



Revista Brasileira de Linguística Aplicada

ISSN: 1676-0786

rblasecretaria@gmail.com

Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais

Brasil

Mendes de Oliveira, Milene

Sociopragmatic failure revisited: the case of intercultural communication between  
Brazilians and Americans

Revista Brasileira de Linguística Aplicada, vol. 17, núm. 2, abril-junio, 2017, pp. 307-334

Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais

Belo Horizonte, Brasil

Available in: <http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=339851657005>

- How to cite
- Complete issue
- More information about this article
- Journal's homepage in redalyc.org

redalyc.org

Scientific Information System

Network of Scientific Journals from Latin America, the Caribbean, Spain and Portugal

Non-profit academic project, developed under the open access initiative

# Sociopragmatic failure revisited: the case of intercultural communication between Brazilians and Americans<sup>1</sup>

## *A falha sociopragmática revisitada: o caso da comunicação intercultural entre brasileiros e americanos*

---

Milene Mendes de Oliveira\*  
University of Potsdam  
Potsdam, Germany

**ABSTRACT:** This article aims to discuss the concept of sociopragmatic failure (THOMAS, 1983) by focusing on American interviewees' perceptions of the phenomenon as arising from utterances spoken by Brazilian learners of English. To achieve this aim, interviews were conducted with three American teachers working in Brazil. After watching video excerpts from previously recorded English classes, interviewees pointed out which utterances sounded inappropriate to them and commented on their perceptions of learners featured in the video, as well as on their experiences with Brazilian learners in general. Their responses were used as evidence for the hypothesis that different types of linguistic asymmetry – namely, structural, pragmatic, sociolinguistic, and discourse-related – can lead to sociopragmatic failure.

**KEYWORDS:** Intercultural Communication; Intercultural Pragmatics; Pragmatic failure; Sociopragmatic failure

**RESUMO:** Este artigo tem como objetivo discutir o conceito de falha sociopragmática (THOMAS, 1983) focando em percepções de entrevistados americanos a respeito desse fenômeno em enunciados produzidos por aprendizes brasileiros de inglês. Para atingir esse objetivo, entrevistas foram feitas com professores americanos que ensinam inglês no Brasil. Após assistirem a trechos de vídeos de aulas de inglês previamente filmadas, os entrevistados apontaram quais enunciados soaram inapropriados para eles e comentaram a respeito de suas percepções com relação aos aprendizes que aparecem nos vídeos e também com relação às suas experiências com aprendizes brasileiros

---

\* milene.mendes.de.oliveira@uni-potsdam.de

<sup>1</sup> This article uses data from the research project described in Mendes de Oliveira (2013). The supervisor of this project was Prof. Dr. Ulrike Agathe Schröder.

em geral. As respostas foram usadas como evidências para a hipótese de que diferentes tipos de assimetria linguística – ou seja, estrutural, pragmática, sociolinguística, ou discursiva – podem levar a falhas sociopragmáticas.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Comunicação Intercultural; Pragmática Intercultural; Falha pragmática; Falha sociopragmática

## 1 Introduction

Novice Brazilian teachers of English as a foreign language might not realize at first that their interpretations of Brazilian learners' linguistic contributions in English classes can differ from the interpretations of other groups of native and non-native speakers of English, prospective conversational partners for these learners in the future. For instance, the utterance commonly used by Brazilian learners (after listening activities, for example), namely, *Teacher, repeat?*, could be perhaps considered inappropriate, or even 'rude' in a common sense evaluation, in classroom contexts in other countries.

Along this line, the research question that motivated the study underlying the forthcoming arguments was how Brazilian learners of English come across in communication with people from other cultures, and what linguistic factors might influence the image Brazilians convey of themselves when speaking English. In this article, I give examples of how American interviewees perceive the Brazilian communication style and what conclusions they draw from it. These examples will be used to illustrate the factors underlying the range of cross-cultural sociopragmatic failures (THOMAS, 2013) and to show the existence of further factors leading to these failures not reported by the author.

