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Abstract:

This paper sets out to discuss the subject matter of epistemic and deontic pragmatic failure in Spanish tertiary students. For this, 30 Spanish tertiary students are selected in order to determine to what extent language transfer causes limitations when interpreting the illocutionary force of modals. In particular, we want to shed light on the following questions: (1) With what frequency do deontic modals cause pragmatic failure in students responses in contrast to epistemic modals? (2) Does "language transfer" cause a major limitation when interpreting the illocutionary forces of deontic and epistemic modals? Could language transfer break down communication? (3) Can deontic and epistemic pragmatic failure be interpreted as impolite? In order to do so, the questionnaires obtained have been analysed following Thomas (1983), Riley (1989), Brown and Levinson (1987) and Downing (2015).

Keywords: deontic, epistemic modality, pragmatic failure, language transfer, illocutionary force.

John Fredy Gil Bonilla & Felipe Ramírez Castellanos

The use of epistemic and deontic modality in Spanish students of English in tertiary education

0. Introduction

Over the last decades, relationships among language, culture and identity have become a favourite topic in social science, due to this fact, some scholars have lately begun to pay systematic attention to many areas in the field of pragmatic failure (Dunworth 2002; Maíz 2015), however, little research has been devoted to both the pragmatic failure considering the deontic and epistemic illocutionary force in the answers provided by Spanish tertiary students and the way these students answer in terms of politeness. This has become an important aspect of analysis as it is in its infancy. As Leech (1977) and Brown and Levinson (1978:216) explain that the *pragmatic force* of an utterance is normally contradictory or uncertain, even in context, and often deliberately. For reasons of politeness, the speaker and hearer should intentionally exploit this contrariness:

... the rhetoric of speech acts often encourages ambivalence: 'Would you like to come in and sit down?' ... depending on the situation could be an invitation, a request, or a directive. Or more important, it could be deliberately poised on the uncertain boundary between all three. It is often in the speaker's interest, and in the interests of politeness, to allow the precise force of a speech act to remain unclear. Leech (1977:99)

The project aimed at answering the following research questions: (1) With what frequency do deontic modals cause pragmatic failure in students' responses in contrast to epistemic modals? (2) Does "language transfer" cause a major limitation when interpreting the illocutionary forces of epistemic and deontic modals? Could language transfer break down communication? (3) Can deontic and epistemic pragmatic failure be interpreted as impolite? Therefore, we will examine how Spanish tertiary students cause pragmatic failure in communication regarding epistemic and deontic modals following this hypothesis: Spanish tertiary students do often commit important errors when failing to use/interpret the illocutionary force of epistemic and deontic modals. The deontic and epistemic modalities have been selected in order to see which one correlates more with the pragmatic failures that Spanish tertiary students tend to cause when communicating. For this, the main objectives for this research are the following:

- To try to find out whether modality in English is a vehicle for pragmatic failure for Spanish tertiary education students.
- To analyse whether epistemic and deontic modality could cause pragmatic failure up to the point of cutting down communication.
- To focus on the most frequent pragmatic errors regarding epistemic and deontic modalities.

The remainder of this paper is divided into five sections. The first one, afore presented is followed by the second section in which we will set out a *theoretical background* where we establish the main basis for our research. On the third section the *methodology*, deals with the sample, instruments and procedures followed in order to carry out this study to later on, in the fourth section, *results and discussion*, analyse the data that we have gathered to then reach a *conclusion* in the final section.

1.1. Language identity and culture

Language is inherently inlaid in culture, therefore, a means of being aware of cultural peculiarities in communication (Vygotsky, 1978, cited in Dunworth, 2002), it is flowing and modification can occur at different levels, firstly on the individual or community and later, on society. (Mills, 2008).

Native and non-native English speakers, due to their multifarious cultural background, code and decode messages in different ways from Spanish speakers, while the former are inclined to be satisfied with the thought that the English language and culture are ubiquitous around the world, the latter also have a strong identity towards

their language and, for this reason, a clash takes place which leads to pragmatic errors.

