Nonnative Speakers' Use of Grammatical Features with Different Interlocutors

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Abstract

This pilot is part of a larger study that investigates nonnative speakers' use of phonetic,

grammatical and lexical features when interacting with different interlocutors. This portion only

focuses on grammatical features in an attempt to identify the features that yield the largest

differences among different speakers. Four speakers participated in an opinion-based activity

with two different interlocutors each. Descriptive statistics showed that the grammatical features

that showed significant differences were: hedges, questions, and adverbial clauses. These results

are informative on their own but would also have more significant implications when combined

with lexical and phonetic features for a more robust understanding of the reasons behind the

speakers' choices. The implications of this study extend to the Program of Intensive English as

well as second language learning (particularly, the area of assessment). Knowing exactly which

conditions bring out certain choices a nonnative speaker makes will certainly be valuable

knowledge not only in the pairing of students but also in oral assessment.

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This project applies the Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1991) in a linguistic environment. The Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) stipulates that speakers have a collection of sociolinguistic features in their possession and choose the appropriate one to use based on the interlocutor's social status, their gender, the relationship between the two speakers, etc. CAT focuses mainly on the sociocultural relationships between speaker and interlocutor. This study, however, attempts to prove that the theory applies to linguistic features as well. That is, a speaker chooses a particular linguistic feature (in this case a grammatical one) based on their interlocutor's L1 background or proficiency level. Some studies investigated the way in which native speakers accommodate their speech for nonnative learners because of lack of comprehension, lack of shared information, miscommunication, among other reasons (Long, 1980; Yoshida, 2001). Other research looked into the way in which nonnative speakers converge with their native speaker interlocutors when prompted to do so (Long, 1982). A third type of research investigated EFL speakers (specifically those from the outer or expanding circles) and their interactions with each other (Jenkins, 2001; Meierkord, 2004). Seeing that each variety has its own set of phonetic, lexical, and grammatical features, the studies focused on the features that were modified to converge with other speakers and those that were kept intact to maintain their linguistic identity.

Most of the research above focuses on one set of features (lexical, phonetic, pragmatic, etc.) and only investigates one set of interactions instead of assuming that the nonnative speaker actually chooses from a plethora of linguistic choices that s/he has access to throughout an interaction (as the CAT proposes). That is, speakers might make different choices depending on

the interlocutor and whether or not they want to converge with or diverge from him/her. What CAT also proposes is that the interlocutor causes the different choices or changes a speaker makes. Therefore, the grammatical features (in this study) the speaker uses are somewhat of a conscious choice induced by the audience. However, very few studies have investigated the change in linguistic features that one speaker makes depending on different interlocutors. Those that have, only focused on one type of feature. In many cases, these features included lexical and phonetic features (Rajadurai, 2006; Van Engen, Baese-Berk, Baker, Choi, Kim, & Bradlow, 2010). For the above reasons, this study seeks to explore the changes in grammatical features that high intermediate nonnative speakers employ with a set of different interlocutors, particularly those who have a different first language. This paper is a pilot study for a much larger project that investigates high-intermediate nonnative speakers' use of phonetic, lexical, and grammatical features with different interlocutors. Therefore the results of this study are exploratory and descriptive in nature and only seek to inform the more rigorous research that will be done in the near future.

Research Questions

1. To what extent does the interlocutor's L1 affect a high intermediate nonnative speaker's use of general grammatical features?

2. To what extent does the interlocutor's proficiency level affect a high intermediate nonnative speaker's use of general grammatical features?

3. To what extent does the interlocutor's L1 affect a high intermediate nonnative speaker's use of specific grammatical features related to opinion-based tasks?

4. To what extent does the interlocutor's proficiency level affect a high intermediate

nonnative speaker's use of specific grammatical features related to opinion-based

activities?

Methods

Participants

The main participants whose utterances were analyzed consisted of 4 participants in total:

2 Chinese learners of English and 2 Arabic learners. All four participants were enrolled in the

English Composition class at the Program of Intensive English. Their proficiency level was set at

Level 5 (intermediate) by the program. Another group of speakers served as interlocutors, some

of whom were also participants and others who simply participated in the activity. The

participants who only served as interlocutors were 3: two native speaks who were enrolled in

English Composition class and one Spanish nonnative speaker whose proficiency level was the

same as the speakers.