The article is intended for current or future teachers, Brazilian or otherwise, who teach or intend to teach English to Brazilians, as well as for pragmaticists and linguists who are interested in the interplay between English as a second language and culture in general. In the following sections, I introduce the topic of 'cross-cultural pragmatic failure' and use examples from the abovementioned study to show how complex and multifaceted this phenomenon can be.

## 2 Cross-cultural pragmatic failure

The study of language transfer in second language acquisition (SLA) dates back to the 1950s. Since pragmatics only started to be investigated in the context of SLA in the 1970s, most research on language transfer before that time accounted solely for phonological, lexical, and structural phenomena (BOU-FRANCH, 2013). The contrastive analysis hypothesis (LADO, 1957), for instance, stated that where a learner's mother tongue structure differs from the target language, there will be negative transfer or L1 interference. However, this hypothesis was found not to hold true for all cases.

As for pragmatic transfer more specifically, Kasper (1992, p. 207) defines it as "the influence exerted by learners' pragmatic knowledge of languages and cultures other than L2 on their comprehension, production, and learning of L2 pragmatic information". This definition holds true, according to the author, under the scope of interlanguage pragmatics, which Kasper (1992, p. 207) defines as the L2 learner's still unstable and deficient pragmatic knowledge.

Kasper's (1992) definition of 'pragmatic transfer' in interlanguage appears to have a psycholinguistic bias. The present article, however, relies heavily on Thomas' (1983) definition of pragmatic failure. The author defines it as "the inability to understand 'what is meant by what is said'" (THOMAS, 1983, p. 91). Pragmatic failure, according to the author, can be of two kinds: a) pragmalinguistic failure, which happens when the speaker maps the pragmatic force differently from a native speaker of the target language or when the speaker inappropriately transfers speech act strategies from L1 to L2, and b) sociopragmatic failure, a term appropriated by Thomas from Leech (1983), which happens when the speaker uses inadequate strategies related to the social conditions of language in use.

An example of pragmalinguistic failure given by Thomas (1983, p. 101) happened in Russian ESL classrooms. The teacher asked learners during reading activities, '*X, would you like to read?*' to which learners repeatedly responded '*no, I wouldn't*'. The author explains that learners failed to recognize that the teacher was making a request. Thus, they did not mean to be rude; they thought, instead, that their preferences were being consulted.

An instance of sociopragmatic failure was provided by Economidou-Koetsidis (2011, p. 3200), who pointed out inadequacies in terms of directness levels and forms of address used by Greek speakers of English

writing e-mails to the faculty in a University context. This is one of the examples given by the author, in which a student addresses a lecturer:

Mr. LN,  
did you talk to Dr ....? what did she tell you?  
Will she allow me to take sociolinguistics?  
Thank you.  
C.

Here we can speak of sociopragmatic failure. The request for information did not take the asymmetrical power relation into account and was performed with an inappropriately high degree of directness. It was, therefore, perceived as impolite and discourteous by the receiver.

Thomas (1983) argues that pragmlinguistic failure is a linguistic problem, whereas sociopragmatic failure encodes different perceptions of socially accepted linguistic behavior. Even though the author herself and other scholars acknowledge that the distinction is rather fuzzy in some situations (THOMAS, 1983; KASPER, 1992), I shall argue in this paper that pragmatic, sociolinguistic, structural, and discourse asymmetry can be associated with 'socially inappropriate linguistic behavior' by hearers in cross-cultural interactional encounters. As will be seen in section 4, my argument is that situations in which certain speech acts, structures, discourse features, and forms of address are inadequately transferred might cause the hearer to assess the speaker's social behaviors in a way that might not match the speaker's original intentions.

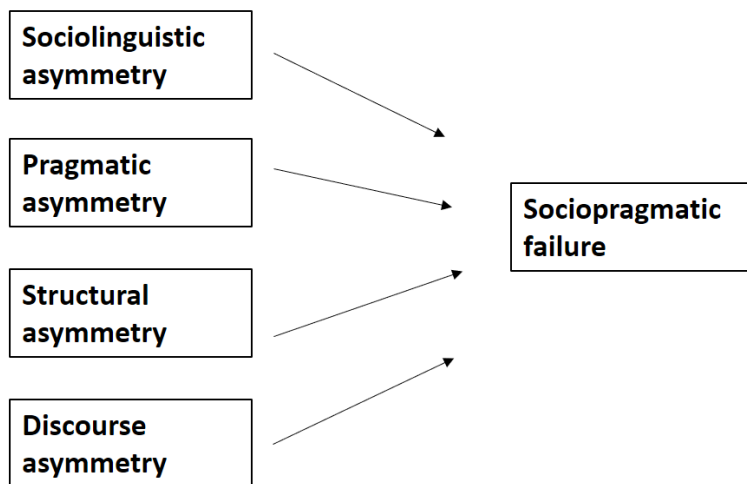
In relation to sociopragmatic failure, Thomas (1983, p. 104) states that