Bilingual interaction is a relevant feature of language learning and a tool for cultural exchange between interlocutors since it is full of language strategies that enhance meaning. (Velasquez 2010: 1). As Thomas (1983) stressed "emerging cross-cultural pragmatic differences may potentially threaten or disrupt collaborative interaction between native and non-native interlocutors" (p. 109) which is the basis of our study.

1.2. Pragmatics

Thomas (1983) and Riley (1989) suggest that pragmatic errors are the result of an interactant imposing the social rules of one culture on his communicative behaviour in a situation where the social rules of another culture would be more appropriate. According to Liebe-Harkort (1989) some difficulties in intra-cultural communication are potentially compounded further, if one of the speakers is monolingual and cannot imagine that the intentions of their speaking partner may be different than his or her own the communication would break down, however, the ideal situation would take place if s/he were to use a form or expression the other would normally use. Clearly, *communicative competence* must include *pragmalinguistic competence* (i.e., choosing appropriate form) and sociopragmatic competence (i.e., choosing appropriate meaning) if inter-cultural pragmatic problems are to be avoided. Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz (1982:14) state this as follows

Many of the meanings and understandings, at the level of ongoing process interpretation of speaker's intent, depend upon culturally specific conventions, so that much of the meaning in any encounter is indirect and implicit. The ability to expose enough of the implicit meaning to make for a satisfactory encounter between strangers or culturally different speakers requires communicative flexibility and adaptability.

Bearing all the previous in mind, conversations involving interlocutors who share different cultural knowledges are more likely to cause breakdowns in communication as a result of language transfer rather than those who share the same cultural background, based on this, we aim to conduct our study and questionnaires.

1.3. Modality

The concept of modality is considered, in the purpose of this study, as a way to see to what extent speakers tend to have problems with the interpretation of the illocutionary forces of modal verbs. For this reason, Downing (2015) states that the notion of epistemic and deontic modality, occurs where the epistemic meaning "is used by a speaker to assess the possibility, probability or otherwise, of a state of affairs according to the speaker's limited knowledge or belief" (p.343) and, the deontic "is used by the speaker to bring about an action, using modals that express different degrees of obligation, advisability or permission" (p.344). Downing (2015) also explains that epistemic meanings "tend to correlate with stative verbs and can take non-human subjects" and deontic "correlate with human subjects as agents of dynamic verbs". Bybee & Fleischman (1995: 13 n3) do not use the dynamic modality claiming it comes from modal logic and 'is less related to the analysis of modality in natural language'. Nor does Biber (1999: 485), who subsumes it under "epistemic". Either Palmer (1990: 36) who points out that dynamic modality is concerned with the ability or volition of the subject of the sentence and so is not subjective like other modalities, hence is less centrally modal.

2. Politeness as the underpinning theory

Brown and Levinson defined politeness as the regarded formulation of utterances in regards to other's feelings without exposing their face. *Face* concerns the perceived and created image of the self. In other words, what we think of others and others think of us, our sense of self (Goffman, 1955, 1967). In Brown and Levinson (1987) there exists a distinction between negative and positive face, where the first is defined as "the want of every competent adult member that his actions be unimpeded by others" and the second as "the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others". Politeness theory is centered on speakers' individual speech acts. That is, to the choices

made in language use. Brown and Levinson's (1987) intricate theory intended to unravel the underlining factors of discourses that, intentionally or not, lack clarity, directness and efficiency (Holtgraves, 2002).

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), interlocutors use a range of strategies either to provide or threaten the face: "direct and unambiguous comments - 'Bald on record'; respect statements-'positive politeness', lessening imposition statements - 'negative politeness', subtle requests - 'withholding the face-threatening act'" (pp. 68-70). Expressions of politeness can be misunderstood depending on the individual's perception or cultural practice (Yus, 2001). Spencer-Oatey (2002; 2005) confirmed that interlocutors need to feel accepted by others as a way of conforming to group norms. Vinagre (2008) shared to some extent the same view as she proposes that interlocutors preferred to be collaborative, and use "positive politeness as a way of showing solidarity and friendship" (p. 1031). Kasper (cited in Kasper & Kellerman, 1997) casts doubt on the culturally neutral focus on cross-cultural communication, whereas Graham (2007) closed with the idea that fulfilling cross-cultural communication has not the same meaning for each interlocutor.