Instrument

The instrument used for this study consisted of a modified version of the "Hot Air

Balloon Activity" where students are provided with the following scenario: A hot air balloon

holding seven passengers is losing altitude and only one person can survive (while all other six

have to be thrown off). The people in this experiment were represented by professions (e.g.

nurse, policeman, etc.). Each participant was allotted one person they had to save and was

therefore asked to make a case for his/her survival (see Appendix A for the task handout).

Procedure

Each of the four speakers participated in the Hot Air Balloon activity twice: every time

with a different interlocutor. The first time they participated, they were asked to sign a consent

form and were told that they will be recorded but their names and personal information will be left out of the study (only participant codes will be used). Both speaker and interlocutor read the instructions with the researcher and then the latter explained the procedure. The two participants were told that they should try to present their own arguments for saving their passenger but also attempt to refute the other person's statements as well (so that the encounter is more of a discussion rather than a series of short monologues). They were also asked to come to a decision in 5 minutes or less. The speakers were given 2 minutes to prepare their arguments and some chose to write down their ideas while others did not need to.

Data Analysis

Only the first five minutes of each encounter were transcribed and the four participants' texts were focused on for this analysis. There were two types of grammatical features that were tallied for each participant: general grammatical features and opinion-based grammatical features.

General grammatical features. Two main features were focused on in this study: questions and ellipsis. Questions feature is perhaps one of the most distinctive of conversational language as it is quite necessary in the interaction between two speakers, whether or not one of the speakers has missing information that the other requires. This feature can be also used when the speakers are negotiating for meaning (Ochs & Schegloff, 1996). The most common form of ellipsis in conversation is situational ellipsis. This is allowed because the main subject of the conversation is always placed in the foreground and any information regarding that subject (or subjects) can be easily retrieved from previous encounters (Carter & McCarthy, 1995).

Task-related grammatical features. In his multidimensional study, Biber (2004) found the following features to strong loadings on opinion-based tasks: wh-questions, that-deletion,

factual verbs, general hedges, factual adverbs, and adverbial clauses. Therefore, these specific

features were focused on in this pilot study in an attempt to see which ones had the most

significant results.

Results

Since this pilot was merely exploratory, no inferential statistics were conducted but

patterns like the one mentioned can help with the setup of the actual study which will include a

higher number of participants and more detailed analyses including phonetic and lexical features.

As one can see from Table 1 below, the results show that most intermediate nonnative

speakers (except for CH01) seem to use a higher number of grammatical features when their

interlocutor is either of a different L1 or a native speaker of the language. For instance, AR01

(Arabic speaker) relied more on questions with the native speaker than with CH02 (Chinese

speaker). He also used more adverbial clauses with the latter interlocutor than with the former.

When one looks at the script in more detail, it is clear that the Arabic speaker was more focused

on providing specific reasons for his arguments, hence the use of adverbial clauses which mainly

began with 'if' or 'because'. In his encounter with the native speaker, however, AR01 was more

focused on what his interlocutor was saying and trying to disprove the native speaker's argument

by literally questioning them. This finding in itself can inform lexical features in the larger study

as it highlights different negotiation techniques a nonnative speaker might use with different

interlocutors.

When one examines CH02's use of grammatical features, the differences are quite

remarkable between the two interlocutors. One such prominent feature is the use of general

hedges. When CH02 was conversing with another Chinese speaker, he only used 4 hedges in 5

minutes. When he was interacting with AR01, on the other hand, he used 17 hedges (a little over

4 times the number of times used with the Chinese interlocutor). This finding is especially

important in this type of task because hedges are certainly necessary when disagreeing with

another speaker or when trying to refute their arguments. This feature will also inform both

lexical and phonetic features in terms of how the nonnative speaker provides his/her ideas in the

least pervasive way possible.

