

The Language and Pragmatics of Sexual Harassment

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journal or publication title	JALT2006 Proceedings
page range	144-150
year	2006-11
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/10228/5839



Piloting of the Sexual Harassment DCT

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Reference Data:

Long, R. & Howard, A. (2007). The language and pragmatics of sexual harassment. In K. Bradford-Watts (Ed.), *JALT2006 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

This paper presents the issue of sexual harassment. The authors discuss the piloting of a discourse completion task (DCT) and survey based on how Japanese and native-English speaking women evaluated and responded to statements that pertain to sexual harassment. The results from the pilot will be used as a means of discussion and for forming research questions for the larger study.

本発表では、セクシュアル・ハラスメントの問題を扱う。発表者は、日本人女性と英語のネイティブ・スピーカーの女性がセクシュアル・ハラスメントについての言明をどのように評価しまたどう反応するか、に基づく談話完成課題とその調査に関する予備知識と試行結果を議論する。この試行結果は、議論の方法として、またより大きな研究の調査問題を作成するために用いられる。

Rationale

There has been more attention to the issue of sexual harassment in Japan recently. As Brandenburg (1995) notes, sexual harassment is not simply a sexual issue but may also be an exploitation of a power relationship, but this depends on the subjective experience of the recipient. The same behavior might be enjoyed by one recipient and unwanted by another. The issue of perception is one that is needs further investigation, as it has not been determined if the views of men (and of their responses) would be different from those of women. Of further interest is to identify if age and status is a factor in how women respond to statements associated with sexual harassment.

Aim

While the issue of sexual harassment in Japan has drawn more attention in the media, it has yet to be determined how women conceptualize this issue linguistically, that is, how particular statements may be determined as forms of sexual harassment. This paper is about the piloting of a discourse completion task that seeks to identify if there are differences between Japanese and non-Japanese women concerning a statements that may be related to sexual harassment.

Furthermore, as Japanese women often have different views about sex and gender norms based on age and status, the aim is to investigate whether or not these differences affect their judgments and responses to these statements. Thus, the two hypotheses are as follows:

1. It is hypothesized that there will be significant agreement among the participants in identifying statements associated with sexual harassment.
2. It is hypothesized that the age and status of the speakers will not influence the participants' responses.

The DCT and Survey

Item writing was based on issues raised in the literature about sexual harassment. Six kinds of statements that related to the definition of sexual harassment were identified: these included observations about a woman's appearance, suggestions, questions, rumors, requests / commands, and opinions. A series of discourse completion tasks were written based on statements which the participants had identified as being related to sexual harassment. These were then

revised by basing them on actual situations involving sexual harassment.

Discourse completion tasks

The discourse completion tasks were written based on statements identified by participants as being related to sexual harassment. The first set concerned whether or not age was a factor; therefore, there were two versions of each task. The first discourse completion task had a picture of a young man (in his 20s) as well as an older man (in his 50s or 60s). The only limitation to the DCTs may lie in the lack of metapragmatic assessment of contextual features (Rose & Ng, 2001).

At first we attempted to create the items on the DCT ourselves, however the responses indicated that participants were not taking them seriously. The next DCT was created using situations discovered on Web-based advice boards. These were situations in which the writer felt that harassment had taken place, but there was still some ambiguity. In many cases, the DCT situation was one event in what would become a pattern of harassment. Since a pedagogical goal of this research is to help learners identify harassment before it becomes a serious problem, we felt this was appropriate.

There had to be some ambiguity in the cases, or else all of the subjects would answer the same way. There is no ambiguity when, for example, someone offers to exchange sex for money or a grade. There is a lot more argument with gender harassment and the other levels, so we investigated those. Also, with more blatant sexual harassment, it no longer is a *pragmatics problem*, so one needs to go to the dean or other resource.

One problem we encountered is that it is very difficult to find different examples. People tend to harass in the same way, so the survey items are the 12 that examples that we could find that were a little bit different. When researching this further, it may be prudent to limit the type of harassment under investigation.

In making the DCT, we wanted to give the subjects the option of not responding because it is one choice available to people subjected to harassment, and also it is also a problem of using DCTs in general. This proved problematic, as will be discussed below.

Feedback we received about the first instrument indicated uncertainty as to whether any particular statement constituted sexual harassment, as it depended on the relationship with the other person. We tried to be as specific as possible about the relationship of the subject to the potential harasser, but many participants still said that this was unclear.

