10 Multimodal Corpus of Spanish Speech Acts: main features and potential pedagogical uses

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Abstract

Most of the more serious mistakes we make in our second or third languages are not linked to grammar, but to pragmatics (Félix-Brasdefer, 2008; Kasper & Rose, 1999; Olshtain & Blum-Kulka, 1985; Rose & Kasper, 2001). While language textbooks are often focused on grammar content distributed throughout a communicative syllabus (Lázaro Ruiz, 2014; Lörscher & Rainer Schulze, 1988), students are still missing the pragmatic rules that are behind the behaviors of native speakers and their use of language. This chapter talks about the creation and use of a multimodal corpus that allows for the analyzation and comparison of three conflictive speech acts (compliments, refusals, and apologies). Through the recordings and transcriptions of native and non-native speakers, the Multimodal Corpus of Spanish Speech Acts (COR.E.M.A.H.) shows the differences in their strategies when faced with each speech act. In this chapter, we will also see how to use this advanced resource in different ways to teach pragmatics in a class of Spanish as a foreign language.

Keywords: language pedagogy, pragmatics, intercultural communication, multimodal corpus, non-verbal communication.

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1.   Introduction

Starting with Bouton (1990, 1992, 1994), Kasper and Rose (1999), Rose and Kasper (2001), and Kasper (2001), linguists began to gather the benefits of the instruction of pragmatics in the Second Language (SL) classroom. In 2001, the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR) was published, including the pragmatic competence within the communicative competence, which increased the visibility of pragmatics in the field of second language acquisition. Hidden behind the subject of 'culture', pragmatics and its manifestations in every linguistic community remained a mystery for students trying to get to grips with the culture they were facing. It was not until 2003 that Bardovi-Harlig and Mahan-Taylor (2003) presented a book, written by teachers and for teachers, about teaching pragmatics in the foreign language classroom. Recently, research in teaching methodology has been developing new ways of bringing pragmatics to the classroom (Alcón Soler, 2005; Félix-Brasdefer, 2008; Kasper, 2001; Rose & Kasper, 2001; Tateyama, 2001; Louw, Derwing, & Abbott, 2010). However, until now, there has not been a resource that could show how native and non-native speakers behave pragmatically in a given situation. The COR.E.M.A.H. (Vacas Matos, 2017) is the first resource of its kind to provide these kinds of materials.

2.   The corpus

Most foreign language students spend many years trying to excel at the grammar rules, vocabulary, and syntax of the language they are studying. They practice extraordinarily difficult pronunciations, study irregular verbs, and the use of tenses to be able to communicate effectively without committing a pragmatic failure. However, after their tremendous effort, they still sound foreign in pragmatic terms (Bardovi-Harlig et al., 1991; Bouton, 1990, 1992, 1994; Cohen, 1995; House, 1996; Kasper, 2001; Louw et al., 2010; Olshtain & Cohen, 1990). They are missing the key that opens real communication between native speakers: authentic, natural, and genuine native behaviors.

Research shows that pragmatics is acquired through the interaction with native speakers living in the target culture, amongst locals. Olshtain and Blum-Kulka (1985) found that immigrants in Jerusalem needed at least ten years of daily coexistence with locals to behave like native speakers of Hebrew just in terms of their acceptability of target speech act behavior. Nonetheless, most SL students are not immigrants according to the Instituto Cervantes (2016), and do not have the chance to live abroad for a long period of time to experience natural conversations with native speakers. This is how the idea of creating a multimodal video corpus of pragmatic behavior was conceived: to provide those students with informal native conversations they did not have access to.

More than 150 hours of role-play conversations of pairs of Americans (average age=20.7 for the intermediate group, and 29.79 for the advanced group) and pairs of Spaniards (average age=30.8) were recorded in order to have enough material to compose a substantial corpus. The total number of subjects of the corpus is 72: 24 native speakers, and 48 non-native speakers divided in two groups by level, B1 and C1 in the CEFR. The role-plays were recorded in pairs from each group. In the three groups, most of the participants were women. Every group had 24 participants: intermediate, 8 male and 16 female; advanced, 5 male and 19 female; and native speakers, 7 male and 17 female. Subjects were asked to perform ten situations with just general instructions about the situations and their roles (complimenter or receiver, for instance). In the end, three situations were chosen to configure the website corpus, given their conflictive intercultural outcomes, and because of their face-threatening nature: compliments, refusals of help, and apologies. One hundred and eight videos were transcribed and tagged for strategies, including non-verbal annotations, upgraders, and downgraders. This way, researchers, teachers, and students can access the version of the transcriptions they prefer to use:
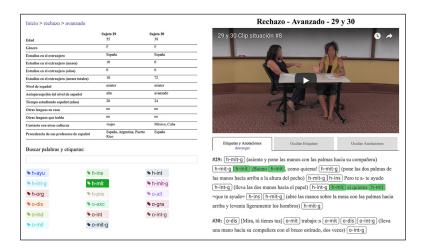
- just the transcription of the role-play;

- the annotated transcription of the role-play (with the non-verbal language also transcribed); and

- the transcription with annotations and the strategies tagged, so they can see what the behavioral patterns of the individuals are for a given situation.

