Connecting production to judgments: T/V address forms and the L2 identities of intermediate Spanish learners

Dan Villarreal *

Department of Linguistics, University of California, Davis, United States

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Abstract

This study investigates the L2 identities of native English-speaking intermediate-level Spanish learners by combining two methods, production and metapragmatic judgments, and focusing on T/V address forms (tú and usted). Twelve intermediate-level Spanish learners interacted with Spanish speakers in oral role-play scenarios designed to elicit different address forms. Learners answered a questionnaire one week later about desired address form use in various interactional scenarios (which were matched with role-play scenarios). An analysis of questionnaire judgments revealed that these learners were both cognizant of the second-order indexical potential of T/V address forms and determined to utilize this indexical potential to construct notions of their desired L2 identities. Conversely, learners' address-form production exhibited an overgeneralization of T, a result that starkly contrasts with the overgeneralization of V found in previous studies. Whereas some learners failed to consistently produce their desired address forms, compromising their selfconstructed ideal L2 identities, others showed an adeptness at matching their production to their judgments. I thus suggest that future research on L2 pragmatics and L2 identity move beyond a focus on L2 pragmatic competence and toward a consideration of learners' indexical awareness and agency.

1. Introduction

The process of learning a language does not merely consist of the acquisition of its grammar and phonology, but crucially includes the ability to use the language in real-time discourse. This ability is typically framed in terms of second language (L2) pragmatic competence, which often assumes that, as with grammatical competence or accent, learners seek to conform to native-speaker pragmatic norms (Kasper and Schmidt, 1996). As the language we use in real-time discourse shapes how the world perceives us, pragmatics is also an important vehicle for our social identities whether in L1 or L2. Second-language learners thus face the unique challenge of constructing L2 social identities via the pragmatic resources available in L2.

One such pragmatic resource in several languages (Spanish, French, German, Russian, and others) is the choice of so-called T/V address forms (e.g., *tú/usted* in Spanish, *tu/vous* in French). Although T is broadly said to denote a familiar and V a formal addressee (Brown and Gilman, 1960), T/V choice does not represent a simple form-to-meaning mapping but rather entails a complex set of social indexical meanings (Morford, 1997). As a result, address forms can present

* Correspondence to: Department of Linguistics, University of California, 175 Kerr Hall, One Shields Avenue, Davis, CA 95616, United States. Tel.: +1 302 562 6688.

  E-mail address: djvill@ucdavis.edu.

difficulties for native speakers of languages without T/V, especially in the foreign-language classroom environment; these learners often lack the cultural benefit of socialization into the T/V paradigm and/or sufficient classroom instruction about the pragmatics of address forms (Belz and Kinginger, 2002). As learners start to gain an understanding of the indexical significance of T/V, they will also start to work out what their use of T/V means about them as users of L2 (whether they consider themselves relatively formal, who they are solidary with, etc.). Even if a learner is able to construct (or begin to construct) notions of their L2 identities, however, they face the challenge of realizing them in real-time discourse.

In this paper, I investigate intermediate Spanish learners' use of T/V from two angles: metapragmatic judgments about their (desired) T/V usage as well as their actual production of T/V in discourse. In so doing, I seek to uncover what this relationship between judgments and production means for learners' ability to construct and realize L2 social identities.

2. L2 pragmatic competence

L2 learners face several challenges in acquiring L2 pragmatic competence. First, the acquisition of pragmatic competence in one's first language (L1) is accomplished through an involved, highly culturally specific process of language socialization (e.g., Schieffelin and Ochs, 1986). Because this process is so culturally specific, learners' L2 pragmatic repertoires will initially suffer greater resemblance to L1 pragmatic norms than L2 norms—the result of pragmatic transfer (Kasper, 1992:207). Takahashi and Beebe (1993) asked speakers to respond to the following situation: ''You are a professor in a history course. During class discussion, one of your students gives an account of a historical event with the wrong date'' (140). The majority (64%) of American English speakers preceded their correction with a positive remark, whereas only 13% of Japanese speakers used a positive remark. Accordingly, only 23% of Japanese ESL speakers used a positive remark, and these remarks hardly conveyed approval or support: ''Well, *I'm almost satisfied* with your account of that event except the date of it'' (141, emphasis original). The form of this utterance may be pragmatically appropriate in Japanese, but not so in English. It is possible that these speakers lacked the metapragmatic awareness (Silverstein, 2001), the knowledge of appropriate English forms in given contexts, necessary to produce appropriate utterances in English.

Even if learners are metapragmatically aware, they may still lack the necessary control over L2 to apply their awareness in production (Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei, 1998). Koike (1989) investigated beginning Spanish learners' awareness of speech act pragmatics by asking different groups of learners to attempt to identify speech acts or produce request/command speech acts in given circumstances. Whereas the first group of learners succeeded overwhelmingly at differentiating requests, apologies, and commands, the second group failed badly at producing polite requests and commands. These learners were reluctant to use more polite and grammatically complex forms (such as requests and hints) in delicate situations, choosing instead to use easily translated but less polite forms (such as direct commands) in the name of expediency. Similarly, Pearson (2006) found that learners who were made aware of differential levels of formality in Spanish nevertheless failed to produce appropriate utterances thanks to struggling with complex verbal paradigms. Both of these studies suggest that L2 pragmatic production is constrained to a substantial degree by L2 grammatical competence (Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei, 1998; Pearson, 2006).

2.1. Pragmatics and identity

A given speaker's patterns of language-in-use reflect strongly on that speaker's *identities*, which I define—drawing on Gee (2001) and Norton Peirce (1995)—as the malleable, contextually based subject positions, emerging within interactions, that represent an individual as a social being (i.e., who the individual is seen to be ''out in the world''). Following van Compernolle and Williams (2012:237), I consider identities to be related to, but distinct from, an individual's *self*. Whereas self is an internal state (or process), identities are the external manifestations of self (and therefore a window through which an outside observer attempts to ascertain self). For example, a person who phrases requests as imperatives rather than questions, omits words like ''please,'' and uses a flat intonational contour will be said to be ''impolite.'' This individual's identity in this situation (impoliteness) derives from their repertoires of language-in-use (economical speech) being perceived as indicating underlying, intrinsic personality features.

An important property of identities is that they are unavoidable (as it were), since they are ''in part an outcome of others' perceptions and representations'' (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005:606). That is, the act of speaking necessarily signals identities regardless of the specific linguistic choices the speaker makes. But identities are often also personally motivated—existing not only ''out in the world'' but also ''in the head''—as speakers may ''actively recruit and facilitate the responses of others'' (Gee, 2001:104) in an attempt to produce identities that will reflect a certain self. Van Compernolle and Williams (2012:237) define this ability to utilize the symbolic potential of linguistic forms as *sociolinguistic agency*.

Given the unavoidability of identities and the connection between pragmatics and identity, L2 learners with incomplete L2 pragmatic competence may be at risk of inadvertently signaling the ''wrong'' identities. For instance, by failing to precede their corrections with a positive remark, Takahashi and Beebe's (1993) Japanese learners of English would likely