

A new approach to teaching intercultural pragmatics: using minimal languages in the language classroom

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Abstract

In this chapter we propose a new way of working with intercultural pragmatics in second and foreign language teaching, an area which is, at the same time, a central component of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) (Byram, 1997) and a largely overseen element in the language classroom. Our novel perspective on intercultural pragmatics is based on the minimal languages approach (Goddard, 2018) to describing communicative culture in simple terms, which can be understood by speakers of other languages without a loss of meaning—even by speakers who have not yet acquired a large vocabulary in the target language. This approach has recently emerged from research in Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) (e.g., Goddard & Wierzbicka, 2004). The minimal languages approach is currently being explored for different practical applications. In language teaching contexts, our pioneering work in Australian English and Danish as second languages (see e.g., Sadow, 2018, 2019, 2021; Fernández, 2016, 2019, 2020; Sadow & Fernández, 2022) is opening new horizons for effective communicative language learning. In this chapter, we will present our current work with Danish as a second language and propose ways of expanding this work to the languages taught in the school system.

Keywords: Intercultural pragmatics, Intercultural communicative competence, NSM, Minimal languages approach, Language teaching and learning

Introduction

In language teaching, intercultural pragmatics skills are contained within the concept of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) (Byram, 1997), one of the central competences in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Intercultural pragmatics, which deals with

communicative culture in different language groups, is a key to the connection between language and culture and ought to be a central element in language teaching. Nevertheless, numerous authors have observed that there is a lack of pragmatic focus in language teaching materials and consequently also in the classroom (e.g. Fernández, 2019).

In our article, we will present the *minimal languages approach* to describing communicative culture. In this context, communicative culture refers to cultural keywords (i.e. particularly salient words which carry important values for a given group) and cultural scripts (ways of communicating and behaving socially that are accepted or rejected by a language group). The minimal languages approach (Goddard, 2018) uses a reduced vocabulary, which means that descriptions in minimal languages can be understood by speakers of other languages without a loss of meaning, even by speakers who have not yet acquired a large vocabulary in the target language. This makes the approach ideal for describing the communicative culture of a given target language in the language classroom.

The minimal languages approach as a framework for talking about and explaining cultural concepts is only recently being used in language teaching contexts, through the pioneer work of Sadow and Fernández (see e.g., Sadow, 2018, 2019, 2021; Fernández, 2016, 2019; Sadow & Fernández, 2022). In this chapter, we will present our current work with Danish as a second language and propose ways of expanding this work to the languages taught in the school system.

The article is structured as follows: After this introduction, we briefly delve into the area of pragmatics in language teaching, and we present the methodology of NSM for analyzing semantic and pragmatic features of language and its extension for practical purposes, the minimal languages approach. Thereafter, we show this in practice through a description of our present project about Danish as a second language. Finally, we discuss the possibilities of applying the same methodology for including intercultural semantics and pragmatics in other second and foreign language classrooms.

Intercultural pragmatics in language teaching

Pragmatics can be defined as:

the study of the choices we make when we use language, the reasons for those choices, and the effects that those choices convey. (Crystal, 2018, p. 304)

The key role of pragmatics in second language teaching should be clear from this definition, especially if we consider learners as language users who employ their new language in authentic situations, establish social

relationships with their interlocutors and are mutually influenced by this linguistic interaction. Pragmatic competence implies understanding one's interlocutors' intentions, feelings and attitudes and being able to interact appropriately with them in different situations, and, as such, is crucial to language learning (Kasper & Blum Kulka, 1993).

The term *intercultural pragmatics* entails the existence of a *cultural pragmatics*, as it assumes that there exist different "points of view" that people in different languacultures have as a starting point for their habitual way of speaking, thinking and living. In other words, all languacultures operate with unique linguistic-cultural logics (Goddard, 2006; Levisen & Ye, 2024). While cultural pragmatics describes and represents these unique logics, the task of intercultural pragmatics is to describe and explain the language and culture encounters that everyone who crosses linguistic and cultural boundaries must deal with. In language pedagogy, this means to articulate the languacultural logics on which a certain cultural-pragmatic tradition is based (Fernández & Levisen, 2024).

Intercultural pragmatics is at the intersection between language and culture and can be said to comprise both sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic perspectives (Leech, 1983). Sociopragmatics can be defined as "one's understanding of the sociocultural meaning potential of language in its contexts of use" (van Compernolle, 2013, p. 74), while pragmalinguistics refers to the actual wording of speech acts. Sociopragmatics is a subtle, often invisible and implicit aspect of language use, which is particularly problematic in second languages (L2), where different cultural pragmatics meet. The sociopragmatic rules feel intuitively right to the members of a languaculture, while they are less obvious to L2 users, who are often guided by the sociopragmatic rules of their first language, which can lead to intercultural misunderstandings or awkwardness. Sociopragmatics focuses on why language is used as it is, and what consequences and implications the use of certain linguistic features can have for a given verbal interaction and for the interlocutors' relationships with each other.