Subjects and context

We piloted the DCT with 10 women, 8 eight from the U.S., one from Canada, and one from England. Most of these women teach in universities, four of them actually specialize in linguistics, communication, or human sexuality. In addition, seven Japanese first-year university students were surveyed. There are many problems with getting subjects for a test like this. The first is, obviously, that some people feel that it will be too personal, although the items were designed not to be sexually explicit. The second problem was that, possibly due to the length of the survey, many people said that they would complete it, but then not do so. Most of the

NS subjects were people I knew, but two were volunteers, who tended to be much more confrontational than the other subjects.

Analysis

Several of these situations actually represent requests or invitations, so they were analyzed according to research on refusals with native speakers of American English. According to Beebe, Takahashi, and Ulisz-Weitz (1990), American speakers of English tend to refuse by giving a positive statement or opinion, then an expression of regret, then an excuse: “It sounds fun, but I’m sorry, I have to wash my hair that day.” Sometimes they name an alternative or make a promise to do something at a later date. One of the differences that Beebe, et. al. found was that American English (AE) excuses are much more specific than those of Japanese speaking Japanese (JJ) when responding to the same DCT. Japanese subjects answering in English tended to show a difference when answering people of different status, and they tended to begin with an expression of regret.

Requests

In our survey, there were five invitations or requests:

1. an older female professor invites the respondent to dinner
2. a male professor invites the respondent to dinner with a comment about her boyfriend
3. someone invites the respondent to his house to have her photograph taken

4. the respondent is invited to feel a man's chest muscles
5. the respondent is requested to make dinner for a picnic.

The main differences that can be seen between the native speaker responses and those found by Beebe et al., (1990) is that in refusing potentially harassing requests the respondents do not use positive comments and they do not make specific excuses. Excuses tended to be things like, "I'm busy" or "I can't."

The first item with the female professor was shown on the Likert scale not to be likely to be considered sexual harassment by either group, and the refusals tend to be more like those found by Beebe, et. al. (1990), although one NS respondent did confront the teacher with, "I don't think this is appropriate." Two of the J respondents actually accepted the invitation, and one of the NS respondents did as well. It is possible that this is because members of both groups feel it is less likely that they will be harassed by a female, but it could also be because this is a fairly innocuous situation.

When the professor refers to a boyfriend, both groups became more confrontational. Two of the native speakers actually accepted the invitation, but in a way that suggests that they are emphasizing that it is not a date. Japanese women chose not to respond in the majority of cases, although a few did make confrontational responses. One answer: "Please never mind about him. We (boyfriend and me) are always together, so sometimes we had better apart." This response could actually be taken as flirtatious, which is probably not what the respondent intended. In the case of being asked to model, Japanese respondents stuck to the model for JJ respondents in Beebe, et. al., (1990) generally

beginning with an apology. NS responses were divided. Some respondents seemed to want to give the man the benefit of the doubt, but some were very confrontational, or used a shortened form of the refusal pattern to indicate disapproval.

When asked to feel a man's chest, the NS respondents refused, but they were likely to mitigate it with a positive statement or a reason. J respondents overwhelmingly chose no response at all. We found that there is a great deal of difference in responses between Japanese and NS responses when the situation involves touching.

With the situation involving cooking for a picnic, neither group seemed to feel that this constitutes harassment, according to the Likert scale. However, NS women showed a great deal more disapproval of the request. There were two acceptances, but the women indicated that they didn't want to do it alone. The J subjects tended to accept, but there were two non-responses, and one refusal.

The items that were not refusals were a little more difficult to analyze. There were three main patterns: to try to change the subject, which we called a *redirection*, and *confrontation*, when the subject explicitly indicated that she found the speech or action offensive. Another pattern was to joke. One problem that we encountered was that a response such as "Why are you saying this to me?" could be either a confrontation or a redirection, depending on one's tone of voice.

Appearance

There were two items that dealt with comments on appearance. In one, a survey on students' interests is

answered with “I am interested in your . . .” In the other, a male supervisor tells a nursing volunteer that she should wear white underwear. The responses to the first illustrate the problem with having “I would not respond at all” as a choice. Most of the J respondents chose this, and it has the highest rate for the NS responses as well.

