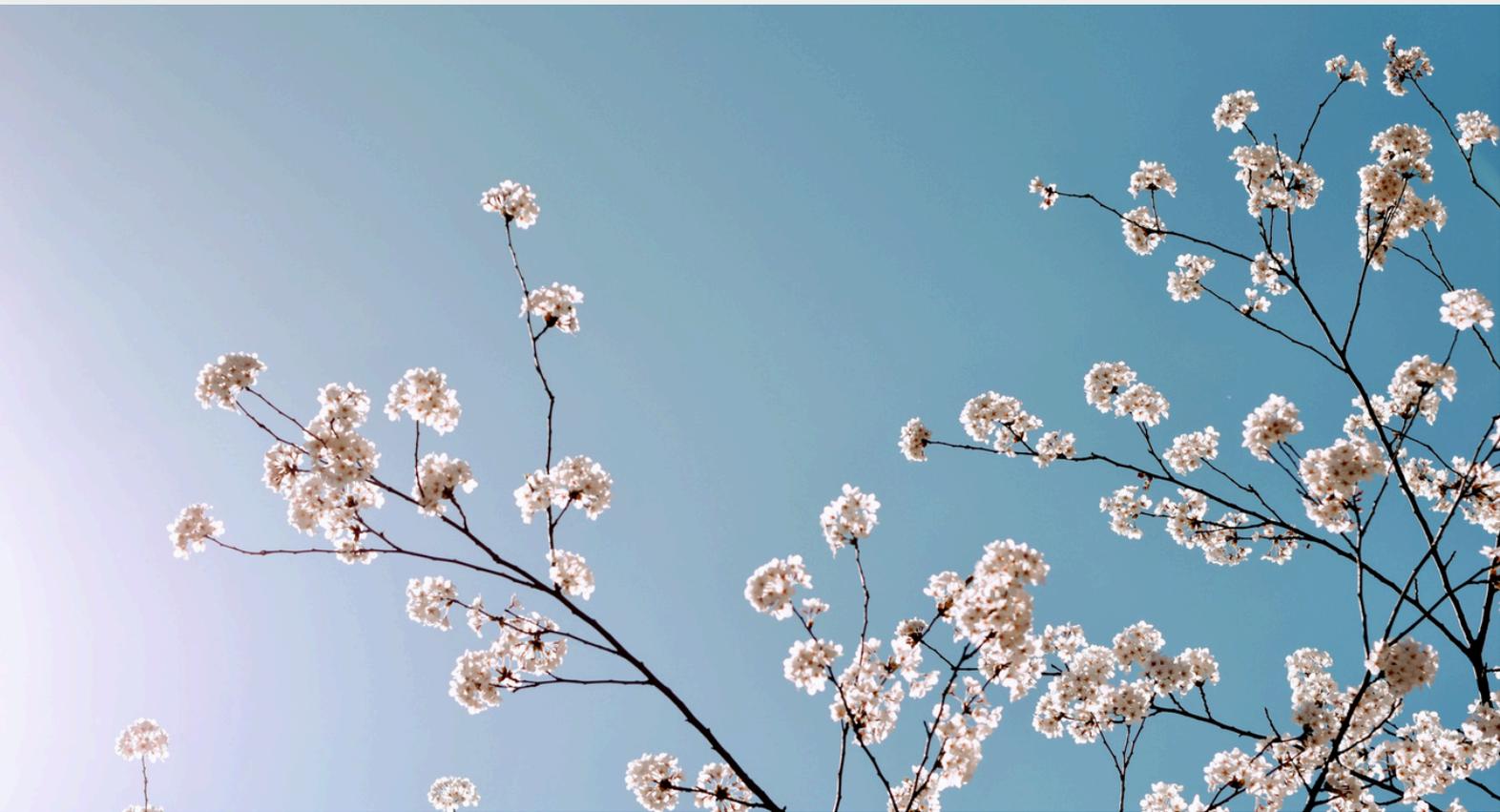


Pragmatics Matters

Winter 2026
Issue 68



- **Article: Refusing Suggestions in the Workplace**
- **Conference reports: International Pragmatics Association, 2025 and Panels from the International Pragmatics Association, 2025**
- **Pragmatics Incidents**
- **Member Focus: Kathleen Kitao**

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Greetings! I hope you are all doing well as you prepare for the coming academic year.