Once having set out the background for our study we will proceed now in the following section to, based on the previous knowledge here developed, establish the methodology to be followed for the analysis of the data.

3. Methodology

The Subjects

The subjects that took part in this study consisted of 30 Spanish tertiary students in English linguistics who ranged in age from 22 to 24 having just graduated from college (BA) and finding themselves at a postgraduate level of studies. The reasons for approaching tertiary Spanish students of English linguistics were threefold as it was assumed that these students are highly trained and proficiently skilled in English language and uphold a sense of professionalism and integrity in their responses. Secondly, these students could be future university professors. And thirdly, tertiary students may conduct research in the future.

Instruments

This study used a questionnaire which was developed by considering two variables. The first variable included some sub-variables, afore described, as the participant's native language, cultural background and place of residence, age and foreign language knowledge. All participants are tertiary Spanish students who have approximately the same knowledge of the language as they are students of English linguistics. The second variable referred to the intention purported in the questionnaire, that is, the participants had limited options in the answers they could provide, two options were given regarding epistemic modality (could and may) and two referring to deontic modality (can and must); students were expected to answer using one of these options only, but in those cases in which the students considered that any of these possibilities were suitable, they were allowed to provide an optional free answer. The dialogue-type focused on different scenarios ranging from formal to colloquial situations.

Procedure

Tertiary students from the faculty of philology at UCM were invited in person to take part in the study. By responding to a questionnaire, participants gave permission for the investigator to use information only for research purposes. Data was collected using the questionnaire which was adapted from real life situations, and names and distinctive features of real life incidents were changed and some omitted. The content was adapted without losing its authenticity while at the same time adjusted to suit the purpose of this study. In an attempt to make each participant feel as comfortable as possible, the questionnaires were anonymous. The questions were based on a dialogue-type with frequent inquiries that normally elicit pragmatic failure in Spanish students, more specifically, the answers expected to provide extended responses using deontic and epistemic modality. The aim was to determine to what extent tertiary students have pragmatic problems when interpreting the illocutionary forces of modals. Firstly, foreign language knowledge was anticipated to impact on the findings of this study. It was also anticipated that the place of residence would impact on cross-cultural pragmatic behaviour, therefore only Spanish tertiary students were selected. In the second section,

participants were asked to provide specific answers regarding epistemic (may and could) and deontic modals (can and must), however, there existed the option of another free response if the four modals given were considered as not suitable. It was expected that the knowledge of a second language and varying degrees of proficiency might have some influence across languages. That is to say that the Spanish tertiary students were likely to suffer from limitations in language use owing to the fact that language transfer can lead to the breakdown of communication.

For the analysis of these sub-corpora, the following procedures were used: in first place, a quantitative research method was followed as we attempted to come out with frequencies through the means of graphs and, on the other hand, a qualitative method was used through an interpretive approach as to make sense of how the different participants answered each of the questions. Data analysis

The component of analysis was determined by the responses produced in the questionnaire. The dialogue-type responses were annotated, classified, analysed and sorted in accordance with Downing's (2015) notions of deontic and epistemic modality, but also was applied Leech's (1983) taxonomy of illocutionary functions (TABLE 1) as a way of classifying the illocutionary forces of the answers given by the tertiary students as polite or impolite. These classifications are related to the speaker's aim of "establishing and maintaining comity" (Leech, 1983, p. 104). They were divided into the four classes of "competitives, convivials, collaboratives and conflictives" (Leech, 1983, p. 104). For the purpose of this study, the second and third classes are regarded as polite, while the first and the last classes are referred to as impolite, with the latter considered the rudest. The free responses obtained were also classified, gathering absolute pragmatic failure answers with some being disregarded due to the fact that those were not relevant for the purpose of our study.