This is probably because this is the easiest thing to do. Since the respondent is reading a survey, and not actually having a conversation with the harasser “no response” is actually the path of least resistance. In other contexts, though, such as in a conversation or when asked a direct question, “no response” actually represents quite a strong response. Interestingly, J respondents had very strong negative responses to being told what kind of underwear to wear, where NS respondents tended to give the manager the benefit of the doubt.

Innuendo

This consisted of two situations: one in which the respondent was shown a picture of a naked woman, and one in which her professor asked if she had had a big night last night. The reactions of NS women were evenly split, with half choosing confrontation and half redirection, and one joke. When I talked to some of the subjects about this, I found a great variety of reactions. Although there was pretty much 100 percent agreement that is definitely or probably harassment, some of the respondents thought it would be funny, while some thought it would be extremely embarrassing and degrading.

The Japanese women again mostly chose not to respond, with one comment that could be either redirection or confrontation, and one remark that I think is a joke: “Is this your favorite picture?” Although most women in both groups chose not to respond, or to respond nonverbally, to the professor who suggests she has had a big night, the J group was more confrontational, where the NS women chose redirection.

Gender harassment

In this category we expected to see clear differences in the judgment of sexual harassment. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Japanese women are likely to define as sexual harassment things that NS women would call discrimination. However, there was not that much difference. This might be because “discrimination, not harassment” was not a choice that they were given, and participants were hesitant to mark the statement as unproblematic. Some of the respondents did write *discrimination* in the survey. However, it might also be that they may have genuinely felt the statement was sexual harassment. The original NS women who posted these incidents to web-boards thought so, and *gender harassment* is a recognized subcategory of sexual harassment.

There were two situations for gender harassment, one in which a lawyer says that women have no head for the law, and one in which the respondent is given a teddy bear as a gift. To the first one, the NS respondents tended to respond with jokes, but choosing not to respond was also common. This is another example of the problem with the “no response” choice—in some cases no response seems to be intended to convey strong disapproval, but in this case some

of the women seemed to feel the remark just wasn't worth a response. Or as one woman said, "I would not respond in any way, bearing in mind I'll probably outlive him." It is difficult to understand the intended meaning of the Japanese responses. In this case it is possible that the respondents just didn't have the English ability to express themselves.

One item does not fit into any other category: being involuntarily hugged. There was also a difference in responses between NS and J women to this situation. NS women objected, but they mitigated their objection, e.g. "I'm just not much of hugger," or they apologized. J response was apparently much stronger. Most chose not to respond at all, but some directly confronted the perpetrator, with no mitigation: Don't hug me.

In conclusion, there are two main differences between NS and J responses. First, although redirection was common strategy of NS respondents, the J respondents never used it. J respondents tended to use silence in a large number of cases. We were unable to ascertain from the DCt why the respondents suggest this—do they not know how to respond, do they not understand the situation, or do they believe this is the most effective response?

Pedagogical Implications

The fact that J women did not choose redirection might be a problem for them if they find themselves in a harassing situation. If they do not know how to redirect, they have no way of responding except to confront, and the situation might not be so clear as to make them comfortable with that. The NS respondents were capable of showing disapproval

without being confrontational, which might be enough to stop the behavior without causing further problems. Silence can indicate strong disapproval, but it may not always be effective as an response to sexual harassment, especially if the person harassed seeks legal recourse and needs to show that she objected to the harassment. It could, in some situations, also be seen as agreement or compliance.

In our conference presentation, audience members suggested that there were too many non-verbal and contextual features that would influence how they would have viewed the person and comment represented in the DCT, indicating that a DCT was not the most appropriate instrument in which to measure the pragmatics of sexual harassment. One goal of further research would be to investigate this question, possibly by putting the instrument into Japanese.

Conclusion

Aside from the usual problems of finding participants, it is clear that investigating possible differences between nationalities in responses to sexual harassment needs to account for a wide variety of factors relating to non-verbal communication, contextual variables, as well as relationships (status) and culture. A DCT and survey, it appears, allowed only a superficial result. Further research should make use of role-play self-assessment; this tool obliges the examinee to both (a) *view* their own pragmatic performance(s) in previously video-recorded role-plays and (b) *rate* those performances. This should be followed by discourse role-play tasks in which the participant reads identical situation descriptions and then rates her ability to perform

pragmatically in those situations. The difficulty, however, is constructing realistic situations and contexts in which to carry out this research, yet the data will provide some insight as to how women can better respond to sexual harassment.

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