

9. Discourse completion tasks

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Abstract: The present chapter examines Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs), a data elicitation method that generates large amounts of contextually varied and comparable cross-linguistic speech act data, used predominantly in cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics. It discusses different features of DCT design, including the formulation of scenarios, the incorporation of social variables and format choice. The chapter then reviews studies comparing DCTs to other data elicitation methods and to naturally occurring data. It shows that while the different data collection methods generate similar speech act realisation strategies, the reported differences – mainly regarding directness, mitigation, and politeness marking – are largely inconclusive, with the results depending on the speech acts and groups of speakers under study.

1. Introduction

The Discourse Completion Task (DCT) is probably the most widely used data collection instrument in cross-cultural pragmatics, a field of enquiry that compares different speech acts across languages, and in interlanguage pragmatics, which examines learners' pragmatic competence and development. What makes DCTs particularly valuable for these areas of investigation is that research aiming to establish culture-specific patterns in speech act realisation or the pragmatic features of a specific interlanguage needs to draw on large quantities of data, and the DCT is the only available data collection instrument that generates sufficiently large corpora of comparable, systematically varied speech act data. Since DCTs can be translated into any language and distributed to large groups of informants within a short period of time, they are the ideal instrument for the contrastive study of speech acts (Aston 1995: 62; Barron 2003: 85).

Although DCT responses do not fully resemble naturally occurring data, the administrative advantages make the DCT a valuable and effective data collection method (Johnston, Kasper and Ross 1998: 157; Billmyer and Varghese 2000: 521; Kasper 2000: 325; Barron 2003: 85), in particular for large-scale projects (Sasaki 1998: 479). DCTs can be designed to elicit multiple occurrences of any speech act across a variety of situations, thus documenting a wide range of semantic formulae by which a given speech act can be implemented (Beebe and Cummings 1996: 80; Johnston, Kasper and Ross 1998: 158; Kasper 2000: 325; Barron 2003: 84). This is particularly useful "when investigating languages which have not yet been

Discourse Completion Task Dct Assessment

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