4. Results and discussion

Having already specified the aims, hypotheses, research questions, our methodology and background literature we proceed now to analyse the questionnaires gathered and the answers provided by the participants to try to show and answer the research questions previously set out.

Table 1: Leech's (1983) classification of illocutionary function

Illocutionary function		Definition	Examples
Polite	Convivials	The illocutionary goal coincides with the social goal	Offering, inviting, thanking, promising, vowing
	Collaboratives	The illocutionary goal is indifferent to the social goal	Claiming, boasting, complaining
Impolite	Competitives	The illocutionary goal competes with the social goal	Ordering, demanding, advising, commanding
	Conflictives	The illocutionary goal conflicts with the social goal	Accusing, cursing, reprimanding

To begin with, we divided our questionnaires in epistemic and deontic modality questions, therefore, having made a division of twenty questions we established ten for each type of modality respectively; this is, ten of the responses should have been answered following epistemic modality and the other ten following deontic modality. All questions, nevertheless, were placed in a random order. This would leave us with a total of 600 answers to be analysed in terms of modality, open questions, pragmatic failure and politeness - 300 responses that should have been answered with epistemic modals and 300 with deontic following a native-like assessment, this is, answers inherent to a native speaker's cultural peculiarities and identity (Mills 2008). In other words, these questionnaires' responses, answered by native Spanish speakers, will show us, as Thomas (1983) stated, the cross-cultural pragmatic differences which may threaten interaction

between the natives and the non-natives. Some examples from correct answers are the following:

Proper epistemic use of modality in English: Example1.

- Q: What would Laura Torres say in order to get a clearer view of the answer?
S: *Could* you explain it in simple words, please?

Example 2.

- Q: One day you worked very late and was about to ask your boss if you may go
• S: *May* I leave now?

An example of the proper use of deontic modality would be:

Example3.

- Q: Can you help me with my luggage?

S: I certainly *can*!

Example 4.

- Q: This is the third time you've been late this week.
S: I *must* come earlier/on time.

After an extensive analysis of all responses and questionnaires, dividing them in correct epistemic and deontic modality answers and pragmatic failures, these are the main results gathered.

As can be seen, TABLE 2 shows the number of cross-cultural pragmatically correct answers delivered by the students in both epistemic and deontic modalities as well as the pragmatic errors committed in both:

	EPISTEMI C	DEONTI C
NON-PRAGMATIC FAILURE	129	162
PRAGMATIC FAILURE	171	138
Total answers	600	

Table 2

As shown in GRAPH 1 (see in Appendix), after placing these responses in terms of percentages over a hundred, 21,5% of the total responses, concretely those ones dealing with epistemic modality were correct, while its counterpart of pragmatic failure is considerably high, being 28,5%, this is, more than half of the answers dealing with epistemic modality were answered wrong causing pragmatic failure and, in most of the cases, a breakdown in communication.

This would be one of the examples of breakdowns taken from the corpora by one of the students failing to use the correct epistemic modal:

Example 5.

Q: Your boss asked you to work office hours on vacation, nonetheless you find it impossible since you already booked a trip. How would you politely inform him/her that you are unable to do so?

S: Sorry, I *can't* do that.

On the other hand, the results dealing with deontic modality show different percentages in the outcomes. 27% percent of the responses regarding this type of modality were correct in terms of cross-cultural pragmatic usage, this is, more than half of the answers provided by the students were accurate and showed good performance in communication, while

only 23% were incorrect due to the language transfer interference and/or breakdown in communication.

Taking into account GRAPH 1 it can be seen that there is a clear difference in the usage of epistemic and deontic modality by Spanish tertiary students. Epistemic modality, not present through modal verbs in the Spanish language, breaks down communication in more than half of the situations presented to the students; the frequency of pragmatic failure is high as more than half of the questions present a misunderstanding and a lack of communication possibilities. On the other hand, deontic modality, normally present in the Spanish language through the verb "poder", usually associated as having the same usage as the modal "can", presents a higher rate of frequency of cross-cultural pragmatic fluent communication. We can state, therefore, that the pragmatic usage of deontic modality by Spanish postgraduate students surpasses in frequency that of epistemic modality.

