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Authentic vs elicited data and qualitative vs quantitative research methods in pragmatics: Overcoming two non-fruitful dichotomies

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1. Introduction

This paper first characterizes the nature of the methods of collecting authentic and elicited data with particular reference to the fields of learner and contrastive pragmatics. This is followed by an overview of qualitative and quantitative research methods. Secondly, advantages and disadvantages of these two opposite pairs are reviewed. Thirdly, I will suggest overcoming these dichotomies characterized as non-fruitful by using a mixed-method approach. This approach will be illustrated by several examples from the author's own empirical cross-cultural pragmatics research.

In doing research in contrastive and learner pragmatics, we are faced with many different types of data collection, and with a fundamental conflict between the goal of – in the case of the author's line of research – contrastive and learner pragmatics research and the means of reaching this goal. On the one hand, we want to recognize, understand, describe and explain systematic, generalizable linguistic-cultural differences and commonalities in communicative preferences – acquired early, often implicit, automatized and socio-historically anchored in multiple networks of personal relations. On the other hand, every single interaction is a separate linguistic action, a “case” which features particular biographical backgrounds, particular interactional histories, particular personal competencies and preparedness to cooperate with others in a particular situation. At the same time, we will have to account for a multiplicity of other situation-specific factors that potentially influence the interactional process. All this clearly defies generalization.

But how can we go about dissolving this conflict? Clearly, we need both – the particular and the general, if we want to understand what happens in intercultural interactions. Wallace Chafe captures this brilliantly: “Understanding of whatever kind is the ability, through imagination, to relate limited, particular, concrete observations to larger, more encompassing, more stable schemas within which the particular experiences fit” (Chafe, 1994: 10). Chafe's “imaginatively expanded vision” (Chafe, 1994: 10) can be described as a perspective as comprehensive as possible that can provide us with causal explanations for whatever we want to find out. In the last analysis, understanding is easier on the basis of a maximally expanded vision. For this we need two things:

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1. A spectrum of data as comprehensive as possible
2. A spectrum of explanatory approaches as comprehensive as possible

For the data, this means: a comprehensive spectrum of BOTH authentic and elicited data. This is the first dichotomy I want to discuss and dissolve. As an example, with regard to misunderstanding research (cf. e.g. House, 2003), a broad spectrum of data would include the following:

- Open, self-directed role plays triangulated with retrospective interviews
- Discourse completion tasks triangulated by meta-pragmatic rating tasks using for instance situational assessments
- Note book entries: Field notes by the researcher, colleagues, students, covering interactionally 'rich points'
- Diary-type records of naturally occurring incidents of intercultural conflicts
- Audio-taped narrative interviews about 'critical incidents'
- Authentic audio-taped conversations enriched by retrospective interviews
- Meta-pragmatic assessment tasks of empirically established cross-cultural dimensions of difference (see here for instance House, 2006)

The following graphs show different attempts at systematizing various data types.

These graphs show different way of ordering and systematizing the most well-known and most often applied means of collecting data in learner and contrastive pragmatics research, giving attention to the different dimensions, parameters and characteristics used to classify them.

2. Authentic versus elicited data

In the following I want to characterize the different data collection types mentioned and classified above in more detail. First of all, I will look at Authentic and Elicited data.

Authentic discourse, Elicited discourse, Open role-play: all three are oral, interactive production data. They facilitate analyses of a many different discourse phenomena, and there is no need to rely on participants' often vague reflection. The difference between them is that only authentic discourse is motivated and structured out of participants' own goals, and not out of the researcher's goals. Elicited discourse and role plays derive from, and exist for, the goals of researchers.

From a pragmatic perspective, then, authentic and elicited data seem to be unbridgeably different as an interaction's overall purpose is its most important source of structuring.

However, this does not mean that elicited data are *per se* 'non-valid'. Such a claim, which is, for instance, often heard in circles of conversation analysts (cf. here e.g. Atkinson & Coffey, 2002, who in particular challenge the belief that interviews can tap stable attitudes that govern people's behaviour) only supports this unfruitful dichotomy. Clearly, both data gathering methods may supplement each other: Elicited data arranged for a pre-determined research goal can be a useful data source in that they enable controlled comparisons of different contrastive and learner data sets. An example is the German project 'Communicative Competence' (cf. e.g. House, 1984) in which three controlled and comparable data sets: Original German conversations, Learner conversations in English, and Original English conversations elicited via role plays enabled researchers to conduct not only insightful cross-linguistic comparisons but also facilitated the 'discovery' of categories in a model for the analysis of spoken discourse (Edmondson, 1981).

Classic authentic data are the following

1. Field notes known from anthropology which reflect a particular researcher's interest, aims and focus
2. Audio- and video-taped data of 'naturally' occurring discourse. Access to these more 'reliable', more 'objective' data are often problematic, especially in the case of institutions.

Field notes are particularly fruitful in descriptions of speech act realizations see here for instance Janet Holmes' (1986) classic work on compliments and compliment responses based on this method of data gathering. Collecting field notes is a time-consuming but valuable source of richly contextualized information. Field notes are however never a substitute for recordings of authentic discourse.

Field notes are perfectly adequate if the focus is on the content of the discourse, on syntactic structures, lexical units and routine formulas. But if the research goal is on the entire speech action in its rich social and discursive context, they are much less useful. Due to limitations of the researcher's working memory, interactional detail and in-depth insights (routinely enabled by detailed micro-analysis) are often lost in field notes.

Authentic, naturally occurring data-for many the *non plus ultra* of data collection - are often subject to the so-called Observer's Paradox famously characterized by Labov (1972:209) as follows: "The aim must be to find out how people talk and behave when they are not being systematically observed. Yet we can only obtain this data by systematic observation. The success of empirical data collection depends on how this paradox can best be solved".

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