The choice of English modal forms in e-mails discourse by Brazilian Portuguese speakers*

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Summary

This paper looks at how Brazilian Portuguese speakers express certain speech acts in electronic discourse while writing in English (giving suggestions/advice, asking for a favor, expressing necessity and expressing possibility), taking into consideration the modal choices these speakers make. The results show that the learners do not treat electronic discourse as a different discourse genre while English native speakers do. Learners of English as a foreign and second language need to become aware of the discourse genre differences.

Key-words: Electronic discourse, speech act, modal expressions.

Introduction

There has been lately great interest in the virtual world and its consequences for communication and language learning. Studies focus on the understanding of the information age community (Jones, 1998; Baym, 1998; Clark, 1998; Danet, 1998, among others), the analysis of the linguistic choices in electronic discourse (Davis and Brewer, 1997), and the effects of electronic communication in language teaching and learning (Warschauer, 1999; Paiva, 1999; Hoffman, 1996; Pennington, 1996; Berge and Collins, 1995).

One of the most frequent debates nowadays is about the type of language produced by computer-mediated communication (CMC) as far as its spoken and written characteristics. McCleary's (1996) research, which is on CMC in a mailing-list, reports that in such environment, CMC is similar to informal letters; however, when CMC differs from informal

letters, it gets closer to oral language. Therefore, some researchers, like Harrison (1998), use a framework for conversation to analyze messages from a listserv discussion. Naumann's (1995) and Uhlirov's (1994, cited in JOHNSTON, 1999, p. 62) studies on electronic communication "have found that the forms of language used in this medium occupy a middle ground between conventional written and spoken forms." Other researchers, such as Yates (1996), Collot and Bellmore (1996) and Gruber (1997) claim that CMC is a different language variety: it is neither written language nor spoken language.

Although CMC has been used as the synonym of the language produced with the use of computers, it also "is the name given to a large set of functions in which computers are used to support human communication" (SANTORO, 1995, p. 11). In other words, CMC can be defined narrowly or broadly: the means which make possible direct human-to-human communication and any computer system which is used by humans to communicate any data, for instance, statistical analysis and financial programs (SANTORO, 1995). Due to this broad definition of CMC, some researchers prefer to use the term *electronic discourse* when the focus is on "how individuals use language to exchange ideas rather than on the medium or channel by which they transfer and deliver their messages" (DAVIS and BREWER, 1997). As the focus of this paper is on discourse choices, I will use the term *electronic discourse* rather than CMC.

As previously mentioned, some researchers have used oral discourse frameworks (MCCLEARY, 1996; HARRISON, 1998) to analyze electronic discourse. This present research uses the speech act theory framework (AUSTIN, 1962; HYMES, 1974; SEARLE, 1975), based on oral discourse, to investigate Brazilian Portuguese (BP) speakers' modal choices. Oral discourse has been vastly studied (WOLFSON, 1984; HOLMES, 1990; BLUM-KULKA, 1983; OLSHTAIN and COHEN, 1983) as researchers describe the usage rules governing compliments, refusals, and apologies among other speech acts. The studies mentioned range from the rules native speakers (NSs) use to how non-native speakers (NNSs) make pragmatic transfer. These transfers may occur as NNSs do not know the target language pragmatic rules. In such situations, NNSs may be misunderstood, causing communication breakdown. NSs tend to excuse structural errors easily but take at face value pragmatic ones (THOMAS,

1983; WOLFSON, 1989). Therefore, this research looks at how BP speakers express the following speech acts in electronic discourse: giving suggestions/advice, asking for a favor, expressing necessity and expressing possibility, taking into consideration the modal choices these speakers make. The aim of this paper is to detect which linguistic choices could lead to misunderstandings, according to the context they occur in. The forms analyzed encompass modal verbs (MVs), such as *should, could, may*, periphrastic modal verbs, such as *have to* and *need to*, modal expressions (MEs), such as *it's possible* and *maybe*, and imperatives.[1]

Both teachers and language learners have expressed their concerns about learners' problems to use modal forms appropriately. A participant of this research wrote in one of her e-mail messages "I know I need to study more about MUST, have, should …"). Therefore, finding out what learners' problems are in using modals in the electronic medium may help teachers to find ways to improve their students' usage of modal forms. The research in this medium can be justified since it creates opportunities for authentic audience (JOHNSTON, 1999) and interaction which is crucial for language acquisition (LIGHTBOWN and SPADA, 1994; PICA, YOUNG and DOUGHTY, 1987). Johnston (1999, p. 61) states that "the only necessary criterion for the authenticity of an audience is whether or not the message is being read or listened to for its meaning."