[...] while the ability to make judgements according to the social scales of value is part of the speaker's 'social competence', the ability to apply these judgements to linguistic utterances [...] comes within the field of pragmatics. It is cross-cultural mismatches in the assessment of social distance, of what constitutes an imposition, of when an attempt at a 'face-threatening act' should be abandoned, and in evaluating relative power, rights, and obligations, etc., which cause sociopragmatic failure.

Thus, sociopragmatic failure comprises linguistic choices or strategies along with social knowledge. Therefore, instead of viewing pragmlinguistic and sociopragmatic failure as subcategories of pragmatic failure, as described in Thomas (1983), I shall propose that sociopragmatic failure can

result from pragmatic, sociolinguistic, structural, or discourse asymmetry (and possibly others),<sup>2</sup> as shown in Figure 1. That is, in cases of intercultural communication in which there is a mismatch of speakers' sociolinguistic, pragmatic, structural, and discourse knowledge, sociopragmatic failure can occur.

FIGURE 1 – Types of asymmetry leading to sociopragmatic failure



Each type of asymmetry<sup>3</sup> will be detailed in section 4, where I will present and discuss examples of asymmetries arising from the discussion of video excerpts, as well as from reports given by interviewees on their own experiences in Brazil.

<sup>2</sup> One point is in order here: Even though Thomas' (1983) definition of pragmatic failure was exemplified with non-native English utterances and contrasted with 'native speakers' norms', I adopt a more up-to-date perspective on this issue (cf. SHARIFIAN, 2009) and suggest that native English speakers themselves are also prone to sociopragmatic failure if they do not understand the pragmatic rules which their interlocutors from other countries and cultures base their conversation strategies on.

<sup>3</sup> In the remaining parts of this article, I shall use the terms 'failure' and 'asymmetry' interchangeably, meaning speakers' failure during interaction to convey their intended messages. By 'conveying a message', I am referring to situations in which speakers are able to get not only the information itself across, but also their illocutionary and social intentions.

A theoretical and methodological framework that has proven fruitful for the analysis of cross-cultural pragmatic failure is that of interactional sociolinguistics, as described below.

### **3. Contextualization conventions into play in cross-cultural pragmatic failure: contextualization cues, politeness, (in)directness**

Several authors (e.g., KASPER; BLUM-KULKA, 1993; TANNEN, 2005; JASPERS, 2012) make the case that Interactional Sociolinguistics (GUMPERZ, 1982; 1996) is an important methodological apparatus in the qualitative investigation of pragmatic misunderstandings in cross-cultural interactions. What interactional sociolinguistic methods offer to the study of cross-cultural pragmatic failure is a holistic look into conversational data for the identification of contextualization cues and conventions guiding inferential processes in interactions. These cues and conventions can be identified on the utterance level through certain lexical, prosodical, syntactic, stylistic, and discursive choices (i.e., contextualization cues), but also on the activity level, where metapragmatic assessments of a more general type are involved, such as “what is to be expected in the exchange, what should be lexically expressed, what can be conveyed only indirectly, how moves are to be positioned within an exchange, what interpersonal relations are involved, and what rights to speaking apply” (GUMPERZ, 1996, p. 396-397). Among these types of activity-level inferences, interactional cross-cultural evaluations pertaining to politeness and (in-)directness also apply (TANNEN, 1984, 1992). Because these two recurring research topics in linguistic investigations have proven important for the analysis of different types of pragmatic failure presented below, they will be elucidated in the paragraphs that follow.