In this issue of *Pragmatics Matters*, we have Shuiko Nishida's summary of her research paper, "Refusing Suggestions in the Workplace." She emphasizes an approach to introducing students to approaches to refusing suggestions.

Todd Allen reported on The Sociopragmatics Symposium 2025. He also reported on two panels from the International Pragmatics Association 2025. They were "Pragmatic Synthesis – Exploring a Single Dataset through Multifaceted Approaches" and "Social Interaction in Hospitality Establishments in East Asia and Beyond."

Jim Ronald put together some examples of daily use of pragmatics in his Pragmatics Incidents column.

Finally, Donna Fujimoto presents this issue's Member Focus, an interview with Kathleen Kitao.

For the next issue of the newsletter, we are accepting contributions related to ideas for teaching elements of pragmatics, aspects of pragmatics, a pragmatics-related presentation you'd be interested in reporting on, etc. We are also interested in descriptions of incidents you have noticed in your real life, in a book or film, etc., for the Pragmatics Incidents column. If you would like to contribute, please email me at kkitao217@yahoo.com.

Kathleen Kitao, Editor

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Article

Refusing Suggestions in the Workplace

By Shiuko Nishida

When you refuse a suggestion, you are likely to give excuses and reasons to justify your refusal. Moreover, you want to be extra careful not to offend the proposer, especially when the suggestion is offered by a person in a higher position like your boss. While Japanese learners of English generally try to be polite and respectful, their way of giving reasons may not always sound so polite. They do not shy away from saying “It’s too easy” or “I can do that myself” when refusing a teacher’s suggestion for a lesson topic. This is in line with some literature suggesting that Asian learners are much more likely to be direct in expressing their excuses (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1991), and sometimes their excuses may not be considered so relevant by native speakers of English (Zhou, 2007). Although these moments can be brushed off rather light-heartedly, they can become critical in building a relationship or when these incidents accumulate.

Context

The following activities are designed for a one-to-one 60-minute lesson online and are addressed to intermediate-level adult learners who have some level of exposure to English in the workplace. However, the activities can be adapted to a variety of settings. The target learners have already established themselves in a multicultural work environment where some of the norms are localized while some remain foreign. For many, reevaluating their identities and understanding different expectations are challenging, while at the same time, their views of appropriateness which they have developed over the years should not be undermined. Yates (2010) cautions that rather than suggesting a “right” response or encouraging the learners to be acclimatized to the employer’s norm, they should be given opportunities to reflect on themselves and explore different ways of interacting.

For these reasons, a fair amount of time should be invested in receptive skills. The goals of the lesson are to allow learners to 1) reassess their metapragmatic awareness (awareness-raising), 2) observe and notice other ways to perform the act (development of observation skills), 3) understand alternative strategies and language forms (gain knowledge), and 4) reflect on their pragmatic practices (promote reflective practice).

Preparation, Materials and Lesson Activities

In the lesson, written Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs) will be put into full use. The following three materials will be prepared.

1. Discourse Completion Task Worksheet

On a Google Document, prepare five scenarios with discourse between a boss and a direct subordinate in the workplace. The DCTs should have at least one turn and should elicit the subordinates’ responses.

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On a Google Document, prepare five scenarios with discourse between a boss and a direct subordinate in the workplace. The DCTs should have at least one turn and should elicit the subordinates' responses.

2. Samples of Japanese-Influenced Responses

Fill out the same discourses in with responses that are reasonably appropriate in the Japanese language and a direct translation in English without any form of mitigators or softeners.

3. Samples of Proficient English Speakers

Collect samples from proficient speakers of English, ideally more than one, using the same scenarios.

Table 1 shows the DCTs with samples of Japanese-influenced responses and that of proficient English Speakers' responses.

