Investigating the Structure of Discourse Completion Tests

Manka Varghese & Kristine Billmyer

University of Pennsylvania
English Language Programs
Graduates School of Education

A significant and long-standing dilemma in sociolinguistic research concerns the methods used to collect the data, the validity of different types of data, and to quote Kasper and Dahl (1991) "...their adequacy to approximate authentic performance of linguistic action." (p. 215). As early as 1966 Labov detected variability among the same subjects depending solely on the instruments used by the researcher to collect data. More recently, Kasper and Dahl noted that in the study of pragmatics, "...we are dealing with a double layer of variability" (p.215): the first layer being that of sociolinguistic variability and the second layer being that of variability induced by the different data instruments. Some researchers have claimed that the most authentic data in sociolinguistic research is spontaneous speech gathered by ethnographic observation (Manes & Wolfson 1981). However, difficulties in relying solely on this method are well-documented (Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper 1989), and have led to the wide use of an elicitation procedure called the Discourse Completion Test (DCT). This paper examines the internal structure of Discourse Completion Tests and, in particular, investigates the effect of systematic modification to the DCT situational prompt on subject response.

Adapted in 1982 by Blum-Kulka for the purpose of investigating speech acts, the DCT is a questionnaire containing a set of very briefly described situations designed to elicit a particular speech act. Subjects read each situation and respond to a prompt in writing.

Advantages of this method are well-known. Without question the DCT surpasses all others in ease of use, and as Beebe and Cummings (1985) conclude, result in the researcher's ability to collect a very large corpus of data, on a wide range of difficult-to-observe speech behaviors, in a short period of time. More importantly, they note, data elicited with this instrument are consistent with naturally occurring data, at least in the main patterns and formulas. These factors have led to the widespread use of DCTs in numerous speech act studies (Olshtain & Cohen 1983; Eisenstein & Bodman 1986; Beebe, Takahashi & Uliss-Weltz 1985) including the most

ambitious research project on speech acts to date, the Cross Cultural Speech Act Realization Project - CCSARP (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989) which investigated requests and apologies across 13 languages.

Notwithstanding its appeal, critics have leveled charges at the instrument itself and have found disturbing discrepancies between DCT and spoken data. Beebe and Cummings (1985) found that DCTs failed to elicit the full range of formulas found in spoken data, and that they elicited responses more limited in length and deficient in the level of elaboration and frequency of repetition typical of human spoken interaction. Critics targeting design of the instrument itself cite the insufficiency of social and situational information in the situational prompt, omitting such things as background to the event, information on role relationship between the subject and the imaginary interlocutor, frequency of their interaction, and details of context and setting (Wolfson, Marmor & Jones 1989). What is missing according to Beebe and Cummings is the entire psychosocial dimension, which they point out, sets up a desire on the part of interlocutors to establish and maintain one's reputation with the expectation of a possible future relationship. Without setting the scene in a Hymesian sense (Hymes 1972), respondents are left to their own devices to invent one of their own situations, which could vary considerably from respondent to respondent, or more likely, not to invent one at all.

Nonetheless, it is evident that speakers in natural conversation have access to this powerful combination of interpersonal and contextual details, and that their unconscious continuous assessment of this information has an impact on their utterances.

The purpose of the present study is to investigate whether enhancing the DCT situation itself, by including a similar level and array of information afforded speakers in spontaneous interactions, would result in DCT data more closely approximating authentic performance. Although previous studies have compared DCTs to other methods of data collection (see Kasper & Dahl 1991), only Rose (1992) has investigated the structure of DCTs, by comparing data elicited by situations with and without a hearer response added after the situation. However, Rose concluded that appending a hearer response had no significant effect on the data elicited. This study differs from Rose's in that it manipulates the internal content of the DCT situation and then asks what impact, if any, such manipulation has on the data elicited.

Construction of the DCT

This study examines 3 versions of a DCT designed to elicit requests. Situations for all three versions are derived from descriptions of situations used in the CCSARP project on requests (Blum-Kulka, et al. 1989), and later formulated by Rose, without hearer response. The CCSARP study provides an arena for comparing results because of the specific coding in-

structions the researchers put together for data analysis, and also because of the likelihood that subjects in this study would be familiar with the situations.

Version I (Original) uses the Rose situations, all of which embed in the situation information on requestive goal, social distance, and social dominance. These situations were modified slightly in the following ways. First, to encourage as full a response as possible, the response space was lengthened to 4" by 8.5". Next, in order to ascertain the respondents' assessment of both level of imposition and the interlocutor's likelihood of compliance, two questions were included after each situation. Finally, the emphasis of the speaker in the two hearer-dominant situations was changed so that subjects would actually take the roles of the librarian and professor rather than try to imagine from a distance how both of these individuals would respond. Below is an example of the Version I - Music situation. All of the Version I situations are found in Appendix A.