Politeness research is a productive field of studies in Pragmatics. Since the launching of Brown and Levinson’s now classical work *Politeness: Some universals in language usage* (1978/1987), many studies have emerged that either use or critique their theory of politeness. In a nutshell, Brown and Levinson (1978/1987) propose four types of politeness strategies acting upon the hearer’s positive or negative face wants: bald on-record, negative politeness, positive politeness, and off-record. These strategies are often equated with a scale of indirectness, off-record being the most indirect and on-record the

most direct. The model also proposes that the more face-threatening an act is, the more redressing strategies (the more indirectness) will be necessary.

Leaning on Searle's (1975) definition of indirect speech acts, Blum-Kulka (1987) argues that, in fact, it is not merely general 'indirectness' that correlates with politeness. Her empirical study on Hebrew and English speakers' perceptions of politeness and indirectness of requests showed that it is not the whole group of indirect speech acts that are assessed as the politest by both groups, but rather those that are conventionally indirect. This finding highlights how important a role conventionality plays in the hearer's decision of what counts as polite.

### 3 Methodology

This article focuses on one part of a broader research project (MENDES DE OLIVEIRA, 2013) where contextualization conventions (GUMPERZ, 1982) used by Brazilian and American speakers of English were identified and connected with sociocultural differences. The part of the research project highlighted for this paper relates to how American teachers of English to Brazilian learners assess some of their linguistic contributions. More information on the methodology is provided below.

#### 3.1 Participants

Three American teachers of English – namely, C.C. (female), B.T. (male), and J.M. (male) – were interviewed for the study, all of them in their twenties. They had been living in Brazil for at least 2 years by the time the interviews were conducted. Further details on participants and methodology for the other parts of the study – i.e., footage of English classes in Brazil – are provided in Mendes de Oliveira (2013).

#### 3.2 Instrument

Prior to the interviews themselves, English classes were filmed and transcribed using the guidelines from the discourse and conversation-analytic transcription system GAT 2 (SELTING *et al.*, 2011), whose details can be found in Appendix 1.

Excerpts from this footage were selected and presented to interviewees. Semi-structured interviews were recorded as a way to gather perceptions of American teachers of English in relation to Brazilian learners'



pragmatic choices when speaking English. Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz (1982, p.19) recommend the use of preceding recorded conversation as a means for eliciting “how participants reflexively address the social activity that is being constituted by their ongoing talk”.

### 3.3 Procedures

Selected video excerpts featuring interactions in English classes, together with their transcriptions, were shown to the three American interviewees, two of which (B.T. and C.C.) were also featured in these excerpts, since their classes had been previously filmed. Interviewees were asked to identify points in the transcription that did not sound pragmatically appropriate to them and to discuss these points. The initial discussion around specific aspects of the videos often ended up triggering reports on interviewees’ own teaching experiences and even more general everyday experiences with the Brazilian culture. Both types of reflections done by interviewees, namely those directly arising from the video excerpts and those based on their own experiences (teaching) in Brazil, were considered to be valid data sources for instantiations of sociopragmatic failure. These instantiations, which are described below, arose from qualitative and microanalytic analyses of the excerpts and interviews. The analyses focused on contextualization conventions leading to different understandings of politeness and (in)directness in discourse.

The limited number of interviewees in the study prevent the generalization of findings. Along this line, I agree with Kasper and Blum-Kulka (1993, p. 12), who define Contrastive Pragmatics<sup>4</sup> as “purely descriptive, having no predictive power for the study of interlanguage pragmatics and actual communicative practices in cross-cultural encounters, but serving an important hypothesis-generating and explanatory role in studies of interlanguage pragmatic performance and knowledge”. These authors also highlight the importance of the microanalytic qualitative methods proposed by Interactional Sociolinguistics for the identification of pragmatic failure.

---

<sup>4</sup> The strand of Pragmatics that involves comparisons of pragmatic patterns in two or more languages and/or cultures.

## 4 Different types of asymmetry and a case of accommodation

In the following, excerpts from the footage will be presented as well as the discussions that emerged out of the interviewees' views on them. Therefore, not only the footage excerpts themselves will be linguistically analyzed as cases of cross-pragmatic failure, but also examples given by interviewees of situations they experienced when teaching Brazilian learners of English or, to a lesser extent, examples given about their impressions on the Brazilian culture in general. The cases are described below and are followed, at the end of this section, by an instance of sociopragmatic accommodation.