Table 1

<p>Scenario 1 Your project team just finished a project and your boss suggested that the team go out to celebrate. But you're a bit tired and just want to go home and spend some time with your family. How would you respond?</p> <p>Boss: Since the project was successful, how about if we all go out for a drink tonight to celebrate?</p> <p>Ichiro:</p>	
Japanese-Influenced Responses	Sample Responses by Proficient Speakers
<p>I'm sorry but it's too sudden. (すみませんが、ちょっと急すぎます)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. I'd love to go out and get a drink, but I'm afraid I've got some family plans tonight.2. Thank you for the offer, but I am a bit tired after the project. I would like to go home and relax with my family.3. Oh, sorry. I can't join you guys tonight. I'm feeling a bit under the weather.

Scenario 2

Your boss has suggested taking a seminar on Effective Time Management. You're not really sure what his intention is, but you're not that interested in this seminar. How would you respond?

Boss: Would you like to take the seminar on Effective Time Management?

Anna:

Japanese-Influenced Responses

I'm not interested and I can manage myself.
(あんまり興味がないです。自分でなんとかできそうですし。)

Sample Responses by Proficient Speakers

1. If you want me to, but I think I'm okay.
2. Thank you. But I don't think I would benefit from this seminar.
3. Sounds like an interesting seminar. However, I've already signed up for all the required seminars for this fiscal year. I can't take any more days off work to attend an extra one.

Scenario 3

Your boss thought the presentation you just did for an important customer was great, and he suggested that you share the slides with the rest of the team. You don't really want your colleagues to get a hold of a copy of your slides. How would you respond?

Boss: Your presentation was a great success. What do you say you share your presentation slides with the rest of the team?

Mika:

Japanese-Influenced Responses	Sample Responses by Proficient Speakers
<p>I'm sorry but I don't want to share my slides with others. (すみませんが、あまり人に見せたくないです。)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do I have to share them with everyone? I'd rather not have everyone see it. 2. I am glad you liked my presentation. That means a lot. However, I generally don't share my personal works with others. 3. Thank you. I'm glad it all turned out well. Hmm... I would prefer not to share the presentation itself.

Scenario 4
You're feeling a bit under the weather, but you just want to finish what you're doing right now and maybe take a day off tomorrow. But your boss suggests this.

Boss: You look tired. Why don't you go home today, come early tomorrow to finish that up?

Shin:

Japanese-Influenced Responses	Sample Responses by Proficient Speakers
<p>I will finish it today and want to take a day off tomorrow. (今日終わらせて、明日ゆっくりさせてもらいたいです。)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. If it's not too much to ask, I would like to stay late today and wrap things up, and then, I was thinking, if it's possible to take one of my sick days tomorrow... 2. Thank you for noticing. However, I would like to finish this today. I think I can do it. However, I would like to take the day off tomorrow instead, if you don't mind. 3. Thanks for your concern. I do feel a bit under the weather. But I will be able to complete all the urgent stuff today so will it be okay if I take a rest day tomorrow?

Scenario 5

You've been busy all week, and your boss suggests that you get some help from Hana. You feel that delegating the task to someone else at this point might not be so efficient. How would you respond?

Boss: You seem overloaded. Why don't we ask Hana for help?

Ken:

Japanese-Influenced Responses

Delegating tasks takes too much time. It's better I finish it myself.
(このタイミングだと説明に時間がかかりそうです。自分でやってしまいます。)

Sample Responses by Proficient Speakers

1. While I would love the help, I'm wondering if the amount of onboarding we would have to do for Hana might be a bit much...
2. Thanks for the idea. But I think I can handle it myself. Besides, if I ask another person to assist, it may actually take longer. So, if you don't mind, I think I can handle it myself.
3. It's alright. I can still manage it. Hana seems to be busy as well. But, if things get really hectic on my end, I'll get in touch with her.

Stage 1: Trying Out DCTs (10 min.)

1. Provide a link to the Discourse Completion Task Worksheet (Appendix A) and have students open it on their end. Show the document on the screen as well.
2. Have the learner read the scenarios aloud while making sure they understand the scenarios.
3. Have the learner complete the discourse by typing the responses into the Google document. If it works better for the learner, responses can be given orally, while the teacher types down the responses on behalf of the learner.

Stage 2: Introduce and Discuss Japanese-Influenced Excuses (Raising Awareness: 12 min.)

1. Show examples of Japanese-influenced responses on the screen.
2. Have the learner read the subordinates' role aloud while the teacher reads the boss's part.
3. Elicit the learner's impression of each subordinate's response.
4. Have the learner identify problematic expressions, if any.

