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Eliciting speech act data on complaints :  
cartoon-prompt MCQ versus : cartoon-prompt  
DCT

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# **Eliciting speech act data on complaints: Cartoon-prompt MCQ versus Cartoon-prompt DCT**

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## **Abstract**

DCTs have long been a popular tool for speech act elicitation. As a part of the methodological and validation research on DCTs, this study examines the degree of consistency between MCQ and DCT type test forms of the "Picture Frustration Test" (Rosenzweig, 1978) when administered in English. The P-F test is a series of cartoon like pictures, each depicting an everyday, interpersonal frustrating situation. A previous study (Tatsuki, 2000) using the P-F test to elicit complaints by Japanese students in both Japanese and English found that a significant number of subjects responded to stress or frustration using the same direction of aggression in both languages but the type of aggression was different. The P-F study functions like a Discourse Completion Test (DCT), which uses a cartoon rather than text-only prompt. The DCT method is very time consuming to code so Rose and Ono (1995) proposed the use of a multiple-choice questionnaire (MCQ) as a substitute and found that the MCQ revealed more contextual variation in every situation than the DCT. The possible influence of social desirability on the MCQ and DCT type test forms is also measured.

## Background

DCTs have long been a popular tool for speech act elicitation (Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper, 1989; Kasper & Dahl, 1991). As a part of the methodological and validation research on DCTs, comparisons have been made to naturally occurring speech (Beebe & Cummings, 1985; Rintell & Mitchell, 1989; Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1992; Rose, 1992). Studies have also investigated the effects on speech act elicitation when certain features of DCTs have been systematically manipulated such as written prompts versus picture prompts and presence versus absence of rejoinders (Johnston, Kasper & Ross, 1998). Variations of format such as Multiple Choice Questionnaire (MCQ) versus DCT have also been studied (Rose, 1994; Rose & Ono, 1995; Hinkel, 1997).

## MCQ vs. DCT

DCTs have the potential to generate a wide variety of responses although as noted by Kasper and Dahl (1991) they are usually highly constrained instruments based on situations that yield the most uniform responses from native speakers. However, because of the variety of responses they generate, they are time-consuming to code and analyze. In the case of MCQs the range of responses are controlled and those choices are usually based on the majority responses derived from a pilot DCT. The pilot DCT would generate a pool of responses from which representative items such as a direct, a hedged, an indirect and an "opt out" (no response) would each be selected from the pool to use as MCQ response options. Although option types used could be tailored to correspond to the research in question, often the focus in DCT derived MCQ research has been on directness/indirectness and the presence/absence of mitigation.

MCQ are easy for the researcher to code and the subject to respond to but have a number of weaknesses. For one, they may distort

assessment of L2 productive ability since learners might be able (through chance or test wise-ness) to choose responses beyond their current ability. Furthermore, despite having a desire to respond, respondents may choose the "opt out" (no response) choice if the available choices deviate in even the smallest way from their expectations. Notwithstanding these possibilities, Rose (1994) contends that MCQ elicited data may be more representative of face to face interaction than data collected by DCTs. Rose and Ono (1995) go further by claiming that "participants (in the Eisenstein & Bodman 1993 study) tended to respond to a DCT with the desired speech act *even though they would avoid doing so in actual interaction*" (p.194) and rightly conclude that such conformity-seeking in responses is problematic for all types of elicitation instruments.

Hinkel (1997) also noted that DCTs may not be ideal instruments to collect data related to ambiguous or situationally constrained pragmalinguistic acts. In her study Chinese L1 subjects selected significantly more options with direct and hedged advice than did NS on a MCQ which, based on previous research, was congruent with expected behavior. However, when responding to a DCT more English NSs preferred direct and hedged advice than did Chinese L1 subjects which directly contradicted the documented body of research on NS and Chinese L1 pragmalinguistic behavior.

Hinkel had a number of explanations for this. One is that DCTs are a consequence-free exercise; subjects do not have to face any of the social or psychological constraints that they would in real life and so may respond without inhibitions that would normally be present which is the opposite of what Rose and Ono argue. Hinkel mentions as another possibility, that subjects may write responses that are easier to access linguistically rather than those that are more pragmatically appropriate. Obviously the jury is still out on DCTs as an elicitation instrument.