### 4.1 Structural asymmetry – The case of tag questions

Different syntactical uses of language might evidence how certain syntactic contextualization cues index cultural orientations, such as non-imposition, for instance. In one of the filmed excerpts, the following utterance was a turn performed by a student, S2, and directed at the teacher.

#### Excerpt 1

22            S2    it's common to say PIGeo:n [no?]

Here, the interviewees point out that this tag question can be seen as a sign of non-assertiveness and lack of self-confidence from S2 as a learner in this group.

Following Brown and Levinson's (1978/1987) politeness theory, using 'no' as a tag question could be seen as a negative politeness strategy in which the speaker already anticipates in the question the possibility that the interlocutor might answer it negatively. This strategy could possibly fall into the negative politeness strategy of 'being pessimistic' (BROWN; LEVINSON, 1978/1987, p. 173), because it is used as a way to minimize the imposition on the hearer.

Mesthrie and Bhatt (2008) discuss tag questions in standard English in contrast with New Englishes. In standard English, a pronominal copy of the subject is inserted in the tag after an appropriate modal auxiliary. An example provided by the author is "*John said he'll work today, didn't he?*" (MESTHRIE; BHATT, 2008, p. 132). In Indian English, for instance, even though this canonical form also exists, if one is to index non-imposition or, as

mentioned above, negative politeness, one is likely to use the undifferentiated tag, as in “*You said you’ll do the job, isn’t it?*”. The authors also point out that the use of ‘no’, as another type of undifferentiated tag question, is possible in West African English.

As for Brazilian learners of English, the canonical tag question in Portuguese – ‘*Você disse que você irá fazer o trabalho, não disse?*’ (‘*You said you’ll do the job, didn’t you?*’), with the illocutionary force of request for confirmation, seems to index more imposition than an undifferentiated tag question – ‘*Você disse que você irá fazer o trabalho, não?*’ (‘*You said you’ll do the job, no?*’),<sup>5</sup> similarly to the case of Indian English described above. The omission of the verb in the latter form in contrast with the former seems to create the effect of a decrease in imposition in Brazilian Portuguese. This is an example of structural transfer coupled with an expectation of social assessment on the part of the speaker (in this case, the assessment that the speaker intends to minimize imposition); a syntactic contextualization cue that has consequences for activity-level inferences. Social considerations are thus also taken into account when a speaker decides to use one form over another. Therefore, this excerpt of structural failure can also be classified as a sociopragmatic failure.

## 4.2 Pragmatic asymmetry: Differences in illocutionary forces

Asymmetrical understanding of illocutionary forces by conversational partners might be a result of different contextualization conventions. In the following examples this observation becomes clear. In one of the recordings, after having a preceding question answered by classmates and the teacher, a student, S3, replies:

### Excerpt 2

32        S3    (0.5) a:h i undersTOOD.

Here, we have another case of transfer that could, as in excerpt 1, be considered structural. However, the utterance is still grammatically feasible in other contexts in American English. The transfer may therefore be considered pragmatic.

---

<sup>5</sup> However, intonational characteristics might also play a role in how these sentences are to be interpreted.

During the interview, C.C. points out that this is a clear transfer from the Portuguese expression '*ah, entendi!*'. The interviewees argue that there is no reason for the verb to be used in the past tense, since the person has just received an explanation and processed it. To them, such a phenomenon requires the use of the present tense 'understand'.

While to J.M., the use of '*did you understand?*' or, more generally, '*do you understand?*' in American English presupposes a kind of cognitive impairment on the part of the hearer (as seen by the speaker), B.T. reports that he usually connects this type of sentence with authority and authoritarian scenarios. An example given by B.T. is that such utterances would be appropriate in a context where a sergeant, after giving instructions to soldiers, wants not only to check if the instructions to the group have been comprehended, but also to reinforce the hierarchical structure of the social relationship in that social encounter.