Example 1. Version I - Original: Music Situation

> You are trying to study in your room and you hear loud music coming from another student's room down the hall. You don't know the student, but you decide to ask them to turn the music down. What would you say?

Version II (Elaborated) was constructed by examining the literature to identify the type of social, contextual and psychological information critics of DCTs found lacking in the situations and others in the field regarded as necessary and relevant (Wolfson, Marmor & Jones 1989; Beebe & Cummings 1985; Hymes 1972). Appendix B identifies the variables which were selected for inclusion in each situation and either stated explicitly or implied. In addition to information on requestive goal, social distance and social dominance, the following information was included: the gender of the interlocutor, role relationship, length of acquaintance, the frequency of interaction, whether or not the relationship was optional, and a description of the setting, all of which set the scene psychologically. Below is an example of the elaborated Version II Music situation in which time and place are described, the interlocutor is given a name, along with some history to the request, thus providing the speaker with motivation for the ensuing act. The six Version II - Elaborated situations are found in Appendix C.

Example 2. Version II - Elaborated: Music Situation

> It is 10:30 p.m. on a Wednesday night and you have a paper due the next day. You are trying to finish the paper and you can't concentrate because you hear loud music coming from another student's room down the hall. You decide to ask her to turn the music down. The

music has been on at this volume for half an hour. You have occasionally seen the student, Lucy Row, in the same dorm during the past six months. She is a student like you but you have never spoken to her. You have heard other people in the dorm complain about the volume of her music on several occasions although you never have because you usually study in the library. However, today the library closed early. You are only half way through and you know that the professor for this class is very strict and does not give extensions. What would you say?

Version III (Timed) used exactly the same situational prompts as Version II (Elaborated) and then added one dimension: instructions to respondents were altered and subjects were asked to reflect on each situation for 30 seconds before writing their response (see Appendix D). This was done in order to encourage subjects to immerse themselves as much as possible in the psychosocial domain of each situation. Ultimately, we wondered if factors external to the situations themselves, and intrinsic to the test administration would have any effect on outcomes.

The Study

The subjects were 55 native speakers of American English, who were undergraduate and graduate students at the University of Pennsylvania. Although data from 32 non-native speakers were also collected, analysis of their responses is not included in this report and will be the subject of a later study. Version I (Original) was administered to twenty students, ten males and ten females; Version II (Elaborated) was administered to nineteen students, ten males and nine females. Version III (Timed) was administered to sixteen students, eight males and eight females. All three forms of the questionnaires were assigned randomly to each group. Data were collected primarily in classrooms, and subjects were not informed of the purpose of the study.

Data were then coded using the Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) and Rose (1992) coding scheme. The main categories of analysis were as follows:

1) Request strategies of the head act (frequency and type)

2) Internal modification of the head act (type and frequency)

3) Length of the entire request act including the head act and internal and external modification (mean number of words)

4) External modification of the head act (type and frequency)

Results and Discussion

Request Strategies of the Head Act

We first examined the head act of each request. A head act is defined by Blum-Kulka, et al. (1989) as "...the minimal unit which can realize a request." (p. 275) and excludes those parts of the act sequence which are not essential. The first category of analysis was the coding of requests by type of strategy. We began with the CCSARP (Blum-Kulka et al.) project's coding scheme and coded requests into 9 different types of strategies as shown in Appendix E. Following this initial step the strategies were collapsed into the following three main categories:

1) Direct strategies, D, where the understanding relies on syntactic devices or the semantic content of the utterance, such as,

Clean up this mess, please.

2) Conventionally indirect strategies, CI, where interpretation is aided by conventional usage,

How about cleaning up?

or reference to a preparatory condition,

Could you clean up the kitchen, please?

and finally,

3) Nonconventionally indirect strategies, NI, which includes strong or mild hints as in

You left this kitchen in a right mess.

Table 1 displays the frequency distribution of requests by the three main categories, Direct (D), Conventionally Indirect (CI) and Nonconventionally Indirect (NI). A chi-square test revealed no significant differences across versions in the distribution of request strategies in four situations. Although there appear to be significant differences in the Music and Extension situations, we feel that a claim of statistical significance would be improper due to the existence of too many empty cells in the chi-square for these situations.

