

Introduction:

This assignment focuses on techniques for discovering and acquiring pragmatics, which goes above and beyond learning the vocabulary and grammar of a language to how people use language and nonverbal signals to communicate. Even if you are studying abroad in a place where your first language(s) are spoken as a native language, or you are interacting with people who speak your first language(s) as a *lingua franca*, pragmatics can vary greatly by culture. It's easy to misunderstand or offend others because you assume that the rules for pragmatics that you are used to apply to your study abroad context.

Activity Instructions:

1. There are three parts to this assignment: Reading and Reflection, Observation and Verification, and Analysis.

Part 1 – Reading and Reflection

From the Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition website, read “03_CARLA_American_Compliments.pdf.” In this document, scholars illustrate some rules of politeness in the U.S. regarding responding to compliments. After you read, reflect on these questions, and then continue on to the short reading below:

1. How does this data align with your experiences of complimenting and being complimented in the U.S.?
2. Did someone in your family explicitly teach you how you should respond to compliments? If so, does that instruction match the data on the CARLA site?

As a comparison, read “03_CARLA_Chinese_Compliments.pdf” in which you will find that people from Chinese culture also tend to reject compliments, though it seems for a different reason (a value for humility rather than equality). One would think, then, that Chinese speakers would find it pretty easy to respond “appropriately” to compliments in the U.S. Actually, the opposite is most often true. In fact, compliments are a pragmatic stumbling block for the Chinese. Dr. Kris Acheson-Clair, Director of CILMAR, explains, “In my travels and work in China, I have asked hundreds of people (mostly English teachers and students) what their English textbooks have taught them about how Americans respond to compliments. One hundred percent of them have told me that they learned one and only one response: ‘Thank you.’ You can see the huge gap here between language classrooms and real social interactions.”

Yes, technically it is polite to thank someone for a compliment; however, in the U.S., despite the Chinese assumption that humility is not important here, the response to compliments is a simple, “Thank you,” only 30% of the time. If Chinese people are always responding with, “Thanks,” in the U.S., then 70% of the time they might come across as (at best) socially awkward and (at worst) egotistical. Responding to compliments is just one example of pragmatics at work. We are going to use this example to help you develop some skills – not only verbal and nonverbal communication skills that are specific to your new local context, but also cultural discovery skills that help you figure out what is appropriate, pragmatically speaking.

Part 2 – Observation and Verification

In Part 2, you will give a variety of people social compliments, record their response, and analyze your data for trends. Then you will verify your conclusions with a cultural informant to see if your hypothesis, or guess, about why they are responding the way they are is correct.

For this assignment, the intent is not for you to sit somewhere and passively watch other people interact. You could spend weeks doing that and not witness the behavior you are looking for. Also, you could observe the targeted behavior but not understand the reasons behind the rules of social engagement. Instead, we are going to teach you a technique of data collection that sociolinguists (the scholars who study pragmatics) call “token elicitation.”

Basically, for you as a visitor in a new culture, it will work like this: Either in English or in a local language if you speak it well enough to function, you will just interact with people in your normal social settings. But occasionally, over a 48- or 72-hour period of time, you will make a conversational move that is meant to produce a certain response. In this way, you can observe and record many examples of that response and draw some conclusions about what the pragmatics of the situation are in your new cultural context. Then, you will test the validity of your conclusions by asking at least one cultural informant (someone native to the local area) about what you think you saw and heard and the underlying cultural values that drive those behaviors. You will want to take good notes on your token elicitation to make your analysis easier and to provide examples for your written reflection later. Record the following information each time you give someone a compliment:

1. Who the person is: their demographics (gender, age, etc.) and what their relationship is to you, in case any of this makes a difference in the “rules.”
2. Your compliment, in case different types of compliments require different responses.
3. What the person said in response. Any accompanying nonverbal signals, including facial expressions, gestures, posture, tone of voice, non-linguistic noises (like laughter, and silence).

So, to be clear, here again is your observation and verification process, to be completed over the course of 2-3 days:

1. Give a variety of people in your social world compliments.
2. Record the information above for each token.
3. Reflect on the trends you are observing.
4. Speak with a cultural informant to confirm what you think you are learning.

Part 3 – Analysis

After collecting your data, review your observation data, and write a short summary that answers the following prompts:

1. Observation analysis
 - Describe the trends in responding to compliments that you recorded.
 - Discuss the pragmatic similarities and/or differences compared to your home culture.
 - What were your feelings, questions, or thoughts about these observed differences?
2. Skill analysis
 - What was the experience of token elicitation like for you to try out?
 - What about your consultation with your cultural informant – what was that experience like?
 - To what extent do you feel you have developed verbal and nonverbal communication skills from this activity?

- How can you apply the cultural discovery skills of token elicitation and seeking information from a cultural informant elsewhere (to other situations or aspects of politeness/appropriateness, to other cultural contexts)?

Please remember to reflect on your current IDI stage and how to move along the continuum when posting your responses and follow up posts.

After your mentor has provided you with feedback, you must take an additional two turns in the discussion to complete this assignment and receive a grade.

Be sure to respond to your mentor's question about your IDI stage.

Be sure to respond to your mentor's question about verbal and nonverbal communication.