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## THIRTY YEARS OF DISCOURSE COMPLETION TEST IN CONTRASTIVE PRAGMATICS RESEARCH

Discourse Completion Test (DCT) became a very popular research instrument after the publication of the influential Blum-Kulka & Olshtain's (1984) paper titled "Requests and apologies: a cross-cultural study of speech act realization patterns (CCSARP)". Hundreds and thousands of papers employing the data collection instrument, originally developed by Blum-Kulka in 1982, have been published since then, and the controlled elicitation procedure has left a very important mark on the way in which speech acts have been studied cross-culturally. DCT has its strong supporters as well as pronounced enemies, but its contribution to the development of the field cannot be questioned. The paper presents an overview of the advantages and disadvantages of the data collection tool, as well as a synthesis of the most important findings which it has managed to yield so far. Major directions of research are summarized and possible future developments outlined.

### 1. Contrastive Pragmatics

The origins of Contrastive Pragmatics are often attributed to the publication of Lado's (1957) *Linguistics Across Cultures*, which attempted to provide a framework for comparing cultural differences in the ways in which languages are used. The book was written with the purpose of direct application to the process of language instruction, supported by prior careful investigation of differences existing between languages. As the major contributor to the development of culturally-oriented pragmatics in the subsequent years was the Speech Act Theory, early contrastive pragmatics research was primarily focused on the ways in which various speech acts were performed in the languages under investigation.

Several types of variability were placed in the focus, situational, individual and cross-cultural being the most important. Situational variability acknowledged the fact that a given speech act could be performed and verbalized dif-

ferently depending on factors such as the setting, the relative status of participants, the social distance between them, the social roles which they perform, the distribution of duties and obligations, time constraints and the like. Individual variability recognized differences between the psychological and the cognitive characteristics of particular participants which might lead to different strategic choices and variable performance of the same speech act in the same situational settings. Finally, cross-cultural variability corresponded either to different performance of native speakers of different languages within similar situational constraints, to differences between native speakers and non-native speakers of the same language, or even to different performance of speakers with different native language backgrounds using the same target language as non-native speakers.

More recent developments in Contrastive Pragmatics have seen the move beyond the investigation of speech act realization patterns to include such phenomena as discourse markers, modality, patterns of polite and impolite linguistic behavior, discursive practices, intercultural communication, cultural scripts, humor and even genres, which have been shown to exhibit different features across cultures. These new developments have been attested in recent publications such as *Developing Contrastive Pragmatics* edited by Pütz and Neff-van Aertselaer (2008), *Contrastive Pragmatics* edited by Aijmer (2011), or *Researching Sociopragmatic Variability* edited by Beeching and Woodfield (2015).

## 2. Discourse Completion Test – origins and overview

Before the Discourse Completion Test (DCT) is introduced a short notice on the scope of the present paper is in place. It is not aimed at presenting the results of research pertaining to the realization patterns of various speech acts across cultures, although many papers reporting on such research will be referred to. If any data or findings are commented or evoked, it will be in a major part with reference to the data collection instruments which were used in the studies. The focus of the present paper is purely methodological, limited to one particular data collection tool, against the background of other instruments employed by investigators.

In late 1970-s and early 1980-s the necessity to modify language teaching curricula to include pragmatic and culture-related factors became very pressing. Criticism levelled at inadequate syllabi, neglecting the functional perspective of language and the culture-driven patterns of language use, together with developments of Speech Act Theory, produced a niche which could only be filled with extensive cross-cultural investigation of speech act performance, which could later be applied in the development of better teaching materials. These were perfect circumstances for such projects as the Cross-Cultural Study of Speech Act Realization Patterns (CCSARP) initiated by Blum-Kulka and Olsh-

tain (1984), which aimed at collecting large samples of data from both native and non-native speakers of various languages in order to find patterns of language use in a broad variety of situational settings.

In order to satisfy the need for extensive data sets the project had to be based on a methodology capable of meeting a number of requirements which often seemed to be mutually exclusive, or at least very difficult to reconcile. First of all, in order to be widely applicable, the findings had to cover a relatively extensive range of naturally occurring situations in which particular speech acts could be performed. Secondly, to meet the requirement of proper representativeness, the data collection tool had to offer the potential of yielding very rich samples. Thirdly, the procedure had to be replicable for the sake of consistency of findings and the prospective comparability of the results. Finally, the tool had to be very practicable, reducing to the very minimum the necessary time and effort which had to be invested in the process of data collection. The answer to all these needs was offered in the form of the DCT.