## Written vs. Picture Prompts

As mentioned earlier, certain features of DCTs have been systematically manipulated and one of these has been the presentation format of the prompt: as written descriptions of the scenario or as a picture/cartoon. Written prompts usually explain or define the situation (who, what, where) that is directed at the subject (usually referred to as "you") and usually demand a written response although oral responses are also possible. In the case of picture/cartoon prompts on the other hand, explanation of the situation is not necessary because it is intended to be implicit in the picture. Furthermore, the prompt is usually directed at the character in the picture (he, she) rather than the subject yet like written prompts, the response may be either written or oral.

Picture/cartoon prompts that avoid the use of the pronoun "you" have long been used in psychological research. They have been referred to as "projective techniques" which, in theory at least, encourage more spontaneous and uncensored responses because the situations have been de-personalized. It was mentioned earlier that use of the pronoun "you" in DCTs may inhibit the subject from making a response that is congruent with his or her own normal behavior and may encourage the crafting of a socially acceptable one. However, it is not just a simple matter of a pronoun. Projective techniques rely on a picture to convey the situation that is de-personalized and free of the other linguistic constraints mentioned earlier.

## Eliciting Complaints

It is a common assumption that complaints (whatever the level of severity/directness) are socially justifiable (if not obligatory) acts in reaction to a "socially unacceptable act" (Olshtain and Weinbach, 1993, p.108). In other words, complaints are face threatening acts that function within the framework of interpersonal conflict. Furthermore,

complaints can function as indirect requests (e.g. its cold in here [*so shut the window*]) and as censure (e.g. its cold in here [*because you forgot to pay the gas bill*]). It is difficult to make a distinction in many cases because of the inherent ambiguity of indirect speech acts. For example, a request with censure might be intended or understood as neither or both (c.f. Weizman, 1993).

Another difficulty in dealing with complaints is that they do not always occur even when all the "pre-conditions" have been met. Olshtain and Weinbach report that one third of their native speakers of English and Hebrew "opted out" (1993, p.113) from expressing censure for a given situation. Although this may be related to the validity of the DCT (Discourse Completion Test) as a data collection method in certain cultures, another explanation may be that people sometimes choose to minimize the source of frustration (e.g. A is late. B: Glad you could come. I just got here myself) or even assume responsibility for another person's socially unacceptable act (A is late. B: Glad you could come. I'm afraid I didn't give you very good directions). Bergman and Kasper (1993, p.52) state that complaints and apologies "refer back to events that constitute norm infringements" and employ action descriptors to make schematic distinctions between complaint and apology. According to their scheme, the speaker of an apology is the perpetrator of a transgression and the hearer of the apology is the recipient of that transgression. Conversely, the speaker of a complaint is the recipient of the transgression and the hearer is the perpetrator. However, this does not account for apologies made by those who assume responsibility for another person's socially unacceptable act. In other words, apologies can occur where complaints would be expected.

There is interplay between the need to respond to a socially unacceptable act (by complaining) and the awareness that doing so constitutes a threat to the addressee's positive face. These are the payoff considerations. The decision to risk threatening the face of another person depends not only on the contextual or social appropriacy of the

act but also on the speaker's psychological ability to perform the act. Therefore, psychological considerations may account for variations in responses and have a bearing on pragmalinguistic behavior.

The fundamental point of agreement in attempts to account for complaints and apologies is the experience of some kind of stress or frustration. Frustration can be attributed to the environment, an object, a person or the subject himself. The subject can respond to that frustration by lashing out, turning it inward or denying its existence. Furthermore, the subject can have a range of expectations regarding outcome; she can hold another person, herself or no one in particular responsible for a solution. It makes sense to start at the point of agreement — frustration — and develop a framework to account for the range of possible responses.

Complaints, which are one of the possible responses to frustration and stress, have been the focus of numerous psychological studies. In psychology, complaints, apologies and denials are considered to be forms of aggression. Contrary to the popular connotation of hostility, aggression can be defined as "...some form of coping behavior that may then be either constructive or destructive in effect" (Rosenzweig, 1978a, p.2). This means that aggression can be seen as an assertive response to a problem or frustration.

Rosenzweig (1978a) posits that the construct of aggression can be classified under two headings: direction of aggression and type of aggression (see Table 1). The full name of the instrument he developed is The Picture-Association Method for Assessing Reactions to Frustration. This instrument is "a limited projective procedure for disclosing certain patterns of response to everyday stress" (Rosenzweig, 1978a, p.8) which "attempts to assess the more characteristic (not necessarily permanent or universal) reaction types used by the subject" (Rosenzweig, 1978a, p.11). The P-F study functions like a Discourse Completion Test (DCT), but it uses a cartoon rather than text-only prompt. However, the coding of responses is done at the level of the direction and type of aggression rather than that of a speech act.