Stage 3: Present the data from Proficient Speakers of English (Observe and Notice: 12 min.)

1. On the screen, show sample responses by proficient speakers of English.
2. Have the learner read the subordinates' parts while the teacher reads the boss's parts.
3. Elicit reactions from the learner.
4. Summarize the sample data (see Table 1) and have the learner compare and spot differences in strategies and forms for making excuses.

If the learner finds it difficult to form their opinions, ask the following questions to elicit their reactions.

- Does the excuse sound like it is respecting or disrespecting the suggestion?
- Does it convey any negative or critical views about the suggestion?
- Does it express the refuser's ill feelings directly or indirectly?
- Does it express the refuser's unwillingness to follow the suggestion directly or indirectly?
- Follow up all the questions above with "Why/Why not?" and "How?"

Stage 4: Understanding Strategies and Language Forms (10 min.)

1. On the whiteboard, list the following three recommendations that could help learners fulfill the act effectively.
 - Respect the suggestion.
 - Avoid or mitigate negative views of the suggestion.
 - Mitigate unwillingness and/or ill feelings.
2. Discuss language forms that will likely allow the learner to act on the recommendations mentioned above. Start by identifying forms from the proficient speaker's samples and elicit more from the learner.

- Respect the suggestion:

"I'd love to but...", "Thank you for the offer/concern/idea," "Sounds like an interesting seminar. However...", "I'm glad you liked my presentation," "That means a lot," "While I would love the help...", "I'm glad it all turned out well."

- Avoid or mitigate negative views of the suggestion:

"I don't think I would benefit from this...", "I'm wondering if ...," "...might be a bit much," "I think I can handle it myself," "If I ask..., it may actually take longer," "...seems to be busy as well."

- Mitigate unwillingness and/or ill feelings:

“I’m afraid I have other plans...,” “I’m a bit tired...,” “I’m feeling a bit under the weather,” “I think I’m okay,” “I’d rather not...,” “I generally don’t share...,”
“I would prefer not to share...,” “If it’s not too much to ask, I would like to...,”
“I was thinking if it’s possible to...,” “if you don’t mind”, “Will it be okay if I...?”

3. Put the elicited forms on the whiteboard and discuss the use in the learner’s context.

(When did you last use these expressions? Can you think of a situation where you would use these expressions? Which ones would you like to use right away? Why and how?)

Stage 5: Reflecting on One’s Own Practice (10 min.)

1. Have the learner go back to the responses that they came up with at Stage 1 and have them choose at least one that they would like to change.
2. Have them recreate the response(s) of their choice in writing.
3. Have them explain what they changed, what strategies they used, and why.
4. Ask the learner to look for strategies and forms that they observe in the workplace and to share them in the next lesson.

Rationale

In order to achieve the primary objective of the lesson, which is to heighten the learners’ metapragmatic awareness, there was a particular need to discreetly draw learners’ attention to the sociopragmatic differences between Japanese learners of English and proficient speakers of English. To highlight these differences implicitly, samples were given both in Japanese and in its oversimplified English translation. The Japanese samples remind learners of typical responses that could be seen exchanged among native speakers of Japanese. By comparison, mitigators and softeners were intentionally omitted in the English version to highlight that simply translating the language does not always translate the appropriateness and the intention.

In contrast, the purpose of presenting the proficient speakers’ samples was to prompt noticing and understanding of both the sociopragmatic and the pragmalinguistic aspects of the act, at Stages 3 and 4 respectively. While there is a general understanding that sample data from written DCTs may not represent the most authentic data (Eslami, 2010; Ishihara, 2022), in this lesson, the proficient speakers’ written samples provide the learner with ample opportunities to compare alternative responses, observe strategies and forms they might largely overlook when performing the act, and reflect on their L2 pragmatic practices. The most significant role that the tasks themselves play in this lesson, however, is the fact that all the data bear relevance, which is something that Yates (2010) strongly advocates in addressing pragmatics for adult learners.