Nonetheless, another graphic (see in Appendix Graph 2) has been created in order to answer the second research question:

The main problem arising from the answers given in the questionnaires have to do with the misunderstanding of the illocutionary forces of the questions. Students, most of the time, fail to provide a pragmatically correct answer due to this breakdown in communication where the illocutionary force appears unclear to them. (Thomas 1983)

Graph 2 gives us a different perspective on the outcomes by showing the overall percentage of pragmatically correct answers and pragmatic failure situations. While, previously, it was found that Spanish students proficient in English show a better use of deontic modality than epistemic, in this graph, it is clear that, by combining both of them in terms of modality illocutionary forces, the overall pragmatic failure is greater than that of a correct usage. Only 48,5%, this is, less than half of the interaction, is fluent communication while, 51,5% implies pragmatic failure and incorrect answers which would lead in real life to a breakdown, an awkward situation or a misunderstanding, usually regarded as impolite by native speakers of English. (Leech 1983)

Overall, language transfer has caused major problems, not only in the responses but also in the analysis, these have been included as cross-cultural pragmatic errors in the graphs. A clear example found in the corpora would be:
Example 6.

- Q: You need to use their computer and it is urgent, how would you ask them?
S: I need your computer, *could* you borrow me?

The following part of the analysis deals with politeness, for that purpose a table showing all four types of politeness (convivials, collaboratives, competitives and conflictives) according to Leech's (1983) classification has been developed as to find out the percentage of politeness/impoliteness caused in pragmatic errors in cross-cultural pragmatics. This is, in spite of being pragmatically wrong, to what extent would these errors be impolite to native people.

These are four responses from the sub-corpora including all four types of politeness:
Polite:

- Convivials
: Example 7.
 - Q: How would you politely inform your boss that you are unable to work office hours on vacation?
S: I am truly sorry, I bought a ticket and *cannot* cancel it.
- Collaboratives
: Example 8.
 - Q: What would a host do or say to indicate to a guest that it was time to leave?
S: I think it's time for you to leave now, we *can* repeat this next week.

Impolite:

- Competitives
Example 9.
 - Q: How would you politely inform your boss that you are unable to do extra hours at work?
S: I bought a ticket and I *cannot* cancel it.
- Conflictives

Example10

- Q: Your English seems to be quite fluent.
S: It *must* be so.

Following TABLE 1 there are 309 pragmatically incorrect answers which are the ones about to be analysed in GRAPH 3. After setting out the previous examples we will now combine them in two blocks of two, this is, *politeness* will form a block holding together conviviales and collaboratives and, *impoliteness* will constitute the second block putting together conflictives and competitives.

Following this study, the results obtained from intensive research on the sub-corpora the circular graph has been created which portraits that, even though at a pragmatic cross-cultural level the answers provided by the students would not be suitably correct, in terms of politeness, these non-native students would not appear extremely impolite, but rather the opposite with an outcome of 205 polite responses, although pragmatically incorrect, and less than half of the answers, 104 found rather impolite, mainly due to a misunderstanding of the illocutionary force or the question itself.

Once gathered and analysed all the results obtained from the corpora by means of the methodology above explained and basing ourselves on the theoretical background we have reached some conclusions that will be described in the last section of our paper.