The instrument was initially developed for the purpose of investigating lexical simplification by language learners (Levenston & Blum 1978), and later applied to the study of speech act performance of learners of Hebrew as a second language (Blum-Kulka 1982). However, it was the paper on the investigation of requests and apologies (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain 1984) which popularized the DCT as the most efficient data collection tool of its time. Many books published subsequently only confirm this fact (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper 1989; Kasper 2000; Aijmer 2011).

A typical DCT has a written form (that is why it is often also abbreviated as WDCT), and consists of a certain number of situational descriptions (usually between 10 and 20) followed by a short dialogue containing some empty fragments to be filled by the study subjects, who are asked to imagine that they are acting in particular situational roles and to write down what they would most probably say in such circumstances. The examples below are quoted from the original paper by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain and their purpose was to elicit requests (1) and apologies (2):

(1) *At a students' apartment*

Larry, John's room-mate, had a party the night before and left the kitchen in a mess.

**John:** Larry, Ellen and Tom are coming for dinner tonight and I'll have to start cooking soon;

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**Larry:** OK, I'll have a go at it right away.

(2) *At the professor's office*

A student has borrowed a book from her teacher, which she promised to return today. When meeting her teacher, however, she realizes that she forgot to bring it along.

**Teacher:** Miriam, I hope you brought the book I lent you.

**Miriam:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Teacher:** OK, but please remember it next week.

(Blum-Kulka & Olshtain 1984, p. 198)

The italicized fragments provide a short description of the setting where a particular conversational exchange takes place. The short description which follows contains information on the social roles of the participants and their relationship, plus some relevant account of previous events which led to the conversation. The onsets of participants' contributions are indicated by their names or social roles in bold type, and in both conversations there is an empty line which needs to be filled in with an appropriate contribution. The situational descriptions and the fragments of the conversational exchanges serve as sufficient prompts for the appropriate speech act which is being elicited.

DCTs constructed in the way specified above exhibit a number of important advantages. Most importantly, they offer a very high control of situational variables: all respondents act in the same social roles, in the same situations and with the same background knowledge. This translates into high replicability of the study design and high comparability of the gathered data sets. Additionally, the DCT may be developed in such a way that it will contain entries representing many possible configurations of relevant socio-linguistic and contextual variables, including such settings which are usually inaccessible for naturalistic data collection. They can be manipulated at ease and adapted for the particular study purpose and research questions. There is no doubt that the DCT is very practicable: it is relatively easy to design, simple in administration and capable of returning high volumes of data in a relatively short time, without considerable effort on the part of the researcher. Many scholars have also benefitted from the fact that it is highly recognizable as a data collection tool and has been used in an impressive number of studies all over the world to date.

Obviously, there are also important reservations and disadvantages, acknowledged and voiced quite frequently by both ardent enthusiasts and sworn adversaries. The most important shortcoming of the DCT is the artificial status of data which it provides. In no way can the findings be labelled as reporting the natural and spontaneous use of language. The degree to which DCT-collected data diverges from the real language is, of course, a matter of dispute and may actually be variable from instance to instance, but the difference is always there. Additionally, DCTs very seldom give insight to such features of natural conversations as discourse markers, false starts, repetitions and prosody, and usually are biased towards higher levels of formality of expression. The responses are usually limited to a short single turn and constrain the participants' freedom in strategically controlling the conversation. Additionally, the contributions are often to a large degree pre-specified, in the sense that certain locutionary choices are much more appropriate than others, due to specific contextual embedding and the fragments which have already been given in advance. Occasionally, the

instrument may also suffer from unclear formulation of background information or the imposition of situational contexts and social roles with which the participants are not familiar or in which they feel uncomfortable. Finally, we cannot forget about the tendency common to everyone in a situation involving awareness of being in some way tested to act in a way which would either please the investigator or present ourselves in a better light.

The remaining part of the paper will be devoted to careful inspection of the advantages against the shortcomings characterized above, on the basis of numerous studies, both practically and methodologically oriented, in order to determine the significance and usefulness of the DCT in present-day and future applications.

### 3. Applicability of DCT to the study of speech acts

It is impossible to list all publications which provide reports on studies employing the DCT as a data collection tool, there are thousands of them. Looking through their titles allows us, however, to identify certain preferences of the investigators in connection with the types of speech acts most willingly studied with the application of the DCT. The most popular include requests (e.g. Faerch and Kasper (1989), Rintell and Mitchell (1989), Van Mulken (1996), Lee (2005), Woodfield (2006), Economidou-Kogetsidis (2008; 2009; 2013), Woodfield and Economidou-Kogetsidis (2010)), apologies (e.g. Bataineh (2006), Afghari (2007), Kim (2008), Jebahi (2011)), complaints (e.g. Tanck (2004), Vásquez (2011)), compliments (e.g. Yuan (2001), Golato (2003), Jucker (2009)), compliment responses (e.g. Tang and Zhang (2009)), refusals (e.g. Beebe, Takahashi and Uliss-Weltz (1990), Tanck (2004)), greetings (e.g. Žurek (2007)) and expressing and responding to thanks (e.g. Bieswanger (2015), Eisenstein and Bodman (1986), Yusefi et al. (2015)). It is possible and indeed practiced to employ the DCT to the exploration of realization patterns of virtually any speech act, but the ones mentioned above constitute a visible majority.

