On Identifying Situations of Use: L1 and L2 Knowledge about Situation-Bound Utterances

William H. Allendorfer
Philip S. LeSourd, Susan C. Herring, J. César Félix-Brasdefer, Daniel Suslak

Abstract

This research explores two new methods of establishing situation-bound utterances (SBUs) through situational elicitation and SBU elicitation tasks. SBUs are expressions, such as “Welcome aboard!”, strongly associated with specific, conventionalized situations of use (Kecskes, 1998, 2000a, 2000b, 2003, 2010). Previous research on SBUs has focused on English speakers’, native and non-native, abilities to produce target utterances using scenarios designed to simulate situations of occurrence, such as Bardovi-Harlig (2009). In keeping with Mey’s (2006) perspective on how SBUs derive meaning from situational contexts, these production studies use situational scenarios to elicit conventionalized expressions. However, relatively few studies have explored Kecskes’ (2010) perspective that SBUs co-construct meaning, allowing them to be used for eliciting information about situations of use. Kecskes (2000a, 20002) attempted to have speakers identify initial associations of meaning for SBUs, and while mixed, results indicated strong initial associations with situationally bound interpretations.

The current study contributes to the L2 pragmatics literature by exploring the ability of native and non-native English speakers to identify potential situations of use for SBUs through situational elicitations, a method of eliciting information typically used to construct scenarios (e.g. context, speaker(s), location, meaning, and alternative expressions) (DiPietro, 1987; Bardovi-Harlig, 2013) for SBUs (e.g. ‘Buckle up’) and other conventional multiword expressions. These scenarios were then further tested with a second SBU elicitation task to determine whether the initial SBUs would be elicited. SBUs were selected from the literature
(Kecskes, 2000, 2010) and also identified by the researcher from a corpus of conventional multi-word expressions taken from *Wheel of Fortune* answers, a la Jackendoff (1995). Participants for the *situational elicitation* task included 20 native, 3 bilingual, and 19 non-native English speakers; furthermore, 5 native and 10 non-native English speakers piloted the *SBU elicitation* task. All participants were undergraduates at a large Midwestern university, and each was independently interviewed to elicit knowledge about SBUs. Native speaker results for the *situational elicitation* task confirm the use of these methods to establish SBUs as eliciting responses clustering around specific situations of use distinct from other conventionalized multi-word expressions, which showed a lack of consistently identified situational clustering. Many non-native learner responses showed a similar lack of situational clustering for both SBUs and other multi-word expressions; however, length of residence may affect a non-native learner’s knowledge of SBU usage.

In addition, the study piloted an *SBU elicitation* task based on the conventionalized situations generated by the *situational elicitation* task. This task improves upon earlier methods of eliciting these expressions in L2 pragmatics research by considering the ability of participants to suggest contextually appropriate SBUs for conventionalized situations with clearly specified motivations for the production scenarios, by various speaker roles (e.g. police officers and teachers), and with multiple alternative expressions elicited by the task. Results indicate that some items need refinement going forward, but, overall, the task appears to consistently elicit target SBUs in a greater range than previous studies. These results demonstrate that native speakers often identify the same sets of SBUs for a given situation, and they are able to perform similarly as roles other than themselves, such as police officers and teachers. In addition, non-
native speakers were able to perform the task and identified several SBUs, including those which
they would not be expected to perform personally, such as those used by teachers.

**Keywords:** situation-bound utterances, routine formulae, conventional expressions, L2
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**References**

Bardovi-Harlig, K. (2009). Conventional expressions as a pragmalinguistic resource: Recogni-