Finally, metapragmatic awareness is only achieved when the learner is able to make decisions judiciously while understanding the pragmatic implications in the target community (Ishihara, 2022). At Stage 5 of the lesson, not only was the learner asked to reflect on what they had produced earlier at Stage 1, which is a reflection on their own L2 utterances, but by asking them to observe people's exchanges outside the lesson, they are encouraged to reflect on the pragmatic practices followed in the community they belong to.

This is a summary of a paper that looks carefully into the speech act of refusing a suggestion through the sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic lenses. The paper attempts to answer a challenging question about how some well-mannered and intelligent Japanese learners can inadvertently sound somewhat disrespectful when refusing a suggestion. For the purpose of this newsletter, the summary focuses more on the pedagogical practice than on the theoretical background.

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Conference Reports



JALT PragSIG at the Sociopragmatics Symposium 2025

Reported by Todd Allen

The Sociopragmatics Symposium 2025, organised and chaired by Todd J. Allen and held across Kansai University's Umeda and Senriyama campuses, brought together scholars to examine how language, culture, and social interaction intersect, with a particular focus on East Asia and comparative contexts. The symposium featured keynote addresses by Professor Michael Haugh and Emeritus Professor Yasuko Obana, whose talks framed the event by addressing relationship formation in initial encounters and the dynamic interplay between directness and indirectness in Japanese interaction. Across two days, the program showcased a wide range of empirical and theoretical work on sociopragmatics, including studies of politeness, identity, media discourse, and everyday interaction in institutional and community settings.

Several presentations by members of the JALT Pragmatics SIG highlighted ongoing pragmatic research across a range of linguistic phenomena and interactional contexts. Todd J. Allen examined small hospitality establishments as sites of sociopragmatic and metapragmatic activity, focusing on how identity, community, and language awareness are co-constructed in neighbourhood bars and izakayas. John Campbell-Larsen explored assessment and agreement practices in English and Japanese, offering insights into how pragmatic and cultural differences are reflected in evaluative language use. Benio Suzuki presented research on the linguistic landscape of Seoul's Namdaemun Market, demonstrating how Japanese repertoires operate within translingual tourist spaces, while Yosuke Ogawa's analysis of Japanese sentence-final particles addressed the negotiation of epistemic stance and social meaning in interaction.

Overall, these contributions underscored the strong presence of PragSIG scholars at the symposium and reflected the group's commitment to empirically grounded, interaction-focused sociopragmatic research.



International Pragmatics Association 2025, Brisbane, Australia

Reported by Todd Allen

Panel 1: Pragmatic Synthesis – Exploring a Single Dataset through Multifaceted Approaches

This panel showed how applying different pragmatic approaches to the same dataset contributed to a clearer understanding of interactional patterns. Using recordings from a small hospitality establishment in Japan, the presenters demonstrated how discourse analysis and sociopragmatic analysis revealed recurring features related to identity, politeness, and turn-taking, while AI-assisted analysis was used primarily as a comparative tool.

Although AI was helpful in identifying surface-level patterns, it was less sensitive to interactional nuance and context-dependent meaning than close qualitative analysis. Comparing AI-based outputs with sociopragmatic findings helped clarify the strengths and limitations of each approach and highlighted the value of methodological triangulation.

The panel concluded that integrating multiple methods can strengthen pragmatic research, while underscoring the continued importance of human-led analysis for interpreting everyday communication.

Panel 2: Social Interaction in Hospitality Establishments in East Asia and Beyond

This panel examined how communication and relationship-building are enacted in small hospitality spaces across East Asia and comparable contexts elsewhere, including izakayas, local bars, restaurants, and food trucks.

Drawing on empirical studies from Japan and New Zealand, the presenters showed how owners and regular customers manage first encounters, support newcomer participation, and sustain a welcoming atmosphere through interactional practices such as topic management, turn allocation, and polite alignment.

For example, in the food-truck study, the analysis demonstrated that predictable patterns of success and breakdown were associated with the progressivity of ordering sequences, with timely and efficient ordering contributing to smoother interaction and service outcomes. Across cases, the findings highlighted the influence of local norms, gendered roles, and expectations of progressivity, with proprietors often taking responsibility for maintaining conversational flow and social cohesion. The discussion also considered how broader social and economic changes shape these practices and the role of small hospitality venues in supporting local communities.