As pointed out in the section of methodological procedures 3.3, the excerpts from the videos often worked as triggers for further comments on Brazilian learners and on the Brazilian culture in general. Following the discussion of the excerpt, for instance, J.M. relates the expression '*I didn't understand*', commonly heard among Brazilian learners of English, to passive reactions they tend to have to the activity of learning a foreign language. He points out that, as a teacher, his first reaction to the expression '*I didn't understand*' is to think '*okay; thank you for the information, but what should I do in relation to it?*'; that is, to him, when Brazilian learners use such an expression, they are merely reporting their difficulties and not necessarily positioning themselves actively in relation to this difficulty.

J.M. also reports that many of his pupils prefer to do grammar activities instead of practicing conversation, as they feel safer with the latter type of exercise. He interprets this fact as a preference of Brazilian learners to feel secure when learning a second language. An example J.M. gives is the fact that it is common practice among Brazilian learners to lean back and ask '*what?*' when they realize they have not grasped the meaning of something the teacher has said (in this case, another pragmalinguistic failure due to the transfer of '*o quê?*' in Portuguese, which translates exactly as '*what?*'). J.M. reports that in the same situation he would expect a different behavior from an American, who tends to lean forward and ask '*sorry?*'. To him, this is a sign of agency, since he understands that '*sorry?*' already incorporates a request for the speaker to repeat or clarify what he has just said, while '*what?*', in his view, represents mostly a reaction of surprise.

In other words, *'sorry?'* to him would be a directive speech act; that is, in this case, the speaker is requesting something from the hearer. *'What?'*, on the other hand, is more likely to be interpreted, according to J.M.'s explanation, as an expressive speech act (RONAN, 2015), an exclamation that serves to express the speaker's attitude or emotions towards a proposition. However, even though the Portuguese *'o quê'* can be used as an expressive speech act, it is also very common as a directive speech act. In English, the most common illocutionary force for *'what?'* may be expressive.

Thomas (1983) points out that psycholinguistic research has shown that native speakers fairly predictably assign a specific illocutionary force to certain utterances. For example, the author reports that the structure *'can you x?'* - x being an activity - is likely to be interpreted by the British firstly as a request, rather than a question as to one's ability to perform x. As stated above, the same might apply for *'o quê?'* in Portuguese, which might firstly be assigned the directive illocutionary force of a 'request for clarification', rather than an 'expression of surprise'. Along the same lines, the direct translation of *'sorry?'* into Portuguese - *'desculpe-me?'* - would very likely not be interpreted as a directive speech act, but solely as an apology, i.e., an expressive speech act (SEARLE, 1976).

Likewise, J.M. also refers to an expression that, according to him, is repeatedly used by Brazilian learners of English: *'I have a doubt'*. Here, we have another case of direct transfer from the Portuguese expression *'Eu tenho uma dúvida'*, used as a preparatory sequence for a directive speech act, just like *'I have a question'*. However, J.M. points out that he usually expects learners to use *'I have a question'* in this situation, since it not only reports a difficulty, but also shows which action the speaker intends to take in relation to this difficulty; that is, to ask a question so as to overcome it.

This comment seems to refer to the directness of the preparatory sequence of *'I have a question'* evidenced by the fit between form and intention of the speaker in contrast with the indirectness of the preparatory sequence *'I have a doubt'*, where the intention of the speaker is not clear. Another factor that might have contributed to J.M.'s evaluation is the fact *'I have a doubt'* is, in the American culture, a non-conventional preparatory sequence for a directive speech act. In her investigation of requests,<sup>6</sup> Blum-Kulka (1987, p. 144) argues that non-conventionally indirect speech acts might cause

---

<sup>6</sup> Even though Blum-Kulka's (1987) analysis refers to speech acts per se (and not to preparatory sequences for speech acts), I believe her findings can also be extended to the analysis of preparatory sequences.

a long inferential path to the hearer that might be regarded as a burden resulting from the lack of pragmatic clarity of the speaker's utterance. Since pragmatic clarity is a result of contextualization conventions, it can be argued that where two cultures do not share certain conventionality in terms of how illocutionary force is to be locutionarily expressed, asymmetric evaluations are likely to arise, as in the case of '*I have a doubt*' and '*I have a question*'.