Even though many voices (e.g. Ishihara & Cohen, 2010; Morollón Martí & Fernández, 2016) have argued for including knowledge of sociopragmatics in L2 classrooms, the task is not easy, as there are a series of challenges. One of them is the lack of sociopragmatic content in teaching materials, which has been pointed out by several researchers (e.g. Ambjørn, 2015; Peeters, 2013; Pozzo & Fernández, 2008; Fernández, 2019). Pragmalinguistics is often better represented in teaching materials through examples of language in use, albeit with different degrees of authenticity. However, pragmalinguistics without sociopragmatic knowledge is insufficient to make L2-users ready for authentic interactions. In our current work with Danish as a second language (DSA), we are finding numerous examples of this situation in the available manuals, which often present examples of similar phrases - e.g. *Er du sød at slukke for lyset?/ kunne du ikke lige slukke for lyset?* (Are you sweet enough to turn off the light?/ Can you turn off the light?) (Are you sweet enough to turn off the light?/ Can you turn off the light?)

the lights?/couldn't you turn off the lights?) or minimal pairs in everyday interactions (e.g. finishing an exchange at a shop with *god weekend / tak, i lige made* (*have a nice weekend / thanks, you too*) without discussing the implications of performing these speech acts in one way over another or in choosing to perform them at all. Other studies have also uncovered similar situations in language textbooks for foreign languages in the Danish school system (see e.g. Fernández (2019) for Spanish).

It is important to note that L2 users do not need to follow the L2's sociopragmatic rules if they believe that following them would identify them with beliefs and values that they do not share (Kinginger & Farrell, 2004; Kinginger, 2008). However, it is important that they know these rules, so that they are better able to interpret their interlocutors' linguistic choices and their communicative intentions, as well as avoid misunderstandings and stereotypes. L2 learners need more than exposure to the L2 culture to achieve sociopragmatic awareness, and language teachers have a central role in facilitating this, provided they can rely on suitable materials and tested pedagogical methods. In connection to the latter, there is extensive literature about the affordances of online intercultural exchanges in providing opportunities for authentic communication (O'Dowd, 2006), developing awareness of cultural differences (e.g. Belz & Kinginger, 2003), developing pragmatic competence (e.g. Morollón Martí & Fernández, 2016), providing opportunities to engage in different speech acts (e.g. Belz, 2006) and opportunities to combine these linguistic encounters with reflection and discussion activities (van Compernolle, 2014; McConachy, 2018; Morollón Martí, 2019). In our current work with DSA, we focus on giving both teachers and students tools to explain and understand communication norms and values. An example could be the following, where we explain how it is well-perceived to ask questions when one does not understand a task at work³⁸:

(1) Asking if you do not understand an assignment

When I don't know how to do something at work, it is good if I ask. If I don't ask, I might do things wrong. I can ask a colleague; I can ask my boss.

When I ask, other people at work can know that I want to do my job well. Other people won't think anything bad of me.

Many people in Denmark think that it is good when it is like this.

³⁸ The examples are presented in English for comprehensibility. The originals are in Danish.

We combine these explanations with pedagogical activities targeting the underlying logics, language use and reflection, and we support the teachers' work via training workshops. In the next sections, we present our theoretical and methodological framework.

The minimal languages approach

The minimal languages approach has recently emerged from research within the natural semantic metalanguage approach (NSM) (e.g. Goddard & Wierzbicka, 2004). The NSM approach originated in Australia as a theory of intercultural semantic and pragmatic analysis aiming to study linguistic cultural diversity. Over the past 50 years the approach has been adopted by researchers all over the world (for an overview of the NSM approach in a Nordic context, see Levisen, Fernández & Hein, 2022). NSM stands for “natural semantic metalanguage”, i.e. a language used to describe and represent meaning based on natural languages (such as Danish, English or Spanish). It consists of a vocabulary and associated grammar, and it stands in contrast to the metalanguages used in other semantic and pragmatic approaches, which typically consist of technical words or formal symbols. NSM is based on simple concepts such as 'you' and 'I', 'big' and 'small', 'good' and 'bad', 'see' and 'hear', known in the theory as 'semantic primes' as they cannot be decomposed into simpler units. 65 such semantic primes have currently been identified, and they are believed to have exponents in all languages (Goddard, 2018). Semantic primes are an expression of the minimal universalism that characterizes human language, i.e. many concepts are language specific, but there is a core of basic meanings that languages have in common (Goddard & Wierzbicka, 2004, p. 13). These semantic primes are used to formulate 'reductive paraphrases', i.e. descriptions of the meaning of words, phrases, and grammatical constructions. These descriptions are by default simpler than the concept that is being explained, as they are formulated only through very basic primes that are understandable to everyone, including people without a background in linguistics. This method of paraphrasing is used mainly for two purposes: to compose 'semantic explications', i.e. explanations of what a word, phrase or grammatical construction means (see example (2)), and to compose 'cultural scripts', i.e. descriptions of values or of communication or interactional social norms that a linguistic group share (see example (3)) (Wierzbicka, 2006, p. 35).