In the course of time the instrument was often modified and tested for its reliability and validity potential, because in spite of its simplicity and straightforwardness of design, a lot of attention and care has to be invested in the process of preparation. For example, Billmyer and Varghese (2000) decided to check the influence of expanding the situational prompt on the quantity and quality of collected data. It turned out that more extended, precise and elaborate situational descriptions delivered significantly longer and more elaborate request formulations in both groups under investigation (native speakers and non-native speakers of English). Rose (1992), on the other hand, wanted to find out in what way getting rid of hearer's response in the DCT would influence the request formulations provided by participants. The findings could not be interpreted as supporting such a modification of the DCT, because although the request formulations were a bit longer and used more supportive moves and downgraders

when no hearer response was included in the DCT, the type and level of directness of the request itself was not visibly influenced.

Occasionally, also the applicability of DCTs to various languages was placed in the foreground. In the conclusion to the study of Japanese and American English requests, Rose (1994) tentatively suggests that open-ended DCTs may be less appropriate for investigations in non-Western contexts, while Nelson, Al Batal and El Bakary (2002) demonstrate a positive effect of replacing written forms with response recordings on their length and naturalness in Arabic.

#### 4. The DCT against other data collection methods

In order to compare the DCT with other data collection tools and methods it is convenient to refer first to their schematic representation against the axis of respondents' control over the language which they are faced with or which they are asked to produce. It could also be described as an axis of freedom of expression. The figure below is a slightly modified version of the diagram created by Kasper and Dahl (1991, p. 3):

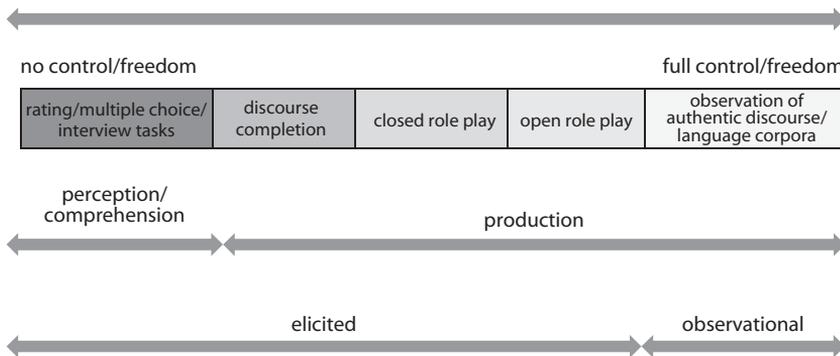


Figure 1. Comparison of various forms of data collection  
(extended after Kasper & Dahl 1991)

Starting from the left, we have tasks which do not involve any language production; instead, the participants are presented with ready-made samples of language and they are asked to perform various tasks, such as rating them on a scale of appropriateness or grammaticality, choosing the most suitable one or making some longer comments on aspects relevant to the study. The first neighbour to the right is the DCT, which involves relatively controlled production, where the freedom of choice of the form of expression is to a large degree limited. Closed role plays constitute the next form of elicitation, thanks to which certain features of natural conversations, such as prosody, discourse markers, repetitions or false starts, may be recorded. Open role plays, in turn, give the

participants full freedom to apply strategic planning of the discourse structure, although they still belong to elicitation techniques, where we do not deal with authentic situations. The extreme right represents the shift to observational techniques, which involve natural language use as it occurs in real situations, where the participants are in full control of their linguistic performance. Both spoken and written form of language can be in the focus of attention, depending on the study design and purpose.

The report by Kasper and Dahl (1991) is actually an extended review of a large selection of studies which were published over the period of preceding twelve years, employing various methods of data collection. The authors note that although naturally occurring language is the ultimate and ideal object of linguistic investigation, such studies are rare, mainly due to serious organizational disadvantages. Additionally, it has to be admitted that naturalistic data collection is possible only in a limited range of settings. As the authors write, “with the exception of highly routinized and standardized speech events, sufficient instances of cross-linguistically comparable data are difficult to collect through observation of authentic conversation” (Kasper & Dahl 1991, p. 41). That is why the central point of the paper is a multifaceted comparison of role plays against DCTs.