**Table 1. Constructs of reaction to frustration  
(adapted from Rosenzweig, 1978).**

AGG- RES- SION		TYPE (Verbal Focus)		
		SITUATION	PERSON	SOLUTION
D I R E C T I O N	O U T	EA-OD Angry, upset about situation Complaint, expression of annoyance or disapproval	EA-ED Angry, upset about per- son involved Complaint, denial of responsibility or blame 3rd party ex- plicit complaint, Immedi- ate threat	EA-NP Angry, upset-expects solu- tion or repair Complaint, request, accusation and warning, immediate thre- at
	I N	IN-OD Embarrassed about situa- tion Apology, excuse, re- gret, remorse, account	IN-ED Embarrassed about per- son involved Apology, self-blame /censure, ex- cuse, responsibility, ex- pression of concern for H or 3rd party	IN-NP Embarrassed-Offers solu- tion Apology, offer of repair, promise of for- bearance,
	O F F	IM-OD Neutral feelings about situation Denial of frus- tration, below the level of reproach, minimization, unavoidable circumstance	IM-ED Neutral feelings about person involved Blame- evasion, absolution, be- low the level of reproach, minimization, no one re- sponsible	IM-NP Neutral feelings about solution Wish, assurance, hope for future improve- ment or solution by natu- ral events, expression of patience

Included under direction of aggression are extraggression (E-A), in which aggression is turned onto the environment (turned out); intraggression (I-A), in which it is directed at oneself (turned in); and imaggression (M-A), in which aggression is evaded in an effort to gloss over the frustration (turned off). The speech acts that are realized according to the direction of aggression are as follows: Extraggression is expressed through complaints and threats, intraggression is expressed through apologies and self-censure, and imaggression is expressed through denials and blame evasion. Type of aggression includes: Obstacle dominance (O-D), in which the source of the frustration stands out in the response; ego- or etho-defense (E-D), in which the subject defends her own integrity; and need-persistence (N-P), in which the solution of the frustrating problem is emphasized by pursuing the goal



despite the obstacle.

Thus the purpose of the following study is three fold. First, this investigation strives to determine the amount of agreement between responses to MCQ and DCT instruments constructed using the PF Study framework. The PF Study in its original form functions like a DCT using a cartoon prompt and is coded for direction and type of aggression (see Appendix for list of scenario descriptions). Rather than constructing a MCQ from a pool of these responses, as is the usual case, a different approach is suggested. Along side each cartoon, two questions will appear:

1. The person in the picture likely feels:
  - a. Angry, frustrated or annoyed
  - b. Embarrassed, responsible or shamed
  - c. Nothing in particular, there is no problem, or it can not be avoided
2. The person in the picture would likely mention:
  - a. The source of the frustration (a person's action, situation or thing)
  - b. The identity of a person who is to blame/responsible
  - c. The solution

Question 1 will determine the direction of aggression. Choices a, b, and c correspond to extraggression (out), intraggression (in), and imaggression (off). Question 2 will determine the type of aggression. Choices a, b, and c correspond to Obstacle dominance (O-D), (source of the frustration is the focus); ego- or etho-defense (E-D), (the subject or another person is the focus); and need-persistence (N-P) (solution or goal is the focus). It is predicted that direction of aggression will display more agreement than type because each of the three directions of aggression is associated with one cluster of speech acts: Outward aggression is associated with complaints/threats, inward with apologies/self-blame or censure and off with denials or blame evasion. On the other hand, type of aggression can be associated with all three clusters of speech acts.

