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Sociopragmatic development and L2 identity during study abroad

Abstract

The study uses a multi-method approach to examine how two male Australian learners of Indonesian develop in their stance towards making complaints, during a short stay in Indonesia. One learner, Paul, adopted an initial stance of sweet-natured tolerance, whereby he was highly reluctant to complain regardless of whether native speakers would do so. However, he came to abandon that stance and assert the same rights to complain as native speakers do. The other learner, Oscar, followed a very different path of development. He came to feel strongly alienated within his L2 setting, which made him increasingly reluctant to make complaints regardless of whether native speakers would complain or not. This contrasting identity development of Paul and Oscar also affected their learning about L2 pragmatic norms. Paul developed new and more confidently-held beliefs about native norms for when to complain. By contrast, Oscar's sense of identity as an outsider made it hard for him to form confident perceptions about those norms. These two case studies demonstrate that L2 learners' sociopragmatic development during study abroad is closely linked to the process of constructing an L2 identity. Thus, they may become either more or less ready to adopt native pragmatic norms with increased time in the L2 culture setting, depending on the trajectory of their identity development. Also, learners' L2 identities influence their very ability to learn about native-speaker sociopragmatic norms.

1. Introduction

This study examines the sociopragmatic development of two learners of Indonesian during a seven-week sojourn in a town in central Java, Indonesia, while studying at a language centre attached to a university. It aims to trace the development of their perceptions about whether to make verbal complaints within their L2 culture setting. This helps us understand L2 sociopragmatic development, and in particular the issue of how much weight learners place on native pragmatic norms in deciding whether to perform face-threatening speech acts. It also helps us to understand the relationship between L2 identity development and pragmatic development, by demonstrating specific ways in which the two elements are linked.

2. Background

2.1 Sociopragmatics

Pragmatic knowledge can be classified into two types. *Pragmalinguistic* knowledge refers to knowledge about the linguistic resources available for performing linguistic acts. Sociopragmatics is the more social dimension of pragmatics. *Sociopragmatic* knowledge refers to knowledge of the relationship between pragmatic action and social context (e.g. Brown and Levinson 1987; Thomas 1983). A basic aspect of sociopragmatic knowledge—one especially relevant to this study—is knowledge about whether it is appropriate to perform a given speech act at all in a given context.

2.2 L2 identities

One perspective on L2 development is to view language as a site of identity construction (e.g. Norton and McKinney 2011; Pavlenko 2002). The range of identities available to learners within their L2 setting influences the outcomes of their learning in two ways: by affecting their access to L2 linguistic resources, and by affecting their agencies and investments in learning the language (Pavlenko 2002).

‘L2 identity’ for the purposes of this study can be defined as the personal stances that learners adopt towards the L2 culture setting (see Kinginger 2009: 107). The process of forming an L2 identity is closely linked to L2 sociopragmatic development, in particular. L2 learners regularly display slow development in sociopragmatics (see for example Barron 2003; Hoffman-Hicks 2000; Rose 2000, 2009; Trosborg 1995). One likely explanation for this is that L2 speakers “may cling to familiar forms of self-expression conceived as elements of their personal identity” (Kinger 2009: 89). That is, L2 speakers may knowingly disregard native pragmatic norms because those norms are not compatible with their own stances toward the L2 culture setting. Examples of this happening have been observed. For example, Thomas (1983) describes an incident where a US American L2 speaker of Russian chose not to apologise in a situation where she knew that an apology was expected by L2 native norms; and Ishihara and Tarone (2009) describe an incident where a US American L2 speaker of Japanese did the same thing.

2.3 Method

The present study is part of a larger one which examines how a cohort of Australian learners developed in pragmatics during a sojourn in Indonesia (see for example Hassall 2013). That larger study examined the learning of address terms, leave-taking and complaining; the present study focuses on complaining. That notion of ‘complaining’ is broadly interpreted, because while the participants had been instructed to focus in their diary entries on complaints specifically, they sometimes reported on other types of verbal conflict instead (such as refusing to pay excessive sums demanded by service providers). The study adopts that broad interpretation of

the participants themselves by focusing on a range of interactions involving actual or potential verbal conflict.

2.3.1 Data elicitation instruments

This study employs a combination of methods: interviews, diary-keeping, and a pre-test/post-test instrument—as detailed below.