In addition to the video transcriptions, the corpus also has a search function (by word or strategy), which produces results that are clickable and that take the searcher to the exact role-play where the word or the strategy has appeared. Likewise, the strategies used in every tagged transcription are listed and clickable, so they can be easily located within the text.

Another feature of COR.E.M.A.H. is that the data from the subjects (age, gender, study of the language, and study abroad time, etc.), are visible and easily downloadable for every role-play, as Figure 1 shows.

Figure 1.   View of one of the videos and transcriptions of the COR.E.M.A.H. webpage

3.   Results

This corpus was created to corroborate the hypothesis that advanced and intermediate learners would show similar behaviors in terms of pragmatics, and

the hypothesis has been corroborated. The data shows that American students behave similarly amongst themselves, and in a different way than Spaniards do. Supporting the findings of several researchers (Alcón Soler, 2005; Bardovi-Harlig et al., 1991; Bouton, 1994; Félix-Brasdefer, 2008; House, 1996; House & Kasper, 1981; Kasper, 2001; Kasper & Rose, 1999; Louw et al., 2010; Olshtain & Cohen, 1990; Rose, 1994; Tateyama, 2001; Tateyama et al., 1997), the COR.E.M.A.H. reinforces the idea that pragmatics should be explicitly taught in order to be assimilated and, therefore, learned and acquired.

3.1.   Analysis of the corpus data

The analysis of the data shows that the subjects with a higher level of proficiency in Spanish showed a similar level of pragmatic competence as those with an intermediate level. Even if the advanced subjects showed a higher level of lexical or grammatical competence, their pragmatic behavior was identical. However, it needs to be acknowledged that several subjects in both groups acted in a way that was more similar to Spaniards than to the way their classmates did. Not surprisingly, these subjects were the ones who spent more time abroad, and also, built up relationships of friendship or even love and family relationships with the locals. This fact reinforces the aim of the creation of COR.E.M.A.H. – performing speech acts in Spanish in order to provide students and teachers with different examples of native and non-native speakers.

3.2.   Pedagogical uses

The use of *realia* or, in the case of COR.E.M.A.H., videos of real speakers producing natural speech acts is – if the students do not have the possibility of traveling abroad – one of the best ways to show how individuals behave in normal life (Cohen, 1995; Lorenzo-Dus, 2008), and how a learner can succeed in communication in ordinary contexts. This resource can be used in several ways by teachers, from just using the transcriptions of the videos (tagged and annotated, or not), to analyzing the non-verbal language, the movements, the proxemics, or even the tone of voice of the speakers. Some ideas of how the COR.E.M.A.H. can be used are the following:

- taking only the Spanish role-plays of the corpus to use the videos and transcriptions as models and play them in class as examples, analyzing them pragmatically in terms of communication to bring the informal conversations closer to the classroom;

- through the comparisons of performances of different individuals within the same group and different groups, studying their patterns and how they differ amongst each other upon the resolution of the three situations proposed;

- telling the students to role-play the situations before watching the videos (or watching the videos with the voice off) for further comparison and evaluation of strategies used amongst the students themselves and those used by native and non-native speakers in the corpus;

- using the transcriptions of the corpus, making the students perform them, and then afterwards showing the videos with the original communication produced by native speakers; and

- using the transcriptions to analyze the appearance in the recordings of discourse markers, upgraders, downgraders, constructions, expressions, interjections, etc.

4.   Conclusion

Given the lack of multimodal resources, but specifically, resources created to learn the informal register and pragmatics of the language, COR.E.M.A.H. provides the foreign Spanish language class with natural language and conversations which are typically absent in the foreign language class and current manuals.

Results of analyzing the data in COR.E.M.A.H. showed that students need explicit instruction in order to succeed as intercultural speakers in these three complex speech acts. There are still many speech acts to record and transcribe,

as well as different types of role-play pairs performing for COR.E.M.A.H., like intercultural pairs, or English learners acting out the role-plays in English, as well as native speakers of English. We encourage researchers and teachers to build more corpora and activities based on the idea of role-plays and natural behavior so that students have access to models of accurate pragmatic behavior to avoid pragmatic failure.

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