5. Conclusions

Regarding our research questions, posed in the introduction, we can state that all have been responded to some extent. The first one, with what frequency do deontic modals cause pragmatic failure in students' responses in contrast to epistemic modals? Was explained in the results and discussion. Spanish students commit less mistakes when using the deontic modals in English, as have been described, mainly due to language transfer and similarity across cultures and languages. However, when using epistemic modal verbs they showed less capacity of cross-cultural pragmatics, being unable in more than fifty percent of the times to identify the illocutionary force of the question and claims and therefore setting up a linguistic cultural barrier in communication. (Graph 1)

The second question aimed to define whether language transfer caused a major limitation when interpreting the illocutionary forces of deontic and epistemic modals, to what we can claim that it does cause major limitations. Natural speech between interlocutors caused a cutting down in dialogues because of it, language transfer did not only show students incapability of understanding or stating what was expected but also awkward responses and situations in terms of analysis and native-like comprehension, as well as a tendency to over-use concepts particular to their native language, Spanish. (graph 2)

The third research question attempted to identify whether deontic and epistemic pragmatic failure could be interpreted as impolite. In this point we reached the conclusion, above explained, that although pragmatic failure had taken place between interlocutors, in rare cases, this is, less than 40% of the time Spanish speakers who caused this cross-cultural pragmatic failure tended to sound rude and apathetic to their hearers, and rather ended up staying neutral and polite (Graph 3)

Several limitations were found when analysing the data since we had to deal with problems in terms of the way participants interpreted the questions suggested, a lot of context had to be given so the answers could be narrowed down as much as possible for analysis and all the variables, independent and dependent, controlled. For such reason, also, a small number of questionnaires had to be retaken since the answers provided by some of the students were unusable for the study for lack of understanding of the questions.

We can safely state that this study could lead to future applications that could be positive in education, such as textbooks and teaching how to acquire cross-cultural pragmatics with a higher focus on epistemic and deontic modals. Research could be extended down this line as to what other variables could be controlled and analyzed for a more precise and extensive research in different age groups and with a broader corpora which could lead us to a better understanding of the situation as to how deontic and epistemic modals constitute such a major problem for Spanish students even at this level in tertiary post-graduate education.

Overall, it seems that Spanish tertiary education students are more prone to committing errors when interpreting/using epistemic modality in English making it a main vehicle for pragmatic failure which can cause breakdowns in communication, however still

sounding polite to the hearer.

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APPENDICES

The Questionnaire

This questionnaire is only used for personal research purpose and will be kept strictly confidential! Please write down the answers according to your own understanding. Thank you very much for your cooperation!

Directions: In the following you will be presented with 20 questions. Please answer each of them briefly within 30 minutes only by using COULD, MAY, CAN OR MUST, if none of these possibilities were suitable, you may provide an optional free one. If you come across any difficult words, you may look them up in the dictionary, but do not discuss with anyone else.

1. Andres Martínez works in an international business office. One day he worked very late and was about to ask his boss if he may go. His boss said to him, "Thanks a lot. That seems to be of a great help." How may Andrés Martínez reply?

2. Laura Torres had a question to ask his foreign teacher. She went to Professor Black's office. After she got the answer, the professor said: it seems to be clear that your answer has been solved. What would she say in order to get a clearer version of the answer?

3. You think that you may need to borrow a book from your American friend. You say:

4. Joyce is talking to her friend, Brenda, who is from Britain.

Joyce: I wonder if you could post this letter for me on your way home, Brenda?
What would Brenda reply?

5. An American friend invites you over for dinner. When everything is ready, the American warm-heartedly says: Would you mind spending the night with me tonight?
What would you say?

6. You want to invite your American friend Jack to come to your house for dinner. What would you say to him?

7. Carmen Maíz is an interpreter. One day a foreign visitor, Mr. Brown, talks to her.
Brown: Your English seems to be quite fluent.
What would Carmen Maíz reply?

8. Miss Wells has been arriving late for school lately. After class, her English teacher, Professor Thyme, talks to her.

Prof. Thyme: Miss Wells. I'm sorry to have to mention this, but could you possibly try to be a little earlier in the morning? This is the third time you've been late this week.
What would Miss Wells reply?

9. At your friend's party: it is already too late and your friend says: Ermm I know all of you are enjoying the party but it is perhaps a bit late. However, you do want to continue the party, you may say:

10. What would a host do or say to indicate to a guest that it was time to leave?

11. Carlos: What did you think of the film?

Green: I couldn't praise this film too highly.

