

# FEATURE ARTICLE

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Recently Mark Holst joined the ranks of the Pragmatics SIG officers as the new Publicity Coordinator serving alongside Donna Fujimoto and Rieko Matsuoka. Here he introduces himself and tells us how he got into the field of pragmatics.

## **Hello from Hokkaido**

**By Mark Holst**

### **Incoming Publicity Coordinator**

Since graduating from university I've taught English in Spain, Greece, the UK and Japan. On the very day of the Showa Emperor's funeral in 1989 I swept into Narita airport on a one-way ticket on Aeroflot, making my way through the somber streets of the capital to Tokyo station, where I hopped onto the Shinkansen to Kyoto to find a job. After a few weeks I eventually found one at a small language school in Nara, where I stayed for two and a half years. I taught a very interesting variety of students of many ages and backgrounds, which introduced me to a good cross-section of Japanese society. During my non-teaching hours I spent much time learning about Japanese history and culture, and I also began my long struggle with the Japanese language. I left Japan in 1991 to do my Master's in applied linguistics in Edinburgh University. After that I came to Hokkaido, where I now teach at Otaru University of Commerce. I teach general English to first and second years, and I have a seminar in sociolinguistics for third and fourth year students.

At Edinburgh, I was most interested in sociolinguistics, discourse analysis and second language acquisition. For my dissertation I made a study into the possible transfer of pragmatic strategies by Japanese users of English (high school teachers) into English. For this I devised a series of 10 situations, each involving a face threatening act (FTA), and the Japanese and native English respondents were asked to fill in an appropriate utterance. I have always been struck by the general taciturnity among the Japanese learners I have taught, and I thought a pragmatic study might provide a suitable empirical framework in which to get to the bottom of this. What I was really interested in was to see if there was any evidence to show any influence of Japanese interpersonal behaviour on the way Japanese learners used English. My results showed some potentially interesting patterns, but ultimately I was

dissatisfied with the somewhat inauthentic nature of the questionnaire format, which asks for imagined responses rather than recording the actual utterances of real people in real conversations. Therefore, when I later returned to research the effect of culture on interpersonal communication for my PhD, I decided to make a series of recordings of authentic conversations from a real life setting – doctor-patient consultations. In the end, I managed to collect 70 recordings at a local hospital, which I analysed qualitatively using conversation analysis, and quantitatively using a concordancer. My main theme was to discover how these encounters in this specific cultural and institutional setting were made more or less patient-centred through the discourse choices of the two participants.

The notion of ‘national culture’, by which I mean the understood norms of interpersonal behaviour in a given society, is at once intuitively real yet vague, and it is difficult to describe in a non-stereotyped way. One way to avoid such stereotyping is to focus on language in use by particular groups of people (discourse communities) and determine if the members of each group communicate in a consistent way. Then, it is possible to see whether the rules of interaction differ from group to group and in what way. I feel strongly that the role of a researcher into language and culture is to work from the bottom up to seek out empirical evidence to show how members of a particular discourse community interact, rather than to invoke a grand top-down psychological or sociological theory and seek out evidence that appears to support it.

I am looking forward to involving myself more with the Pragmatics SIG, since it is clear that our area of study is at the core of language learning. As English teachers in Japan we are concerned more and more with getting our students to manipulate the language effectively, not just asking them to memorise vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation patterns. We have to get out the message that pragmatics is at the heart of the language: we teach language appropriacy from our beginners’ classes, so it should not be regarded it as some esoteric add-on that is only suitable for advanced students. I hope I can play a small part in spreading this message to all our colleagues in JALT, and publicizing our own research activities in the area.

Best wishes,

Mark