This asymmetry, in terms of directness and indirectness, might contribute to an interpretation offered by the American interviewees (see below) according to which the Brazilian culture tends to be more implicit than the American culture in many situations.

Another excerpt identified in the recording and discussed by the interviewees was taken from a class in which the teacher (B.T., in this case) was introducing a book lesson called '*Strange Landings*' and was asking learners to try to interpret a picture shown on the e-board that was to be related to the topic of the lesson.

### Excerpt 3

49	S1	strange LANDings?
50	T	yes.

In line 49, the student asks a question whose intention is to request clarification. However, it is interpreted as a different speech act by the teacher. The contextualization cue used in this excerpt is the prosodic contour *rising to high*. In the same speech event, the teacher himself had also used the prosodic contour *rising to high* in turns 07 and 12, as can be seen below.

#### Excerpt 4

- 01 T           there you GO.  
02           (0.6)  
03 S1          ((reading a question on the board) who  
              is the young MAN?  
04 S1          is a DEAD man.  
05 T           ((laughs))  
06 S2          ((laughs))  
07 T           <<looking at the board> you think he's a  
08 S1          DEAD man?>  
              ((laughs))  
09 S1          <<pointing to the board> he's a  
              (xxx xxx) of NATure> maybe,  
10 S2          he's a: HORse man,  
11 S1          ((laughs))  
12 T           <<pointing to the board with a  
              doubtful look> HORse man?>

In turns 07 and 12, the teacher's *rising to high* intonation was not being used as a contextualization cue for a request of clarification; the intent was to offer back-channeling to students' turns. Therefore, the teacher might have interpreted S1's prosodic contour in turn 49, excerpt 3, as a contextualization cue for the same type of question.

The speech event (in which excerpts 3 and 4 were included) was shown to the interviewees, who offered different interpretations of it. C.C. pointed out that she could have interpreted turn 49 as a request for confirmation of, for instance, accuracy of pronunciation. The intent of the student in this case would be to know whether the pronunciation was correct. B.T., who was the teacher featured in this excerpt, points to the fact that Americans are used to rhetorical questions, and that is how he interpreted S1's question. To J.M., when students repeat a sentence in this way, it seems that they are confirming it.

Here, J.M. points to the implicit character of the Brazilian culture. The aforementioned reflections about the expression ‘*I have a doubt*’ were mentioned by American interviewees to exemplify the implicitness of the Brazilian culture. Along this line, J.M. states that he has learned that a more explicit communication style can be offensive in Brazil. He reports having been accused by close acquaintances of being aggressive and rude when using expressions such as *of course* or *obviously*.

Thomas (1983) also refers to the formulaic expression *of course* as used by Russian speakers of English as a second language (in contrast to British English). She argues that, as a pragmalinguistic transfer from Russian ‘конечно’, it can be used to convey an enthusiastic affirmative, but it can also imply that “the speaker has asked something which is self-evident, so that конечно, transferred from Russian to English in answer to a ‘genuine’ question, can sound at best peremptory and at worst insulting” (THOMAS, 1983, p. 101-102). The Brazilian dislike for ‘*of course*’ expressions might be referred to two highly avoided sociopragmatic factors in Brazilian culture already pointed out in this article: imposition on the hearer and directness.

All the cases discussed in this section would originally fall into the pragmalinguistic type of failure, following Thomas’ (1983) framework. However, it is undeniable that speakers might make, as the interviewees did, social-behavioral assessments in relation to them; this is what also makes them cases of sociopragmatic asymmetry.

### **4.3 Discourse asymmetry: The case of interruptions**

Some authors suggest that transfer in terms of discourse patterns should be analyzed separately (Cf. CLYNE et al., 1991) and should not follow under the category of pragmatic failure, while others use terms for discourse and pragmatic failures interchangeably (Cf. TAKAHASHI; BEEBE, 1992). Here, I present a discussion about interruption in discourse.

The following excerpt is related to a class in which the American electoral process was being discussed. The session happened a day after a presidential election in the United States. This is a part of the session in which the teacher was making a presentation, so turns were longer and more monologic when compared to the shorter and more dialogic excerpts presented above.