What does Mr. Green mean?

12. María is discussing with her best American friend Charles

María: How is Tom doing at school?

Charles: Ah, well ... you know what they say: *boys will be boys*.

What would María say?

13. Andres needs an appointment with his foreign teacher. Professor Jason writes back

to Andres saying: I could meet next Thursday at 12:30. What would Andres do?

14. On being disturbed by the next-door neighbour's lawnmower early on Sunday morning:

John: It is now clear that we have to wake up!

What would you say?

15. Nuria has just arrived to the airport of England and she is in a rush and cannot stop under any circumstance.

An old woman says to Nuria: Could you help me with my luggage? What would Nuria say?

16. Your friend has been having monetary issues lately and has pretended everything is fine for the last month since she hates talking about money. On the other hand you positively know that she is in debt and urgently needs money, otherwise she will lose everything she has. How would you offer her the help she needs?

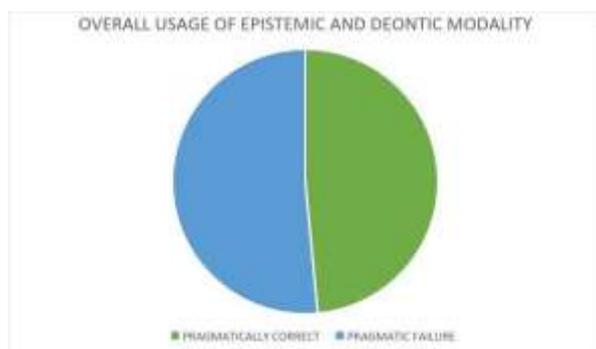
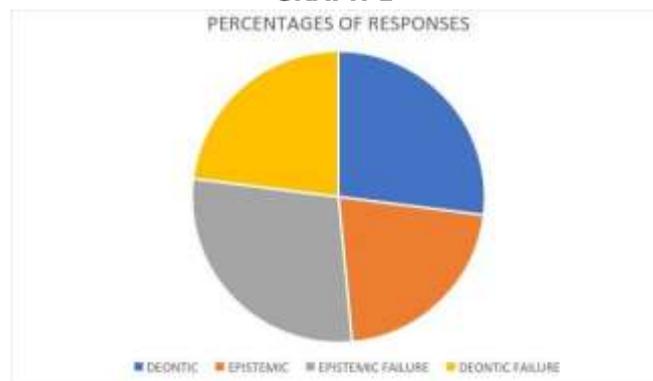
17. Your professor is organising the end of the semester and your final paper and sends you an email stating the following. "Although we do have class tomorrow, would you mind coming to my office before? Thank you" Would you consider it a question, a suggestion or obligation?

18. The first time you asked a friend whether you could use their computer, you accidentally erased important information from their work. Now, you need to use their computer again, and it is urgent. How would you ask them?

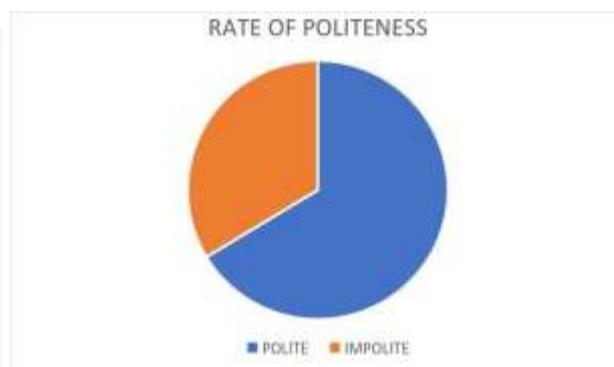
19. Your boss asked you to work office hours on vacation, nonetheless you find it impossible since you already booked a trip. How would you politely inform him/her that you are unable to do so?

20. After a day of work you arrive home. The person you live with asks you "could you take the garbage out?" What would your reaction be? What would you reply?

GRAPH 1



GRAPH 2



GRAPH 3