This study has the following hypotheses about BP speakers' modal choices in electronic discourse:

a) they are different from NSs' choices in face-to-face discourse, compared to results in Dutra (1998a);

b) they are different from NSs' choices in electronic discourse, compared to results in Dutra (1998b);

c) they are similar to NNSs' choice in face-to-face discourse, compared to results in Dutra (1998a);

d) they are influenced by the speakers' first language (L1), depending on the speaker's interlanguage[2] (IL) stage.

It is important to call attention to the fact that the NS data come from speakers of the American English variety.

METHODOLOGY

The participants of this research belong to two groups that took a one-term distance learning course called "Reading and Writing through the Internet", which is coordinated by Professor Vera L. M. O. Paiva and assisted by her teaching assistant, at the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG). One of the groups, formed by university employees, had eight participants. The other group, mainly formed by undergraduate students, had 15 participants. The age range of the two groups is 18 to 35. They are all native speakers of Brazilian Portuguese.

The e-mails analyzed in this paper exemplify the virtual interaction among the class members: teachers and students. I have randomly selected 131 student e-mails from the whole corpus. Rarely did teacher and students meet face-to-face, so their e-mails were about the activities they did in the Internet, about the activities they were assigned to (papers, exercises), and about their experience learning English through e-mails, chat and the Internet in general. The e-mails were collected in two different terms. In the first term the teaching assistant provided a copy of the e-mails for my linguistic analysis and in the second one, all the messages were posted in the Internet through the site *http://www.egroups.com*, to which I had direct access.

The analysis done in this paper is primarily a qualitative one, looking for tendencies that may turn into evidences of the hypotheses presented.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The e-mails show that the BP speakers use a variety of linguistic forms to perform the speech acts: modal verbs (MVs), periphrastic modal verbs (PMVs), modal expressions (MEs) and imperatives. Some forms are preferred to express the speech acts analyzed:

Speech acts	Linguistic forms
Giving suggestions/advice	MVs, imperatives
Asking for a favor	MVs, imperatives
Expressing necessity	MVs, PMVs, MEs
Expressing possibility	MVs, MEs

Table 1 – Speech acts vs. linguistic forms

In order to understand the students' IL, concerning their patterns of modal acquisition, it is crucial to analyze the usage of each form used to perform each speech act. Afterwards, a comparison is made with NSs' usage based on previous studies which treated the oral acquisition of modal forms (Dutra, 1998a)[3] and the usage of modality in electronic/mailing-list discourse (Dutra, 1998b).[4]

1. Giving suggestions/advice

Giving suggestions or advice was performed using mainly the MV *should*:

> Then, as for many points mentioned in these
> articles we *should* think twice if we are not
> seeking the truth.

This suggestion includes also the speaker/writer as she uses the pronoun *we*. This usage is actually a politeness strategy, so that the suggestion may be lightly taken by the other participants of the group. There are also instances of *should* being used with the pronoun *you*:

> I think you *should* use some of the programmes
> because to chat to foreigners help to improve
> our vocabulary and to know about different
> cultures around the world.[5]

The writer is in a position of giving direct suggestion or advice since she is an expert on ICQ (a chat program) and in this specific message is giving her virtual classmates suggestions on how to use ICQ. After sharing with them her expertise, she ends the message with the suggestion above, which is a perfect closing statement for someone who has had experience on the Internet. The writer above uses *I think* before the MV expressing advice so as to downplay her suggestion and to sound less imposing. The fact that she also starts with the pronoun *I* also takes the focus away from the interlocutors.

There is also the usage of the MV *should* with the pronoun *I*. In these cases, *should* comes in an embedded sentence as part of the speech act of asking for a favor. The MV *should*, nevertheless, keeps its advice meaning as the sentence below can be interpreted as a call for advice:

Can anybody teach me how I *should* begin a
formal letter?

The NNSs' choices of *should* with different pronouns as shown
above corroborate the results from the NSs' studies which show that
they also use *should* to express advice in both face-to-face and mailing-
list discourses.

Suggestions and advice are also given with the use of the
imperative form:

Don't waste your time visiting this webpage.