(1) **Curling parents (*curlingforældre*)**

This kind of parent wants to do many things for their children. They want to help their children with everything, so that the children never feel bad and so that the children never have to do anything that is difficult.

(3) It is important to play

Many people in Denmark think that it is good for children to play. It is bad if children do not have time to play.

It is good if children play in many ways. For example, children can play with other children, with adults, without other people. They can play outside in nature. They can play with toys. It is good if they use their bodies when they play.

Children feel something good when they play. They learn many things when they play. When they play in many ways, they learn different things.

Building on this idea, the minimal languages approach is an applied branch of NSM research. While the NSM as a metalanguage has been used for semantic description in a research context, the extremely limited vocabulary can make comprehension more difficult for learners, as explanations are long and do not always read like “natural” text. In the minimal languages approach, the focus is on explaining concepts and interactional norms using a limited defining vocabulary which is bigger than NSM but bound by the same principles of simplicity and cross-translatability. That is to say that while not all words in a minimal language are universal, they are chosen to be more easily translatable and simpler for the users than other alternatives.

The minimal languages approach has been used for a wide range of applications in diverse communication areas such as easy-to-read texts in history education (Christian, 2018), crisis and health communication (Diget, 2023; Goddard et al., 2021), as well as language education. It is more flexible than the NSM approach and more tailored to the contexts in which it is used. An example of the difference between NSM and minimal languages can be seen in example (4), where (4a) is an NSM explication of the weekend from Peeters (2007, p.88-89), and (4b) is a minimal language explication of the weekend from our current work with DSA.

(4a) ***Weekend***

part of a week

there is no other part of the week like this

this part has two parts of the same kind

many people think of this part like this:

I want this part to have more parts of the same kind

this part is the part when, for a short time, I can do things

because I want to do these things

not because I have to do these things

after this part, many people feel something bad

before this part, there is another part

this other part has many parts of the same kind

this other part is the part when people do many things

because they have to do these things

not because they want to do them

they do not want to do these things for a long time

this other part is the part when many people think:

after this part there will be another part

this is good

when people think like this they feel something good

(4b) ***Weekend***

People in Denmark do not have to work every day of the week. Children do not have to go to school every day of the week. There are two days a week when many people do not work and when children do not go to school. These days are Saturday and Sunday. Many people in Denmark do not work on Saturday and Sunday (e.g. teachers, pedagogues, office assistants).

Some people have to work on Saturday and Sunday sometimes (eg bus drivers, doctors, waiters). When this is the case, these people can stay at home on another day (e.g. Monday or Wednesday).

The precise vocabulary of a ‘minimal language’ depends on the field of application but is generally around 250-300 well-chosen words. In our project “Danish in the Making”, we are creating a ‘minimal Danish’ (that we call stepping stone Danish) as a metalanguage for DSA teaching inspired by Sadow’s work (2019) with *The Australian Dictionary of Invisible Culture for Teachers*.

In the Danish in the Making project (see below), we have used this minimal Danish to explain cultural keywords (such as *hygge*, *fælleskab*, *janteloven*,

ligestilling and many others) in a way which is accessible to newcomers to Denmark. At the same time, we are elaborating cultural scripts with some of the most salient Danish communicative norms, for example scripts about thanking (*tak for sidst*, *tak for mad*, etc.) or about how to address your colleagues or your boss at work.

The Danish in the Making project

The research project *Danish in the Making. Intercultural pragmatics for learners and teachers of Danish as a second language*³⁹ presented here aims to address the oversight of migrant and refugee language learning needs in second language contexts in Denmark. At the intersection of intercultural pragmatics and language learning, the project investigates the best ways to identify and explain aspects of communicative culture (social values, communicative styles, and cultural keywords) that are embedded in Danish to make them accessible for DSA learners and teachers. We do so by applying the minimal languages approach described above for the creation of a cultural dictionary of Danish (called *Dansk sprog og kultur i brug — danSKiB*), a freely available learning online resource which includes descriptions of chosen elements of Danish communicative culture, examples of language use and pedagogical activities for the DSA classroom. In order to produce a resource which is relevant and useful for the DSA context, we base our work on an extensive teacher and learner cognition study, including classroom observations, a questionnaire and interviews with both DSA teachers and learners. During the development of our product, we test the drafts likewise with teachers and learners. The purpose of the teacher and learner studies is to map the communicative needs of newcomers in Denmark as well as the teachers' needs regarding appropriate teaching materials. The testing is a guarantee that our materials meet the target group's expectations.