Role plays have one obvious advantage over DCTs: they yield language which is much closer to real conversational behavior, as it contains multiple turns, is strategically organized, and exhibits such conversational features as prosody, false starts, repetitions and overlapping. Additionally, role play studies are easily replicable. On the other hand, they are much more difficult in technical handling, because they require careful transcription, which is very time consuming and always involves some simplifications and possibly also distortion of the original material. Kasper and Dahl also indicate that in the process of role play data analysis interrater reliability is harder to achieve (p. 21), although later they add that “there is [still] a great need (...) for comparative studies of the validity of different elicitation techniques” (p. 41).

In response to this requirement, the study of Felix-Brasdefer (2010) offers an extensive overview of DCTs, role plays and verbal reports in the context of validity and reliability. As far as the interrater reliability is concerned, the figures speak in favor of DCTs. Quoting the findings of Hudson (2001), Felix-Brasdefer reports that DCT studies yield 0.86 score for interrater reliability, compared to 0.75 for role plays and 0.78 for data obtained in language labs (Felix-Brasdefer 2010, p. 44). However, the main point of focus for Felix-Brasdefer is the notion of validity, which is analyzed in several dimensions: related to content, construct and criterion.

As far as the content validity of various instruments is concerned, it is in fact dependent on a particular research design and the care invested in the preparation of the data collection tool. The degree to which a particular item measures intended properties of a given area, or how well the items encompass the range of situations in which a given speech act is performed, does not really depend on the choice between a DCT and a role play: it is more the outcome of the quality

of construction of either of them. However, when we inspect more closely the construct validity of DCTs and role plays (i.e. their internal structure, in relation to which aspect of pragmatic competence they attempt to measure), it turns out that if we focus on interaction, then some serious disadvantages of both role plays and DCTs may be exposed. For example, in role plays in which students are asked to perform together with their university professors, their real-life roles can very significantly interfere with the roles which they are asked to act out. In turn, while filling in DCT response sheets, participants are very often highly inhibited by the closed and prescribed situational scenarios.

Before any conclusions are formulated, however, it is necessary to return once again to naturalistic data collection, which in recent years received a very important new dimension. This new face is represented by language corpora, which are more and more frequently exploited in linguistic investigations. When Kasper and Dahl were writing their paper, computer-assisted handling of electronically recorded language data was in its infancy. Nowadays very rich collections of authentic language use are available to the researchers, together with increasingly sophisticated and ingenious software offering unlimited research options. The question is, however, what important changes this has brought into the research methodology and in which dimensions our insight into the real language use has become richer and more illuminating.

Very interesting observations are reported by Jucker (2009), who uses the investigations of the speech act of complimenting to pinpoint the major differences between the types of research which he calls 'armchair' (intuited data), 'field' (natural data) and 'laboratory' (elicited data). As the naturally occurring language is available nowadays in form of language corpora, Jucker decided to focus on the potential differences between the more traditional form of data collection (field notes) and the corpus method, as one of the central issues in the paper. His illustration takes advantage of an earlier study which he conducted with his colleagues (Jucker, Schneider, Taavitsainen, & Breustedt, 2008), in order to compare the results of the classic investigation of compliments by Manes and Wolfson (1981) with an attempted replication based on corpus data.

One important difference between the two study designs is the method of identification of the target construction. In field work, every instance of language use identified as a complement is noted down first, and then the examples are analyzed in order to identify the emerging patterns which most frequently occur, which in turn can be used to elaborate generalized formulae composed of metalinguistic labels. In extracting data from language corpora the analysts work in the opposite direction: they have to use metalinguistic labels to produce search strings capable of returning the examples of authentic language use recorded in the corpus. In the former situation the procedure is largely inductive, in the latter case – predominantly deductive. Thus, in an attempt to find the kind of constructions reported by Manes and Wolfson, Jucker and his colleagues had to construct search strings based on the generalizations identified by the former. However, in spite of great care invested in the elaborations and subsequent

'manual' checking of the results, it turned out that the findings reported in the two studies were significantly divergent, in that the most frequent pattern in Manes and Wolfson's study was considerably overgenerated, while the next two substantially undergenerated in the study by Jucker et al.