Imperatives are also used to give a suggestion or advice by NSs in
both face-to-face and mailing-list discourses. The problem is to whom
speakers/writers choose to use the imperative and how often. In face-
to-face discourse, NSs tend to use imperatives in situations where the
interlocutors know each other (friends, acquaintances, or intimates) and
there is either no authority relationship between the interlocutors or the
speaker has some authority over the addressee (DUTRA, 1998a). NNSs
of various L1 backgrounds, however, do not know these pragmatic rules
for oral discourse (DUTRA, 1998a). In the electronic/mailing-list discourse,
imperatives are also used by NSs. In both interactions of a specialized
mailing-list and the distance learning course, members have the same
power, expect for the teacher and her assistant. However, with time,
some participants, who are more knowledgeable about a subject, may
feel that they have some power over the other participants, overusing
the imperative. It will depend on the other members of the group to
accept that power or not. In the data being used for this paper, the
NNSs tend to use imperatives with some frequency, but it is not enough
to affirm that they are overusing it and in inappropriate situations.

There are examples of MVs (*must*, *may*) being used to give a
suggestion in cases where this modal form does not convey this meaning:

I think that we *must* not only to contemplate their ruins but we
may reflect about the importance of Mayas' culture nowadays.

The example above shows that the student's linguistic choices
are not suitable to express the speech act of suggestion. The learner
sees *must* and *may* as appropriate when the MV *should* should have

been used. For this learner, the semantic nuances of these MVs do not exist. This type of mistake is also present in NNSs' oral production, especially in the production of the ones that speak Spanish and Brazilian Portuguese as their first language[6] (DUTRA, 1998a). Therefore, Brazilian Portuguese speakers tend to use the same inappropriate forms (*must* and *may*) to give suggestions in both oral and electronic discourses.

2. Asking for a favor

The BP speakers, mainly, performed the speech act of favor-asking using the MVs *could* and *can*:

> *Could* you help me?
> *Can* anybody teach me how I should begin a formal letter?

These results corroborate the NSs' usage results from the previous studies about electronic discourse and oral language production.

There are two differences in terms of this present study results and my 1998 studies. First, the BP speakers use imperatives to ask for a favor:

> Please give me an answer about it.

The only softening device in such usage is the word *please*. The other studies do not show this tendency of the NSs. Second, NSs use embedded sentences both in face-to-face production (e.g. *I was wondering if you could ...*) and in electronic discourse (*Do you have an idea where I might get this?*). However, the NSs' choices are clearly different, according to the medium. The data show that more proficient BP speakers use, in electronic discourse, forms which are used by NSs in face-to-face conversation (e.g. *I was wondering if you intend to fix a closing date for the weekly activities*). Therefore, BP speakers may sound more formal than they really want to be in electronic discourse as they follow rules that work well in face-to-face interaction but not in electronic discourse.

3. Expressing necessity

Necessity is expressed by BP speakers by MVs (*must*), PMVs (*have to* and *need to*) and MEs (*it's necessary*):

> The "chat" was another problem. It's a very good way to
> practice but I think we *must* start chatting among us before
> chatting with unknown people. In this case we *must*
> synchronize our availability, this is not easy too.
> First you *have to* use normal chat of Yahoo.
> I think that *it's not necessary* to have those illness to care our health.

The use of *must* by the BP speakers occurs in both electronic and in oral discourses (Dutra, 1998a). This usage in electronic discourse is preceded by the pronoun *we*, making the statement less bold as the speaker is included in the action to be taken. In fact, *I think*[7] precedes *we must*, transferring even more the focus of the necessity to the speaker rather than to the participants of the group or to the professor and her teaching assistant. In both electronic and oral discourses, NSs, who are speakers of the North American variety, tend not to use *must* to express necessity. NSs only use *must* in face-to-face communication to express necessity when the interlocutors are intimate and the speaker has power over the addressee (Dutra, 1998a). Thus, the NNSs use in electronic discourse the same inappropriate linguistic forms to express necessity as they do in face-to-face communication.

The PMVs *have to* (e.g. *…first you have to use normal talk of YAHOO …*) and *need to* (e.g. *I don't think you need to apologize for you English)* are used by both BP and NSs in electronic and face-to-face discourse. BPs' usage of these PMVs is, therefore, appropriate.

The use of MEs (*it's necessary*) to express necessity is commonly used by BP speakers in electronic discourse (e.g. *I think it's not necessary to have those illness to care our health*). This similar behavior was not noticed in NS electronic discourse and it was rare in their oral production. It seems that these MEs used by BP speakers for this speech act, considering the high frequency of them, is a direct transfer from the correspondent Portuguese form (*é necessário*), which learners assume as having the same function as the English form (*it's necessary*).

4. Expressing possibility

BP speakers use both MVs and MEs to express possibility:

> I think we *can* do it now.
> … where I *could* save "What a wonderful world".

> Second, until now I do not know, really don't know enough
> about e-mail, or Hot-mail, *maybe* it seems silly but …
> Do you think *it's possible* to include them in it?
> I had to study in the evening and it was *impossible* to me.