The panel concluded by emphasising the importance of analysing everyday interaction to better understand communication, culture, and social relations in East Asia and beyond.

Pragmatics Incidents



Pragmatics Incidents

Jim Ronald

In our lives, there are many occasions when we hesitate over whether to say something.

Here is one such incident that occurred in early December.

This evening, on the train home, as I was getting ready to get off, I was about to pass a man, and I noticed his flies (fly in American English) were undone, so I thought I should say something.

As I passed him, I lurched close to his ear, and said, "Chotto, chakku". (Er, your flies. [Chakku is the Japanese pronunciation of Zack, the brand name of a zipper.]) He looked at me, a bit angry or confused. I looked pointedly in the general direction. He checked, and as I headed for the door, looked back with an appreciative smile.

About ten days later, this happened in my 1st year university class:

As I approached one group in my 1st year class, one male student, with a gentle smile said, "Jim-sensei, chakku." I quickly adjusted my attire—and then they talked a little about how to say this—with the female student in the group mentioning "shakai no mado" [Literally, window on society]! Anyway, just a little embarrassing, but pointed out with care, and treated almost clinically as a matter of interest from a linguistic perspective.

Here is another incident in another class, a kind of project work class of 2nd and 3rd years, at around the same time.

One team was preparing for a class Christmas party, and they were sharing possible games or activities. I joined them briefly. One of the students suggested bingo.

"Bingo is boring!" I reacted. They were shocked, but laughed, happily!

I then shared this episode with the whole class, and asked all the students to list good ways to make suggestions to other groups. I wrote "Bingo is boring" on the board as a too direct example, or maybe one that a teacher might express, depending on the class, but would not be good between classmates. Together, they made a good list, each team adding a couple of ways to make suggestions to classmates.

The teams then mixed up and reformed into new groups, each containing one member of each team. They each shared about their project plans. As they did, they did give each other lots of feedback, including suggestions - so I would call that success!

Another area that is a recurrent scene for pragmatic challenges, no doubt for many of us, is in the writing of emails. In both of the examples below, face-to-face communication may be much simpler, and somehow lighter, than when we have to write it.

After a 95-minute Zoom committee meeting two days earlier:

Dear ___-san and all,

I really appreciate the way we consider each matter with care.

At the same I really appreciate meetings that are committed to finishing within an hour!

What can we do to achieve both of these goals?

It may sound funny, but I'm serious. I think we need to, and I don't think it's impossible.

Jim

This is another example of a situation where we might hesitate to communicate. In this email, I tried to balance the goals of making a suggestion, implicitly criticising the length of the previous meeting, and maintaining good relationships with those involved.

And another:

In a follow-up email to Dr. Naoko Taguchi, after meeting her at the JALT conference:

Dear Taguchi-sensei,

[body of email - thanks, etc.]

By the way, may I call you Naoko? In any case, I'd be more comfortable if you were to call me Jim!

And she did, and I did – so that was good, too!

Feeling uncomfortable with the terms of address used in emails is not a rare experience, especially in intercultural communication settings, I imagine, which is one reason I wanted to include it. As a result, we may often just put up with the “uncomfortableness” rather than address it. In this case, I did address it – and it seems to have been worth doing.

Member Focus

Kathleen Kitao

Interviewed by Donna Fujimoto

a) When and why did you join our SIG?

I've been a member for some years – long enough that I don't remember how many. I joined because I was interested in Pragmatics and wanted to meet other teachers who were, too.

b) Any ideas of events, activities we can hold that might be interesting?

I really don't have anything new to suggest, but I think the online presentations and MyShare have been useful, so I hope we'll continue to have that type of event. Since we're geographically spread out, the online presentations allow us to hold events at times other than the annual conference. MyShare allows people in the same local area to meet and interact face-to-face, which has been enjoyable, in addition to giving us a chance to learn about what other members are doing.

c) Why did you come to Japan in the first place? And what keeps you here?

In 1976, at the University of Kansas, I met Kenji Kitao. After he returned to Japan in early 1977, we corresponded (back in the days of snail mail) and then married in 1980, so I moved to Japan in August of that year. Kenji passed away 11 years ago, but I stay in Japan because after so many years, it's my home, the place I get homesick for when I'm away for very long.

d) How did you originally get interested in Pragmatics?