Second, this investigation will examine whether or not the agreement between MCQ and DCT response corresponds with the predictions of hostility theory since this would offer a separate type of validation. The P-F Study and frustration theory research drifted out of fashion as interest in competing theories of aggression (see Bandura, 1983 for a comprehensive review) and hostility (Dodge, 1986) increased. However, in 1993, Graybill and Heuvelman endeavored to re-examine the P-F Study within a social information-processing model of aggression, which contends "frustration results in retaliatory aggression only if the frustrated individual attributes hostile intent to the frustrator. The main premise of the Graybill and Heuvelman research was that aggression as a response to such provocation is a normal positive response since, in its broadest sense, aggression refers to any form of competitive self-assertion in social interactions (Bernstein, 1991). However, if a non-hostile or ambiguous situation were to provoke an aggressive response, such a response would be considered deviant from the expected norm. Since the subjects for this investigation come from the general population, there is no reason to expect much deviance. Therefore, obviously hostile items should exhibit high agreement and a high frequency of complaint responses, while ambiguous and low to nil hostility items should exhibit progressively lower agreements and frequencies of complaints. This is because for healthy people there are a range of responses and strategies available to deal with ambiguous or non-hostile situations, hence wide variance.

Finally, most social science research acknowledges that subject responses can be influenced by the degree of a person's conformity or tendency to respond in a socially desirable manner. P-F study was designed as a projective technique, which in theory, at least, allows un-self-censored truthfulness. The use of the pronoun "you" in DCTs may inhibit behavioral responses and may encourage socially acceptable ones. By depersonalizing the situations, P-F questionnaires may actually elicit more spontaneous uncensored responses. Never the less, faking skill is still possible. Thus, the administration of a social

desirability questionnaire (SDQ) is informative since questionnaire surveys are known to be affected by response biases such as social desirability and defensiveness. In order to estimate the response bias, 10 yes-no social desirability items were selected from the MMPI lie scale (Oguchi, 2001).

## Methodology

The subjects in this study were 103 sophomore students (19-20 years old) from two Japanese universities: one public (faculty of commerce), and one private (faculty of sociology). The students were designated as upper intermediate English proficiency based on program entrance placement criteria. The MCQ version was administered in the 1<sup>st</sup> week of the 2<sup>nd</sup> academic term along with the Japanese version of the social desirability questionnaire items. A practice example for the MCQ was provided in Japanese. The DCT version was administered in 4<sup>th</sup> week of the 2<sup>nd</sup> academic term. A practice example was provided in Japanese. Two subjects failed to complete all of the pages of the questionnaire, so the two questionnaires were discarded. The DCT questionnaires were coded following the category descriptors of the P-F study manual and those categories corresponded to the MCQ responses as indicated in Table 2.

**Table 2. Correspondence between PF categories and MCQ responses**

AGG- RES- SION		TYPE (Verbal Focus)		
		SITUATION	PERSON	SOLUTION
D I R E C T I O N	O U T	EA-OD→a,a	EA-ED→a,b	EA-NP→a,c
	I N	IN-OD→b,a	IN-ED→b,b	IN-NO→b,c
	O F F	IM-OD→c,a	IM-ED→c,b	IM-NP→c,c

## Results

Table 3 summarizes the results. Cohen's kappa was calculated for each item pair. Half of the items show agreement (i.e. they are significantly different from zero), but the kappa values are low. According to this analysis, direction of aggression shows more agreement (12 items) than type of aggression (3 items). Also, perceived hostility appears to relate to agreement. As predicted by the previous research done by Graybill and Heuvelman, hostile items exhibited high mean agreement and a high mean frequency of complaint responses, while ambiguous and low to nil hostility items exhibited progressively lower

**Table 3. Agreement of paired items by direction and type of aggression**

PF Item	Kappa Direction	Kappa Type
9	0.243**	0.215**
16	0.223**	0.082
10	0.222**	0.019
14	0.222**	-0.078
13	0.212**	0.123
8	0.179**	-0.057
6	0.269**	0.051
24	0.202**	-0.002
1	0.162**	0.019
18	0.135**	-0.022
22	0.112	0.019
3	0.108	0.057
4	0.099	0.021
12	0.055	0.060
11	0.333**	0.072
15	0.160**	0.130**
2	0.127	0.080
23	0.122	-0.018
5	0.084	0.152**
20	0.069	-0.083
17	0.046	0.047
19	0.008	-0.043
7	0.004	0.123
21	-0.014	0.005

\*\* $p < .01$

**Table 4. Mean kappas for direction and type and mean frequencies for questionnaire format by hostility rating**

Hostility Rating	Mean (direction)	Mean (type)	Mean frequency MC complaints	Mean frequency PF complaints
HS	0.22	0.05	40.34	58.80
NH	0.14	0.02	33.40	40.60
AM	0.09	0.05	26.90	29.60

agreements and frequencies of complaints (see Table 4). In order to determine if there was a correlation with the social desirability scale, an aggression hostility score for each subject was calculated. The more negative the score, the more extraggressive the responses and similarly, the more positive the score, the more intraggressive. There was no significant correlation between the subject hostility scores ( $r = -0.09$  n.s.) and their SDQ scores; therefore it can be assumed that response bias did not affect the way that the subjects responded.