The use of the MVs *can* and *could* corroborate the results from the previous studies that show that NSs also use these verbs to express possibility in electronic and face-to-face discourses.

As for the possibility ME forms, the adverb *maybe* is also used by NSs in the previous studies. Yet, BP speakers may use this adverb more often than the NSs due to the fact that the position of the possibility MVs (*may*, *might*, and *could*), between the subject and the main verb in the sentence, make them harder to be used than the adverb *maybe.* This adverb functions as an uncertainty device and Biber (1988) classifies it as a hedging linguistic feature. As BP speakers use them more often than NSs, they may sound insecure when they do not mean that (e.g. *I will start section two now but it is already tonight at university and maybe I will finish it at weekend at home).* It seems that *maybe* "modalizes" the whole clause it precedes rather than only the main verb as the possibility MVs does.

The use of other possibility ME seems to occur very often in the electronic discourse of the BP speakers: *it's possible*, *it's impossible*. The NSs, however, do not use this type of ME in electronic discourse. It seems that the BP speakers are transferring a linguistic form used in Portuguese (*é possível que …*) into English and using it very frequently in electronic discourse:

> I tried several times to access the hotmail site and it wans't
> *posible*, so I created a new one for me. If it is *possible*, I want
> you to send e-mails to this new address.

It seems that many learners in the groups analyzed have not reached the IL stage of appropriately using the modal verbs of possibility. Therefore, they rely on their first language, using impersonal constructions such as *it's possible*.

CONCLUSION

The data point out to partial evidence to all four hypotheses presented about the Brazilian Portuguese speakers' choices of modal forms to express the speech acts of giving suggestions/advice, asking for a favor, expressing necessity and expressing possibility:

a) they are partially different from NSs' choices in face-to-face discourse;

b) they are partially different from NSs' choices in electronic discourse;

c) they are similar to NNSs' choice in face-to-face discourse, especially in their choices of MEs, if compared to BP speakers in my previous study (DUTRA, 1998a);

d) they are influenced by the speakers' first language, depending on the speaker's IL stage.

The confirmation of hypotheses b) and c) shows that the NNSs do not treat electronic discourse as a different form of discourse while NSs do (DUTRA, 1998b). Therefore, learners of English as a foreign and second language need to become aware of these differences.

The BP speakers that participated in this research are able to perform the speech acts investigated (giving suggestion/advice, asking for a favor, expressing necessity and expressing possibility) with some limitations. These limitations are due to three aspects: a) BP speakers do not know the semantic extension of the various linguistic forms that may be used to perform the speech acts above; b) first language interferes in their interlanguage usage of some MVs and MEs; and c) even more proficient language learners do not know that electronic discourse varies from both face-to-face and written discourses.

Using the Internet as an education resource, opens a new world of communication to students as "the Internet currently hosts communication between 100 million people and that by the year 2000 the number will have nearly doubled" (JONSSON, 1998 – Chapter 1). Therefore, doing more research on electronic discourse and informing students that it has its own rules is of great pedagogical importance.

RESUMO

Este trabalho concentra-se em como os falantes de português do Brasil expressam certos atos de fala em discurso eletrônico escrito em inglês (dar sugestões/conselhos, pedir favor, expressar necessidade e expressar possibilidade), levando em consideração as escolhas modais que esses falantes fazem. Os resultados mostram que os aprendizes não tratam o discurso eletrônico como um gênero discursivo diferente enquanto os falantes nativos de inglês o fazem. Os aprendizes de inglês como língua estrangeira e segunda língua precisam se tornar conscientes das diferenças dos gêneros discursivos.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Discurso eletrônico, atos de fala, expressões modais.

NOTAS

1. Imperatives are included here since they are under the scope of irrealis (see Givón 1995) in the same ways as MVs, PMVs and MEs.
2. The term *interlanguage* (IL) was coined by Selinker (1972) to refer to the second language learner's system.
3. From here on, when I refer to results from NSs' oral discourse, they come from Dutra (1998a).
4. From here on, when I refer to results from NSs' electronic/mailing-list discourse, they come from Dutra (1998b).
5. Spelling and grammar mistakes made by the learners in their e-mail messages have not been corrected to maintain the original text.
6. Arabic and Korean speakers also use *must* inappropriately; however, this transfer seems to be of a different nature from the Spanish and Brazilian Portuguese speakers. For more details, see Dutra (1998a).
7. See Davis and Bower (1997) for a detailed analysis of verbs that co-occur with modals.

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