I first encountered Pragmatics when I took a class in 1983 at TESOL Summer Institute. I didn't really have a clear idea what Pragmatics was when I signed up for the class, but I was immediately fascinated. Robin Lakoff has a metaphor about linguists sweeping the aspects of language they couldn't explain under a rug, until the rug gets very lumpy, but Pragmatics allows us to bring those aspects out from under rug and examine them. I felt then, and I still feel, that Pragmatics explains so much about language use because grammar and syntax, of course, deal with language on the sentence level, but Pragmatics allows us to consider how context influences communication, which means it deals with language as we use it in real life.

I could find examples of Pragmatics all around me, and I could understand its importance for learners of a second/foreign language. I became particularly interested in speech acts, since that's often an area of difficulty for learners. Once when I was interviewing a student who was studying overseas and doing a homestay, and I asked her if there was any advice she had for others, and she said, "Yes – don't complain." She had had a problem with the family she was living with, and her complaint had not gone over well, but I think it was the way that she had expressed it rather than the fact that she complained. This is an example of why it is important for language students to develop an understanding of what is appropriate when they are using speech acts, especially ones like complaints, requests, refusals, and so on, which can be sensitive.

e) I know you are retired, but can you tell me about your classes in the past? What were your main goals/research/publications, etc.

In 1985, Kenji and I went to Michigan State University, where I earned my PhD in Communication, so I put Pragmatics aside for a time. After I returned to Japan, I got a job on the faculty of Doshisha Women's College. In 1995, Kenji and I went to Lancaster University in the UK for a sabbatical. Geoffrey Leech (who had authored *Principles of Pragmatics*, the book used in my 1983 Pragmatics class) was there, as was Jenny Thomas, another well-known Pragmatics researcher. Being around them revived my interest in doing Pragmatics research and teaching. Kenji started doing research on requests, and I got interested in refusals, looking at them in terms of politeness and of Harold Sacks' concept of preference organization. I got interested in studying refusals based on an off-hand comment by a colleague, but it turned out to be a good choice, because refusals are complex speech acts where speakers must choose from a variety of strategies. Kenji and I wrote a textbook on speech acts, and I used it in an undergraduate course I taught.

Later, I had a graduate student who did research on apologies, and I attended a presentation at a corpus linguistics conference about using corpora to study apologies, which got me interested in studying apologies using corpus methods, which I'd also learned about at Lancaster University. For corpus research, apologies have the advantage of using a limited number of expressions, so it's possible to find almost all the apologies in a corpus using five expressions (sorry, forgive, apology/apologize, excuse, and pardon). I used an American sitcom called *Modern Family* as a corpus and looked at the elements of apologies, responses to apologies, and how apology expressions that are used for speech acts other than apologies, such as condolences or regrets.

f) What are your interests both professionally and personally?

In addition to Pragmatics, I've studied and done research in Interpersonal Communication and Intercultural Communication. I did my master's thesis on foreigner talk and my PhD dissertation on reading and Schema Theory.

Personally, I have a lot of interest in history, especially American and British history and the history of medicine, I've recently developed an interest in Dutch and Flemish art, and I also like to read mysteries.

I like to travel, and I've been to more than 70 countries.

g) Are you doing, or have you done, anything that might be unexpected from a teacher?

I don't know that this is really unexpected from a former linguistics/communication teacher in Japan, but I teach crocheting at an integrated school for the Deaf in Kenya, so I live in Kenya for three months of the year with the family of the director. I also started a library and an extensive reading program at the school, and I've taught Japanese and origami there as well. To prepare myself, I studied sign language, which is fascinating.

h) What do you do in your free time?

Now that I'm retired, I have more free time, even though I'm keeping surprisingly busy. I like to crochet, and I've been crocheting for more than 50 years. I do a lot of crocheting, especially blankets (which I either give to friends or donate to children's homes), but I've had to learn to make a lot of other things in order to teach the crochet class.

I like to travel a lot to different countries and within Japan, as I mentioned, and I added two more countries in 2025, Guatemala and Tanzania, as well as traveling in the States, Uganda, Kenya, and Nepal.

I'm also obviously the editor of our SIG's newsletter.



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