In essence, the head act request strategy, appears to be unaffected by the addition of social and contextual information which Versions II (Elabo-

Table 1
Frequency distribution of request strategies

	MUSIC	NOTES	RIDE	LIBRARY	EXTEN.	PRESENT
Version	D C N	D C N	D C N	D C N	D C N	D C N
1(n=20)	4 15 0	2 18 0	0 13 1	8 9 1	0 14 2	1 14 1
2(n=19)	0 19 0	0 18 1	2 16 1	2 14 1	1 10 8	1 16 2
3(n=16)	0 13 0	0 14 0	0 9 4	3 12 1	2 14 0	2 13 0
		p <0.026				p<0.014

p < 0.05

Table 2.
Mean downgraders per request

	MUSIC	NOTES	RIDE	LIBRARY	EXTEN	PRESENT
1(n=20)	1.1	0.4	0.7	0.8	0.5	0.5
2(n=19)	1.3	1	0.7	0.9	0.6	0.6
3(n=16)	0.9	0.9	0.6	0.5	0.7	0.5
	p = 0.032					

p< 0.05

rated) and III (Timed) supplied. Overall, there was an overwhelming choice of conventionally indirect strategies across versions and in most situations. This indeed has been the main finding of the CCSARP project as well as the main finding of request studies using naturally occurring data. In fact, this area - main patterns and formulas - is the most widely-cited category of analysis where typical DCT data seem to replicate spoken data.

Head Act: Internal Modification

The next category of analysis, that of internal modification to the head act, was identified to determine whether amplified content had any bearing on how a speaker mitigated the request within the core act. The types of internal modification found were primarily downgraders, which include lexical and syntactic ways of softening the request, and a few instances of upgraders which intensify the request. Lexical downgraders include politeness markers such as *please*, consultative devices, *do you think*,

Table 3
Mean words per request

	MUSIC	NOTES	RIDE	LIBRARY	EXTEN	PRESENT
1(n=20)	14.2	12.8	24.4	10.0	22.6	17.3
2(n=19)	28.8	35.3	31.0	19.3	47.7	42.3
3(n=16)	23.8	31.6	33.7	18.8	49.7	39.0
	p = 0.042	p = 0.001		p = 0.005	p = 0.004	p = 0.001

$p < 0.05$

understaters or hedges like, *a bit*, as in, *Could you do your paper a bit earlier.* Syntactic downgraders include the use of tense and aspect, such as *I was wondering if...*, conditional clauses, and the use of the interrogative.

As the results of an ANOVA in Table 2 show, no significant differences were found in the use of downgraders across versions, except in the Notes situation. There, the difference was between Versions I (Original) and II (Elaborated) only.

In fact, the low mean value of downgraders, fewer than one per request across all situations, suggests that subjects are not mitigating their requests in the head act much at all. Thus far, our analysis of the core of the request - the head act - shows two things. First, that manipulation of situational content has no effect on choice of request strategy or amount of internal modification; and second that the overwhelming preference for conventionally indirect strategies seen here is consistent with previous studies which examine both naturally occurring and DCT data.

Length of the entire request act

We next compared the mean length of the entire request act across all three versions. As Table 3 shows the mean length of the request act in Versions II (Elaborated) and III (Timed) was two to three times greater than in the context-poor Version I (Original). An analysis of variance revealed significant differences in five of the six situations: the Music, Notes, Library, Extension and Presentation in mean length of response.

A post hoc comparison of means using the Scheffe test revealed that the significant differences were between the context-poor and both context rich-versions (Version I - Original and Version II - Elaborated; and between Version I-Original and Version III-Timed). No differences were found between the two context-rich versions (Versions II and III), leading us to conclude that instructions to the subjects to imagine themselves in the situation for 30 seconds before writing a response, produced no variation.

The difference in length can be illustrated by two typical examples of responses from Version I (Original) and Version II (Elaborated).

Example 3: Version I-Original: Music Situation

" I'm trying to study. Could you please turn down the music a little?"

And

Example 4: Version II-Elaborated: Music Situation

" Lucy, I'm really sorry to bother you, but if possible could you please lower the volume a little. Tomorrow I have a paper due and I'm really stressed out."

As one can see, the requestive head act in both versions is almost identical. Differences between response data from the context-poor versus context-rich versions lie almost exclusively outside the head act, a topic we will turn to next.

External Modification

The last major category of analysis is external modification, moves which occur outside the request head act. Two subcategories, supportive moves and alerters, were examined separately.

1) Supportive Moves

Supportive moves are ways that the speaker aggravates or mitigates an utterance. These include such acts as getting a precommitment (Could you do me a favor), disarmers (I'll give your notes right back), grounders (I had trouble with the data collection) and promises of reward (You can borrow my notes anytime).