For the pre-test/post-test, participants were presented with several scenarios involving a potential complaint. For each scenario, participants were asked how likely they were to complain in that situation. They were then invited to comment further on that response; for example; to comment on any perceptions that influenced their willingness to complain in the situation.¹ Two of the test scenarios in particular proved effective in eliciting comments from participants which revealed something of their stance towards verbal conflict within their L2 culture setting. In one scenario, the participant is a passenger in a taxi where the driver is driving fast, and overtaking in the face of oncoming traffic, in a way that strikes the passenger as unsafe. In the other scenario, the participant is a student who leaves their seat at a crowded table in the university library for a few minutes, first marking out their place with a pile of their belongings; and returns to find that a local student has taken their seat.

The procedure for diary-keeping and interviews was as follows. Before departure, the participants participated in an individual session with the researcher, held at their home university. In this session they were interviewed about their previous study of Indonesian, exposure to other languages and cultures, and expectations regarding the study-abroad experience; and also completed the pre-test.

While they were in-country the participants were assigned three sets of diary-keeping tasks on their learning of pragmatics. Their first two sets were to contain a minimum of six entries, with at least two on complaining, and their last set was to contain minimum of nine entries, with at least three on complaining.²

The participants were interviewed individually by the researcher after submitting each set of diary entries. The first interview was held around the two-week point of the course, the second interview around the four-week point, and the last interview shortly after the end of the course, back at the home university. In each meeting the participants were asked to clarify or elaborate on individual diary entries from the latest set of entries, asked about their daily interactions during the last weeks, and asked about their impressions and evaluations of their experience of living there. In the last meeting, participants also completed the post-test activity.

2.3.2 Selection of participants

The larger study comprised twelve participants. Although a number of those twelve participants made isolated remarks which shed light on their stance towards verbal conflict within the L2 culture at one point or another, only a few of them provided enough remarks throughout the study for a picture of their development to emerge. Two such participants, who show contrasting paths of development, are chosen as

the focus of this paper. These two stayed in the L2 culture setting for seven weeks, and each lived with a homestay family (for further details of the setting for the sojourn, see Hassall 2013).

In data extracts below, references to days refer to days within the program, so “Day 14/48” refers to Day 14 of a 48 day program, and “Day -1/48” denotes a day immediately before a 48 day program began.

3. Paul

‘Paul’ is a 20 year old white Australian male. He had studied Indonesian for two semesters at his home university in Australia at the time of departure, and was of upper elementary/low intermediate proficiency. He had never studied a foreign language other than Indonesian, and had never been abroad.

3.1 Before departure

In his pre-test, Paul displayed a wish to present himself as a ‘good westerner’: humble, respectful, and highly tolerant of what locals do. In the ‘library’ scenario where a local student takes his seat, Paul displayed this self-identity clearly. He stated that he would be unlikely to complain to the local student, and commented on that as follows.

- (1) if it was [at my home university in Australia] - - I would DEFINITELY come up the person and - give him a piece of my MIND - but if I’m in Indonesia I’m very sort of disinclined - to um:: be rude to a: - - um - - local [...] if I was an ACTUAL Indonesian I probably WOULD - go up and you know TELL him my books are there [...] I just don’t want to be the obnoxious FOREIGNER who comes up and BERATES them [pre-test]

In Extract (1) here, for Paul, the native pragmatic norm for whether to complain was not the key determinant for whether he complained himself. He thought that Indonesians probably would tend to complain in this situation, but that perception is largely beside the point for him. His self-identity ruled out complaining for him.

Paul showed a similar stance in the ‘taxi’ pre-test scenario, as well. He said that he would be very highly unlikely to complain to the driver, and commented:

- (2) I would NOT complain - to be honest [...] I know people DO tend to get uppity about - the SAFETY stuff I dunNO it just sort of feels: - sort of RU::DE? [...] and also you GO into another country you have to sort of EXPECT these kind of things to happen [...] I’d sort of RESPECT - - that - it might SEEM - dangerous or unsafe - to like - ME but - I would not be offended by what he was doing at ALL [...] yeah I’m not one to get UPPITY about that sort of - thing at ALL [pre-test]

In Extract (2) here, once again, the issue of a native norm was not of paramount importance to Paul.³ Rather, for Paul, the crucial thing was that it would not be fitting for *him*, as a western visitor, to complain about the driving practices of a local driver. His own stance on whether to complain was based on that.