The online resource contains entries grouped in different categories, which reveal central aspects of Danish culture and of life in Denmark, such as child raising, the workplace, health, education, social life, democracy, the environment, and many more. For each of these categories, there are a number of entries, containing: a) descriptions of a term or a communicative norm (e.g. *madpakke* [lunchbox], *at tage initiativ på arbejde* [to take initiative at work]); b) notes, which add less essential information or clarify nuances in different contexts; c) 'scenario examples', i.e. constructed examples which in simple words show a situation where the word is used or show the communicative norm in action (e.g. *Sara tager altid initiativ til at præsentere nye ideer under*

³⁹ The project is financed by the Velux Foundation. See: <https://veluxfonden.dk/en/projekt/danish-making-intercultural-pragmatics-learners-and-teachers-danish-second-language>

møder. Hun får ros af sin chef på grund af det. [Sara always takes the initiative to present new ideas during meetings. She gets praised by her boss because of it.]; d) authentic examples from the internet, which are often more complex, but target the more advanced learners. For each category, we include a series of classroom activities, which include elements of both interaction and reflection. Figure 1 shows a partial screenshot of the entry for *det er vigtigt at lege*, belonging to the category “child raising”.

Figure 1: Screenshot from the in-progress *danSKiB* website showing the entry for *det er vigtigt at lege* [it is important to play]

In addition to the online database, we hope that our project will contribute to improving teacher competences in teaching and explaining invisible aspects of culture such as communicative styles and values, which all L2 learners need to master to successfully interact in their new environments, using the technique of the minimal language approach. For that purpose, we will offer a series of free training workshops for DSA teachers.

Applications to other languages

Even though our project focuses on DSA, the results of this research are also applicable to other second language teaching contexts and to foreign language teaching contexts. Previous work from within the NSM and minimal languages approach has already proposed similar applications for French (Peeters, 2013, 2021, 2024), Spanish (Barrios Rodríguez, 2020), and English

(Sadow, 2021; Bullock, 2021). While each of these projects has had its own challenges and adaptations, the principles of using reductive paraphrase applying a well-chosen minimal language vocabulary has proven to be useful for language learners each time.

In the long-term vision of the Danish in the Making project, the plan is to expand both the product and the teacher workshops to other language groups within the Danish and Scandinavian school systems, such as Spanish, French, and German. Danish was a practical language to start with, as there is a lack of dictionary materials aimed at learners of Danish, and there is extensive existing work on Danish cultural keywords and scripts within the NSM framework — particularly through the work of Carsten Levisen and his students. The existing NSM descriptions were quality assessed, updated, improved and supplemented by new original work that “fills the gap” in the existing analytical work.

For a Danish (or Scandinavian) educational context, the current Danish materials can be used as a starting and contrastive point for the second languages taught. For example, the Danish entry for *fælleskab* [society/community] could be used in a French language classroom in Denmark to compare to the French *société* [society/community]. The Danish entry alone can be used to create a starting point for where students think a difference might be and how that might affect their understanding. A comparable entry for the French word could be written by the class to consolidate that discussion. An entry from a similar dictionary for learners of French could also then be used to continue the discussion and to highlight and consider stereotypes which speakers of both languages may have. The minimal languages approach means that these kinds of entries would be effective whether they were written in the students first language (e.g. Danish) or in their L2 (i.e. French).

Of course, this idea can be expanded to any and all language pairings. At this stage, there are not enough resources to provide all language pairings with the depth of materials development as is emerging in the Danish in the Making project, but the minimal languages approach at the heart of such dictionaries is a tool for all teachers, which can be used regardless of the existence of written materials. As such, this project will also offer workshops in using minimal languages and creating reductive paraphrase in second language classrooms for teachers of all foreign languages. In this way, teachers can develop the skills to explain intercultural pragmatics with clarity, and in an accessible way for learners of all levels.

Final remarks

In this article, we have presented our efforts to include more intercultural pragmatics (including both aspects of pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics)

to the language classroom to help promote learners' intercultural communicative competence. Our present work focuses on Danish as a second language, where we are developing novel and freely available teaching materials based on the minimal languages approach. Our intention for the future is to expand this work to comprise other languages taught in the Scandinavian school context. We hope that this brief presentation can inspire colleagues who might be interested in joining us and contributing to this work. For more information on our project, see our website: <https://cc.au.dk/danish-in-the-making>.

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