula in English, her study reveals that a comparison of the pragmatics of this common social ritual in Chinese and English is interwoven with foundational similarities and subtle but significant differences.

In the area of materials development, Byon's contribution works at dispelling the mystique of such notorious pragmatic pitfalls as Korean speech styles and the alternation between them by revealing the readiness with which everyday media materials can be adapted for the targeted instruction of this pervasive conversational practice. Xiang's cross-linguistic comparative examination of the production and perception of apologies by British CFL learners takes a careful empirical approach to understanding cross-cultural pragmatic difference. Her results generate an important set of baseline data for developing instructional content that is informed by both actual CFL learner interlanguage and the production of native Chinese and British English speakers.

Finally, several papers move beyond foreign language settings to address the potential for learner pragmatic development in the "wall-less classroom", that is, the domain of second language settings. Nowhere is the richness of social meaning more accessible to learners than when they live and participate in communities where the L2 is spoken. Indeed, many teachers justify their decision to exclude pragmatics from their instructional content by drawing on the anecdotal wisdom that "learners will learn pragmatics when they live overseas". This hopeful forecast of learning outcomes is the object of inquiry in the contributions of Nemoto and Jones. Nemoto's paper presents the results of her survey of college students on a study abroad program in Japan and a sample of their homestay families. She reports that learners place a high value on non-transactional talk such as initiating a conversation and telling stories at the dinner table, but feel that their L2 development while living overseas does not yet enable them to participate in these activities effectively. Through her discussion of these and other findings Nemoto identifies a range of learner needs that are not being met by prior FL instruction, nor even by the rich L2 interactional environment. Jones' paper, in what I believe is a first for East Asian L2 pragmatics research, provides an extended report on the pragmatic development of three children, ages 7, 5, and 2, over the course of their one-year sojourn in Japan. These findings provide us with the first longitudinal description of young learners' pragmatic development in an L2 setting, laying the groundwork for future study of this important area.

Research on the learning of pragmatics by students in East Asian FL classrooms remains scant indeed, perhaps owing to a general perception that learners' struggle with the basics of grammar and vocabulary leaves them no time for study of complex pragmatic phenomena. The beauty of this collection is that there is an overwhelming lack of evidence to support the mantra that East Asian languages are "truly foreign" or somehow especially difficult. Rather than painting a picture of students struggling desperately to avoid sliding down a slippery slope with no glimmer of hope for successful attainment in the immediate future, these studies demonstrate learners of all levels, pursuing their studies in a range of settings, and focusing their learning on a diverse repertoire of pragmatic phenomena, consistently making extraordinary progress towards their goals of learning to use the target L2 in meaningful interpersonal interactions. The findings reveal that, when L2 instruction is designed with the "best practices" of explicit pragmatics-focused instruction, and/or when learners are able to learn in a setting where the input is derived from a rich interactional environment, learners not only make significant gains in their pragmatic development, but they concurrently show an expansion in their appreciation and awareness of the target language and their ability to communicate in it.

This work comes, I believe, at a welcome, and perhaps even critical time. As pragmatics continues to make its way into the mainstream of research on L2 learning and teaching, increasing numbers of researchers, pedagogy professionals, and professionals-in-training turn to the literature to inform them of "the state of the art" of the field, and also for guidance in pursuing new endeavors in this field (or having current endeavors informed by prior findings). Yet, it appears that the number of those who are now taking an interest in the pragmatics of East Asian languages continues to significantly outnumber the ranks of those who are actively pursuing this research. Confronted by the as yet relatively limited body of work on teaching and learning pragmatics in the CJK foreign language classroom, many would be newcomers to

research on pragmatics-focused instructional innovation or curricular change may be daunted by stepping into what remains predominantly uncharted territory.

The innovativeness of the lines of research undertaken by the contributors to this volume and the considerable fruits that have been born of their labors provide critical support and stimulating insight to those who are already working in this field. These works should provide both direction and encouragement to those who would initiate a new thread of pragmatics-focused research and/or instructional innovation. Notably, these select papers are representative of a larger body of research on language learning and reports on curricular change and pedagogical projects presented during the 3-day forum on Pragmatics in the CJK Classroom: The State of the Art that was held at the University of Hawai'i in June 2006. It is my hope that the insights and inspiration shared at that gathering will energize all of the participants who attended, as well as those who are motivated by the work presented in this volume, to commit their professional and intellectual efforts to the pursuit of unlocking the power of pragmatics for students of East Asian languages in classrooms throughout the world.

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