3.2 Breakdown of initial identity

Paul's idealised sense of identity suffered shocks as soon as he arrived in Indonesia. He spent two nights in Bali, in an area teeming with western tourists, and immediately felt himself under assault from service people and vendors. For example, unofficial porters at the airport forcibly snatched his luggage and carted it away and then demanded an enormous price for their services, and taxi and mini-van drivers and food vendors demanded astronomical prices and refused to come down to acceptable ones [diary, Day -1/48; interview; Day 12/48]. He remarked: "My first night in Bali has been extremely eventful and argumentative [...] You have to adopt a forceful, obnoxious Australian manner to get by" [diary, Day -1/48].

Once during this time, as Paul felt his identity as a 'good westerner' slipping away, he tried to retrieve it. He had approached a taxi driver in a very friendly fashion, but then became rattled when the driver kept insisting on outrageous prices to take him to his hotel, and ended up shouting repeatedly at the driver: "It's GOT to be [such-and-such amount]" When the driver finally sullenly agreed, Paul smiled at him and said warmly "*Terima kasih banyak ya*" 'Thank you very much, yes.' However, the driver just gave Paul a puzzled, contemptuous look at his sudden reversal of manner: "he just - like he found it STRANGE" [Interview; Day 14/48].

In short, Paul felt himself forced into adopting an identity which he loathed: the loud aggressive westerner, simply to survive in everyday transactional encounters.

3.3 Flux

After Paul arrived in the town, his stance regarding verbal conflict underwent a period of flux, of gradual reconstruction. During the first weeks he experienced various relevant encounters, such as a case of apparent gross overcharging at a hair salon [diary, Day 21/48], and fully "five or six" encounters with bicycle rickshaw drivers who, after reaching the destination, would invariably declare that the pre-agreed price was wrong. Paul experimented with different ways to deal with these situations. For example, with the first few rickshaw drivers who tried to overcharge him, he argued politely, but he eventually decided that that was futile, so with the last two drivers he just handed over the pre-agreed amount of money, ignored their protests, turned his back and walked away [diary, Day 13/48; interview, Day 25/48]. So Paul gained experience in taking various stances in challenging situations. And a coherent identity started to emerge which was quite different to his initial stance before departure.

3.4 Emergence of a new identity

Paul's reports suggest that he began to display stances towards his L2 culture setting different from those he had displayed previously. In his fourth week in Indonesia, Paul dealt with two incidents in a way he was very pleased with. Paul characterised these incidents as "confronting someone who I'd previously talked to and they had lied to me in the conversation" [diary, Day 32/48]. On the first such occasion, Paul

went for a long walk by himself at night and became lost, and met a group of young men his own age sitting on the side of the road who, just for fun, gave him wrong directions. After wandering through deserted streets for ages, Paul eventually came across them again still sitting in the same place [diary, Day 32/48]. On the second occasion Paul found an electric shaver in a small shop. He tried it out by plugging it into a socket, and when it did not work, the owner vigorously denied that it was broken. So Paul bought it and took it home, but found out at home that it was broken after all, and brought it back to the shop [diary, Day 32/48].

In both these incidents Paul confronted the people in question, speaking calmly, with a polite demeanour; and thereby succeeded in getting what he wanted (i.e. correct directions from the youths, and a refund of money from the shop owner). Paul reported with satisfaction on these incidents: "Using [a] calm, methodical approach and keeping my cool [...] gave me a good experience of arguments in Indonesian" [diary, Day 32/48]. And he added in an interview: "I was HAPPY because [...] the really WESTERN thing to do would have just been to YELL at them [post-return interview]."

So Paul was pleased with the identity he projected. He had moved away from the sweet and hyper-tolerant identity he adopted before his departure, but was also avoiding the 'obnoxious westerner' persona which he disliked. He felt he was now successfully asserting his right to be treated fairly, while still managing to maintain a pleasant demeanour.