## Discussion

That there was more agreement with respect to direction of aggression than type was expected. As mentioned earlier, each of the three directions of aggression is associated with one cluster of speech acts: Outward aggression is associated with complaints/threats, inward with apologies/self-blame or censure and off with denials or blame evasion. On the other hand, type of aggression can be associated with all three clusters of speech acts. It may well be that the meta-analysis that would be required for a MCQ respondent to do in order to consistently elicit the type of aggression (i.e. the situational, personal or solutional focus of the speaker's attention) is too demanding to expect from a subject. Nevertheless, it is appealing to allow subjects to infer interpret and report their own intuitions and intentions rather than relying on a post hoc analysis by outsiders, no matter how skillfully they are trained.

One notable limitation of the use of MCQ data from a linguistic

perspective is that since there are no written responses, it is not possible to examine fine details such as number and type of up graders/down graders, hedges and mitigators that accompany and affect the severity of complaints. However, this is counterbalanced with a potential benefit. Regardless of language productive proficiency it may be possible to collect large amounts of information that can predict (through inference) whether or not a complaint is likely to be produced in a specific circumstance. Furthermore, this MCQ design can be used for L1 investigations and adapted to gather information on other speech acts. Development of MCQ instruments such as this one that tap the meta-analytic skills of the respondent rather than the researcher may mark a change in the way speech act data is gathered and coded in general.

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## Appendix

P-F Scenarios and Item Classification by Age-level and Sex of Frustrater/Frustratee (adapted from Rosenzweig, 1978b. pp.4-32)

#	Scenario Description	Frustrater sex	Frustrater age	Frustratee sex
1	The driver of a car apologizes for splashing a pedestrian's clothes	M	older	M
2	A hostess is expressing consternation at a guest having broken a favorite vase.	F	peer	F
3	A girl remarks to her companion, who is seated in a theatre behind a woman with a big hat, "You cannot see a thing."	F	older	F
4	A man who drove his friend to the train station is apologizing for the car breakdown that made them late and miss the train	M	peer	M
5	A customer complains to a clerk that she has brought back a new watch three times because it does not work	F	peer	M
6	A library attendant explains to a girl carrying four books that the rules allow only two books to be signed out at a time.	M	peer	F
7	A waitress is accusing a customer of being too fussy.	F	peer	M
8	A young man is explaining to a companion that the latter's girlfriend has invited him to a dance	M	peer	M
9	Although it is raining, a clerk at a dry-cleaning shop refuses to give a customer his raincoat until the manager arrives in the afternoon.	M	older	M
10	A young man is accusing another of being a liar	M	peer	M
11	A man in a telephone at 2:00 a.m. apologizes for a wrong number to a person who has just been awakened by the call.	M	older	F
12	A young man points out that the young woman's scarf was taken by someone else who has left her own instead.	M	peer	F
13	A man seated at a desk states to a young woman that he can not keep an appointment previously arranged with her.	M	older	F
14	A woman standing on a windy street remarks to a girl that the person for whom they are waiting should have been there 10 minutes ago.	F	older	F
15	A girl apologizes to her partner in a card game for making a stupid play.	F	peer	F
16	At the scene of a car accident, a man accuses a younger woman of having no right to try passing.	M	older	F
17	A woman standing with a younger man beside a car reprimands him for losing his keys.	F	older	M
18	A store clerk apologizes to a customer for having just sold the last of some item.	F	peer	M
19	A motorcycle policeman scolds a young man for passing a schoolhouse at 60 miles per hour.	M	older	M
20	A girl wonders aloud to her friend as to why they were not invited to a party in the next apartment.	F	peer	F
21	A woman scolds two girls for saying mean things about someone who was in an accident the day before and is now in hospital.	F	older	F
22	A girl who has fallen down is asked whether she is hurt.	M	peer	F
23	A young man dressed for travel, interrupts his telephone conversation to explain to his companion that a relative wants them to wait until she arrives and gives them her "farewell blessing" again.	F	older	M
24	A woman returning a torn newspaper to a younger man explains apologetically that the baby caused the damage.	F	older	M