Overall, the mean number of supportive moves in data elicited by the Elaborated and Timed situations (Versions II and III) was two to three times greater than the mean number of supportive moves in the context-poor Original situations (Version I data). Table 4 gives the results of an ANOVA of mean supportive moves per request and shows significant differences in all of the situations except for Music. The Scheffe test revealed, as expected, in all cases the differences were between the Original context-poor version (Version I) and both enriched versions (Versions II and III). No significant differences appeared between the Elaborated and Timed versions (Versions II and III). Data from the Presentation situations illustrates the differences between the elaborated and original versions.

Example 5: Version I - Original: Presentation Situation

"I was really hoping that you could present your paper one week earlier."

This request contains no external modification in the form of supportive moves.

Table 4
Mean supportive moves per request

	MUSIC	NOTES	RIDE	LIBRARY	EXTEN	PRESENT
1(n=20)	1.4	1.2	1.1	0.6	1.3	0.5
2(n=19)	1.9	2.4	2.1	1.2	3.1	2.3
3(n=16)	2.0	2.5	2.3	2.0	3.0	2.7
	p = 0.016	p = 0.048		p = 0.042	p = 0.003	p = 0.001

$p < 0.05$

The above example can be contrasted with a typical example of a request act taken from the Presentation situation for the Elaborated Version II, which includes a variety of supportive moves.

Example 6: Elaborated Version II: Presentation Situation

"Nancy, you are one of the strongest students in the department so I am hoping you can do me a favor. If you can't, it's no problem but we're studying the subject relevant to your presentation then. Can you get it ready? If not, it's okay."

The above response elicited by the elaborated prompt in Version II contains two imposition minimizers (*If you can't it's no problem* and *If not, it's okay*), a grounder (*we're studying the subject relevant to your presentation*) and a precommitment (*I am hoping that you can do me a favor*).

When we examined the types of supportive moves elicited by the two context-rich versions (Versions II and III), we found many more promises of reward, such as *I'll be more lenient with you for the grading*, and disarmers, such as *I know you have a lot of work*. We also saw other speech acts such as compliments present in the Elaborated Version II example above, as well as expressions of gratitude and apologies. All of these were found in abundance in data elicited by the elaborated and timed situations (Versions II and III) but hardly ever appeared in data elicited by the original situations (Version I).

Explanation for these findings is given by Beebe and Cummings (1985) who maintain that a typical DCT situation (similar to Version I situations) "...does not bring out the real...dynamics of natural interaction between members of a group" (p. 8). This is because respondents are addressing an anonymous fictional character and have no motivation to establish or preserve a relationship. And we saw evidence of this in the minimalist data elicited by the original context-poor (Version I) situations. However, the

enhancement of social, situational, and psychological content in Versions II and III may have provided respondents with a greater sense that they were interacting with a real person, in a real place and time, and more motivation to establish or maintain their reputation and rapport with the human being they were addressing. As our data show, when the psychosocial dimension of the situational prompt is augmented, then the written responses become more elaborated in much the same way speech in natural spontaneous interactions happens: with excuses and reasons, promises, and other means of saving one's own face and minimizing potential damage to another's.

2) Alerters

The second type of external modification we examined were alerters which are ways to warn the hearer of an upcoming speech act. Alerters include names and address terms, such as Tom, or Professor Smith, or attention getters such as Excuse me. Alerters were counted as one for an address term, an attention getter, or a combination of both.

The results of a chi square on the frequency distribution of alerters are reported in Table 5. They show that alerters appeared three times more frequently in data from the Elaborated and Timed versions (Versions II and III) than in data from the Original version (Version 1) in four of the six situations except for the Music and Ride situations.

It is possible that the supplemental information provided in these situations (Versions II and III), and, in particular, the interlocutor's names which were supplied in five situations gave subjects a "you are there" feel to the setting and succeeded in prompting them to frame the ensuing speech act with an alerter. A somewhat unexpected finding was the large number of alerters in the Library situation in spite of the fact that the hearer's name was not supplied. An explanation for this finding may be found in the situation itself, in which the librarian is interrupting a student who is speaking to someone else, thus resulting in a high frequency of "excuse me" type alerters.

Table 5:
Frequency distribution: alerters

Version	MUSIC	NOTES	RIDE	LIBRARY	EXTEN	PRESENT
1(n=20)	6	3	10	3	3	1
2(n=19)	10	12	14	8	12	11
3(n=16)	9	9	12	12	12	10
		$p < 0.003$		$p < 0.003$	$p < 0.003$	$p < 0.001$

$p < 0.05$