Another domain where Paul was satisfied with his development in complaining concerns queue-jumping. The issue, as Paul repeatedly experienced it, is this:

- (3) in Indonesian supermarkets? - and shops generally? - - there is a - HABIT - of Indonesian people to simply push IN? in front of the line? like - without any sort of explanation? - like you'll literally just be standing there and they'll just - walk in FRONT of you? [post-return interview]

Paul's behaviour when people push in front of him in this way changed:

- (4) at first - the first few weeks I didn't SAY anything - initially - because I knew it was a CULTURAL thing but then I decided to sort of pipe up and just be like - Maaf - SAYA pertama [Excuse me - I was first] - when they tried to go to the - counter and I knew I was NEXT - and - and as SOON as you said something they'd BACK OFF - - it's like they sort of RELIED on the fact that no-one said ANYTHING? - - to:: get AWAY with it? [...] I initially assumed - things like people pushing in the QUEUE - OH that's what EVERYone does HERE - - - but [...] the majority of Indonesians DON'T - it's only a very small MINORITY who do it." [post-return interview].

Two things can be seen from the above. First, Paul developed an increasingly nuanced perception of L2 native pragmatic norms. He initially perceived pushing into queues as acceptable within the L2 culture setting, simply because some Indonesians do it ("a cultural thing"). But as the weeks passed, he formed a less simplistic perception of just how appropriate it is by local cultural norms ("the majority of Indonesians

DON'T"). Second – unlike before his departure – Paul now felt that L2 pragmatic norms apply to *him*, as well. He felt that since it's not the norm to push in on people, he should not have to tolerate it either. The right to complain which is conferred on Indonesians by virtue of social norms was his right as well.

3.5 After return

In the post-test, Paul continued to display this new stance towards complaining. In the 'library' scenario Paul said: "When I first got here I DEFINITELY wouldn't have said anything at all? but NOW I DEFINITELY would? [...] I now feel comfortable enough in Indonesian culture [...] that I don't think [complaining in this scenario] is a particularly rude thing to DO - at ALL?" He explained further that taking someone else's seat is the same kind of behaviour as pushing into a queue, and thus he was now confident that "GENERALLY the majority of Indonesians DON'T [do it]" [post-test].

Paul's perception of the native pragmatic norm was now confident and explicit. And Paul clearly assumed now that his own conduct will be guided by that norm. He would complain here because he thought it's all right for Indonesians to do so.

In the 'taxi' scenario, Paul showed a similar development. He said now: "I would DEFINITELY [...] say something to the DRIVER". And he added "I'd feel a lot more COMFORTABLE doing it now [...] knowing everything I do about Indonesia" [post-test].

Again, Paul had developed more confident and explicit perceptions about the L2 native pragmatic norm. He now clearly regarded complaining to the driver as acceptable by L2 native norms ("knowing everything I do about Indonesia"). Further, he based his own decision on whether to complain largely on that fact. As he now chose to claim the rights that Indonesians claim, he was assuming a new place within the L2 culture setting.

To sum up, by the end of the sojourn, Paul had developed an identity which entails consulting L2 native pragmatic norms as a primary determinant for his own pragmatic action. Also, along with his increased confidence in the legitimacy of his own place within the L2 culture setting came an increased confidence in his understanding of L2 sociopragmatic norms themselves.

4. Oscar

'Oscar' is a 23 year old white Australian male, who had studied Indonesian for four semesters, and was of mid-to-high intermediate proficiency. He had studied German to an advanced level, and lived for a short time in Germany. He had travelled in other European countries as well, and also briefly in Central America. He had also once recently spent ten days on holiday in Indonesia with his Australian girlfriend. However, the co-presence of his girlfriend seems to have made that time in Indonesia a highly insulated experience: when Oscar was asked in his pre-departure interview about his impressions of Indonesia based on that earlier trip, he expressed no strong feelings about it.

4.1 Before departure

In the pre-test, Oscar conveyed a neutral stance towards making complaints in his L2 culture setting. This was exemplified in the ‘library’ scenario, where Oscar responded casually: “mm:: - I can’t re:ally see myself saying anything in that situation - probably - not particularly because it’s in INDONESIA - I probably wouldn’t say anything if the same thing happened here [i.e. at his home university in Canberra] either” [pre-test]. So Oscar seemed to feel that it made little difference to him whether a potentially conflictive encounter took place in his L2 or L1 culture setting: his assessment of whether to complain would not be significantly affected by that.