Table 1

Counts of All Grammatical Features

Participant	questions	ellipsis	wh-questions	that-deletion	factual verbs	general hedges	factual adverbs	adverbial clauses
AR01 (+CH02)	2	0	1	7	9	3	1	11
AR01 (+EN02)	8	0	7	6	7	0	0	2
CH01 (+CH02)	0	0	0	3	3	4	0	4
CH01 (+EN01)	0	0	1	3	3	0	0	2
CH02 (+CH01)	0	0	1	1	1	4	0	2
CH02 (+AR01)	1	0	1	6	7	17	0	4
AR04 (+AR07)	0	0	0	1	2	0	0	2
AR04 (+SP01)	2	0	0	2	2	0	0	8

The last feature that also showed promising results was adverbial clauses. This was

shown in AR04's more prolific use of adverbial clauses with the native speaker interlocutor than

with the other Arabic speaker. This is an interesting finding because, unlike AR01, AR04 wanted to provide as many arguments as possible to the native speaker (rather than questioning that speaker's claims). While when he was discussing the same topic with the Arabic speaker, he did not seem to want to offer many explanations and instead asked his interlocutor a few questions about his arguments. This is also interesting in terms of how speakers of the same L1 modify their use of grammatical features with different interlocutors but in different ways, which also informs expected results of other linguistic features with a larger sample of participants.

Relevance to PIE

This pilot study and the subsequent larger project have many implications in relation to second language learning and intensive English programs. When it comes to second language learning, many standardized tests require students to engage in a conversation with another speaker and are evaluated on their use of lexical, grammatical, and phonetic features. This study shows that students' linguistic repertoire is certainly not static and their choices clearly depend on the interlocutor and their use of features as well. Therefore, results from the more expanded study can inform assessment specialist in terms of how to design such oral interviews in a way that brings out the best in each student undertaking them.

As for the implications to the PIE, it is to the researcher's knowledge that many role-playing tasks are included in most of the Listening and Speaking classes as an activity or form of assessment. The implications therefore are quite similar to standardized tests: it has been shown that students use different linguistic features depending on their interlocutor. Therefore, it would benefit the teachers and curriculum designers to be familiar with such changes to be able to pair up students with the best possible interlocutor who would maximize their learning experience and their oral performance.

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Appendix A

Participant Code: ___T1
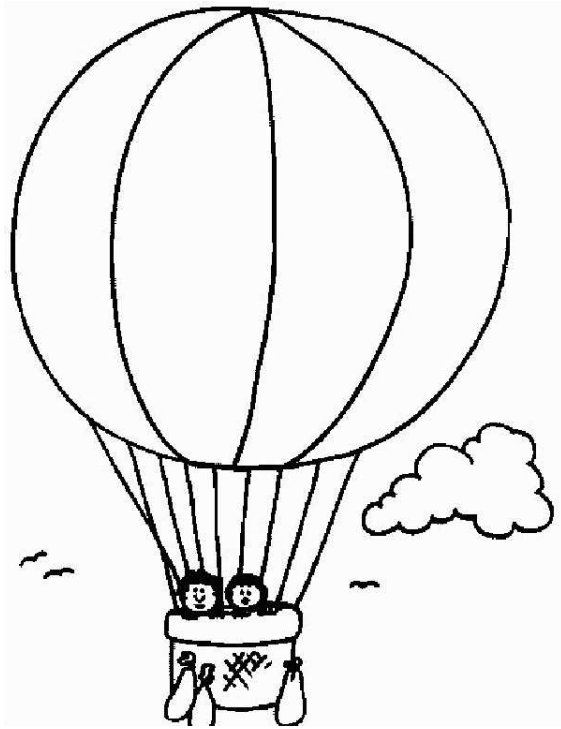
You are in a hot air balloon which is losing height rapidly and will soon crash because it is overweight; therefore you have to get rid of six of the passengers and only **one** person can remain on the balloon. Who would you choose? The passengers are:

1. Nurse

2. Artist

3. Engineer

4. Research Scientist

5. Journalist

6. Policeman

7. School Teacher

Your assigned passenger is: _____

Take 2 minutes to come up with good arguments to keep your passenger on board. Your partner will be assigned a different passenger and also prepare arguments for his/her passenger. You should try to convince your partner that your passenger is the only one who should stay on the balloon.

The purpose of this activity is for you both to come to some form of agreement in terms of who stays on board. Try to do so in **five** minutes.

Begin the conversation by stating your participant code (found at the top of this page).