The comparison allowed to highlight the major drawbacks of corpus analysis, although the criticism of this method was by no means the authors' intention. They wanted to stress that it is extremely difficult to produce search strings which neither undergenerate nor overgenerate the correct examples, that the software frequently filters out all search results which only slightly diverge from the search string (because of false starts, hesitation sounds, untypical connections, insertions and discourse particles) or which extend over a couple of turns, and that the data must often be checked manually in order to eliminate incorrect examples. It can also be added that corpus analysis will never allow to identify very untypical examples of a given speech act, although we come across them on everyday basis. Studies involving careful manual analysis of relatively small corpora often surprise us with examples escaping all possible classificatory labels or patterns (e.g. untypical instances of compliments quoted in Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk (1989)). The conclusion is that there is no flawless method of collecting data and that the choice must always be based on careful consideration of all advantages and disadvantages which they offer.

## 5. Synthesis versus selection

The suggestions formulated in most of the papers reviewed above seem to have one common denominator. All authors in some way speak in favor of combining the advantages of particular data collection tools, and the most evident solution seems to be exploitation of at least two different ones in every study.

Perhaps not all authors are so explicit about it, but we can sometimes read the recommendation between the lines. For example, in Jucker (2009) we read that ideal method does not exist, that in fact the choice depends predominantly on the research question(s), and that it is not necessary to use as many methods as possible in a given research. Most importantly, more modesty is required in arguing for the superiority of any of the methods and in generalizing the results or applicability of our findings. It is Felix-Brasdefer (2010) who goes this one step further, when he recommends the use of verbal reports as instruments validating the experimental data. In his opinion, both concurrent and retrospective reports increase content and construct validity of DCTs. Another good solution involves the use of speech data gathered in institutionalized settings (where it is relatively easy to obtain), in order to validate simulated examples. One more alternative is proposed by Woodfield (2008), who shows how combining a DCT with a concurrent verbal report by native speakers of English may produce a better and more authentic version of the DCT, to be later used in further research. Economidou-Kogetsidis (2013), in turn, advocates taking advantage of DCT-elicited data as preliminary

information on the semantic formulas, the general tendencies and pragmalinguistic preferences of native speakers, which can be later investigated in more detail with the help of some other data collection tools.

The preference for combination is not anything new, it seems quite evident in a number of earlier studies: Beebe & Cummings (1985), who compared refusals obtained with the help of DCTs with those recorded from telephone conversations, Eisenstein & Bodman (1986), who studied expressions of gratitude with the help of a DCT supported by informal interview, Bodman & Eisenstein (1988), in which DCT results were compared to data obtained with open role plays and natural language recordings, and Rintell & Mitchell (1989), who looked at requests elicited with a DCT and a controlled role play. In all these studies and in many subsequent ones, DCTs are combined with other data collection tools in order to render the findings more reliable and trustworthy.

In addition to increased reliability and validity, combination provides us also with valuable information on the inherent advantages of each data collection instrument. For example, in her study of requests obtained with a DCT and from authentic telephone conversations involving service situations, Economidou-Kogetsidis (2013) was able to observe that the use of a DCT leads to increased directness, syntactic and lexical simplification, and more speaker-oriented request perspective (dominance of 'want' statements). Higher level of directness can be the result of the absence of a real person as a conversational partner; with other people present the need for facework and pressure related to politeness is always higher. The simplifications are the natural consequence of the closed character of the instrument, whereas the application of speaker-oriented perspective can be again attributed to the absence of a real conversational partner, with whom more status-related negotiation would be necessary, next to the obvious recognition of the other person's rights and needs.

Selection of a single data collection instrument, on the other hand, would usually entail a more limited scope of study or its preliminary character, especially if the only instrument used is the DCT. It will be typically the first choice for scholars taking their first steps in investigating pragmalinguistic variability and trying to establish their position in the world of academia. Symptomatically, most of recently published papers investigating speech act realization patterns come from the Middle East and Africa, and the majority of authors successfully employ the DCT format as their data collection tool. One of the reasons is that it is a relatively safe instrument, in the sense that if it is properly constructed and executed, the findings are usually reliable and difficult to question or refute.

For the same reason the DCT is a valuable asset in the process of education and training of young linguists. When properly introduced and used in small-scale research projects by students of linguistics, it can very quickly expose the weaknesses of any research design, as well as powerfully demonstrate the strengths of structured investigation. Offering the students some practice with a DCT-based research can undoubtedly contribute very largely to their development as young researchers.

It does not mean, however, that the DCT is some kind of a toy for beginners only. It will remain a very powerful and influential data collection tool, applied also in very sophisticated and ambitious projects. As the research and its criticism so far have shown, there are so many advantages which the DCT offers (presented at length throughout the paper) that we cannot simply afford dismissing it as an infantile instrument. On the contrary, being aware of all its limitations and strengths, we can construct and use it in research in such a way that will guarantee high quality of both the obtained data and the conclusions drawn from its analysis.

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