4.2 Outsider identity

Oscar quickly came to feel very alienated from his L2 environment – a development which (as we see shortly) strongly influenced his complaining. A feeling of being a conspicuous outsider quickly established itself as a dominant theme in his diary entries and interviews. During his second week, he said:

- (5) I can’t imagine WORKING here - - just the staring in the street - and the interest in what you do - and the laughing at the little things you do [...] I mean the attention you get here just gives you a lot of pressure? [...] I mean even if you’re just catching an *angkot* [public minivan] to uni and you know how it works - you’re not doing anything wrong - you know where to catch it and how much money to give the guy and where to get off - and everything - you STILL get all this attention [interview, Day 11/ 48]

This feeling of being a conspicuous outsider intensified as the sojourn continued. Two weeks later he spoke even more strongly on that theme. Here is an excerpt:

- (6) to stand in an elevator and people are clearly LAUGHING at you - - if you - transpose that to - to an Australian context that would be OUTRAGEOUS [...] I REALLY understand why expats [...] make those BUBBLES for themselves [...] it’s just too DISCONCERTING to be - around people every day who are - treating you as an outsider [...] you just get so much ATTENTION [...] you’re just reminded of being an outsider every - every – DAY at least [interview, Day 24/ 48]

4.3 Bewilderment about L2 pragmatic norms

Oscar’s feeling of alienation made him inclined to despair of understanding local norms for interaction. As a result, he felt “totally helpless in terms of making complaints” [diary, Day 12/48]. He illustrated that claim as follows. Whenever he tried to browse for clothes in the local department store, he felt badly disconcerted by the close attention of the female shop assistants, who “shadow” him incessantly as he moved from rack to rack, watching him “like a hawk”, and darting in whenever he betrayed the slightest interest in an item, to ask him if he wanted to try it on [diary, Day 12/48]. He exclaimed in frustration about their conduct: “I just don’t

UNDERSTAND it [...] I just don't know what they're DOING" [interview, Day 24/48]. Because of his uncertainty, he did not know if he could legitimately ask them to go away, and if so, how bluntly he could do it [interview, Day 24/48].⁴

Oscar's mystification about what is going on in such encounters made him feel even more isolated. He said that "it makes you want to take other foreigners WITH you - that's the sad thing about it" [interview, Day 24/48]. He explained that if you were with fellow westerners you could laugh about it together, but if you were by yourself, the weirdness of the experience was much harder to cope with.

4.4 Persistent frustration

Oscar continued to experience incidents of potential verbal conflict, but did not become more confident at handling them. Instead, he merely felt puzzled and frustrated by their incomprehensibility. On two occasions he was cheated on the fare by public mini-bus drivers. Objectively, Oscar handled both those incidents well, managing to obtain his change without raising his voice or losing his temper. However, he was left disoriented and confused by them. He felt frustrated in his inability to understand the drivers' behaviour.

On the first of those two occasions, Oscar handed the driver a larger banknote than was needed, and the driver "tried to act as if there was no need for change" [diary, Day 17/48]. When Oscar then asked the driver whether there was any change for him – deliberately choosing that low-key way of complaining in order to save the driver's face – the driver responded by trying to cheat him a second time, by giving him a drastically inadequate amount [diary, Day 17/48]. Oscar was mystified by the effrontery of this driver. He reflected in frustration: "people have TOLD me that there's this Javanese - need to save FACE but [...] how can you all save face when you're all - trying to screw each other OVER?" [interview, Day 24/48].

On the second occasion, a driver gave Oscar no change, and when Oscar challenged him, he grinned broadly at Oscar as he handed it over – as if, Oscar felt, the driver was trying to laugh off the entire episode [diary, Day 43/48]. Oscar remarked "it's not the ripping OFF that CONFUSES me [...] it's the fact that you're then expected to [...] to let him save FACE [...] by smiling BACK and - like HA HA isn't it funny you tried to rip me OFF" [post-return interview]⁵

So from Oscar's perspective, these challenging encounters were not helping him to make sense of L2 native norms for complaining. Instead, he just felt persistently confused and uneasy in situations of potential verbal conflict.

4.5 After return

In the post-test, Oscar revealed how his stance towards complaining within the L2 culture setting had changed since before his departure. This was particularly striking in the 'library' scenario. Oscar now expressed vehemently his antipathy to the notion of complaining to the student who took his seat:

- (7) I would DIE before I said something [...] no I would ABSOLUTELY not SAY something - - if there was no other space in the library I would LEAVE the LIBRARY - - there is NO WAY I would say a WORD (laughs slightly) [...] if I HAD a confrontation with him EVERYone in the library would be LOOKING at me [...] there's so many EYES on you all the time - that - - you're always - - second-guessing- your actions [...] AND also because you're worried about doing something that's - RUDE? [...] - there's always some slight doubt in your mind that - maybe that's what's DONE in Indonesia [post-test]

Oscar shied away from complaining here for two reasons. First, it would accentuate his hated feeling of being conspicuous (“EVERYone in the library would be LOOKING at me”). Second, he felt unable to assess competently when he has the right to complain in the L2 culture setting (“there's always some slight doubt in your mind that - maybe that's what's DONE in Indonesia”). These two factors are related. The constant scrutiny Oscar received made him worry that there may in fact be something strange about what he is doing. As he put it above: “there's so many EYES on you all the time - that - - you're always - - second-guessing - your actions”. In other words, feeling conspicuous in public settings undermined Oscar's confidence in his ability to assess L2 sociopragmatic norms confidently.

5. Conclusion

These two contrasting stories show that sociopragmatic development during study abroad is closely linked to the process of constructing an L2 identity. With increased time in the L2 culture setting, learners may come to change the weight they attach to their perceptions of native pragmatic norms, depending on the trajectory of their identity development. For instance, a learner who abandons an identity as a model westerner may become more inclined to assert normative rights to complain, whereas a learner who adopts the identity of a manifest outsider may be unwilling to complain regardless of what L2 pragmatic norms might permit.

Moreover, learners' L2 identities influence their very ability to learn about sociopragmatic norms. For instance, learners who come to feel they occupy a legitimate position within the L2 culture can more easily develop confident perceptions of the relevant norms, whereas learners who feel positioned as outsiders may continue to perceive the norms as frustratingly opaque.

This study has implications for classroom instruction in L2 pragmatics. Study abroad learners would benefit from pre-departure instruction about two related things: sociopragmatic norms of their target culture, and the range of potential identity positions that L2 learners might adopt while abroad. Learners of Indonesian should have their attention directed towards practices such as cheating by service providers during transactions, or pushing into queues by customers in stores, and reflect on the norms underlying those practices. They should also reflect on the various identity positions that learners might adopt in Indonesia, such as hyper-tolerant 'good foreigner' or disaffected outsider, as well as more nuanced and

helpful stances that are possible. Pre-departure activities of that type can help learners interpret and benefit from their own experiences in the target culture. They can optimise learners' chances of finding 'third places', identity positions that are "between and beyond the social order of their native culture and that of the target culture" (Kramsch 1993: 238) and which grow from an understanding of similarities and differences between the two.

Notes

1. In a follow-up section of the test, participants were asked to write down what they would say in each of the scenarios if they did choose to complain. However the present study does not examine data obtained from that follow-up section.
2. Participants were instructed to make their remaining diary entries on address terms and on leave-taking.
3. Discussions with several Indonesians confirm that Indonesian pragmatic norms permit a person to complain in both these test scenarios, while at the same time, individual Indonesians would vary greatly in their inclination to complain in both cases. Regarding the 'taxi' scenario specifically: taxi passengers in Indonesia have a strong right to tell the driver to drive in a way they are comfortable with, but on the other hand, as this type of driving by a taxi driver is more common in Indonesia than Australia, possibly fewer Indonesian passengers would be alarmed by it and hence feel inclined to complain.
4. Three Indonesian informants offered different interpretation of the shop assistants' behaviour as described by Oscar. Two informants felt that the assistants were probably trying to give Oscar especially good service as a western foreigner, but felt awkward in his presence and did not know what to say to him. Another informant thought that the shop assistants might have perceived Oscar as rich and so were trying to encourage him to buy. In any case, all informants agreed that Oscar was entitled to let the shop assistants know he would rather browse without them at his shoulder.
5. Oscar was probably misreading the meaning of the driver's smile here. The driver probably grinned in order to mask feelings of embarrassment, or even of annoyance.

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