### Excerpt 5

- 01 T the reason they pick TUESday (-)is becau:se  
ah: when this was decided (.) they couldn't  
pick sunday, like here in brazil, because  
sunday was the LORD's day way back then  
everybody went to church and prayed (.) right,
- 02 T ah MONday was (-) ah: (.) some sort of working  
da:y I don't remembe:r really:
- 03 T WEDnesday was the market day people went  
to the marke:t I don't know what happened  
to thursday and friday but for some reason  
tuesday was the only day that people could  
vote.
- 04 T so that's what it is and it's been THAT way.
- 05 T (0.6)
- 06 T ah how the vote [(xxx)]
- 07 S1 [was] was yesterday a regular business day in  
the United States or (.) did people go to work  
yesterday or
- 08 S1 everything STOPped?
- 09 T ye:s
- 10 T °hh states can CHOOse if they want to make  
election day a <<doing the quotation gesture  
with hands> holiday;>
- 11 T states can CHOO:se to say that (.) this a  
holiday no work <<pointing arm to the door>  
everybody go home.>
- 12 T MOSTly that doesn't happen.
- 13 T americans are workahOLICS right?
- 14 T they probably work MORE and have less vaCAtion  
(.) than any other country in the world.
- 15 T It's ahm (.) it's actually really SAD (.)  
<<dim> very sad.>

A point that came up during the interviews was the fact that, in turn 07, S1 initiates a turn by performing an overlap with the end of turn 06 uttered by the teacher. The first occurrence of ‘was’ could be interpreted as an ‘attention-getter’ (WIERZBICKA, 2003, p. 89). What attracted the interviewees’ attention was that no phrase was introduced to point to the interruption itself.

C.C., who is the teacher being filmed in this excerpt, pointed out that, in the beginning of her clarification about the elections in the U.S., she had already stated that interruptions could be made. Thus, in this case, she would not interpret it as impolite. However, she herself points out that in educational contexts in the US, children are taught to raise their hands whenever they intend to initiate a turn and that non-interruption seems to be more important in the American culture than in the Brazilian one.

Murata (1994) proposes that interruptions be classified as either ‘intrusive’ or ‘cooperative’. Even though floor-taking is, according to the author, a subcategory of ‘intrusive interruptions’, his reflections open room for cultural variation. The author argues that floor-taking (classified as an intrusive interruption technique) can also be seen as a manifestation of the speaker’s attempt to participate actively in the conversation. The very situational context – an English class, where learners are expected to ask questions in order to secure good comprehension – allows for that. It seems that, to the mind of the Brazilian interruptee, making this interruption would have no consequences as for the amount of imposition on the teacher. Even though turn 7 was not necessarily regarded as rude by the teacher herself (C.C.), she, as well as other interviewees, have highlighted that interruptions and loud speech can be at times considered somewhat ‘aggressive’. Here, my interpretation is that it is the feeling of being imposed on the source of such an evaluation.

During the interview, B.T. reported that even though S1’s overlap could not be identified as ‘rude’, he himself had undergone various situations in Brazil when he first arrived in the country, through which he had judged Brazilians to be “aggressive” and “rude”. One example given by the interviewee refers to the fact that it is common among Brazilians, in their homes, to speak to other members of their family without going over to the person and speaking to them directly, but to call loudly from a different room than where the hearer is located. Also here, I argue that the impression of imposition (through the contextualization cue of loudness), as in the analysis above, was the reason for B.T.’s evaluation.

As shown above, the use of discourse strategies, such as turn-taking, can differ from culture to culture. Gumperz (1996) refers to them as ‘sequencing strategies’ and treats them as a type of contextualization convention influencing the activity-level contextualization. Thus, these differences might lead to behavioral assessments on the part of the hearer, who can take the speakers to be ‘rude’ and ‘aggressive’, for instance, because of their disregard for interactants’ roles and positions (sociolinguistic variables). Speakers can also be regarded as ‘rude’ due to a lack of attention to politeness issues (pragmatic variables) in discourse. Therefore, this type of asymmetry should, along with the ones previously presented, be regarded as sociopragmatic failure.

#### 4.4 Asymmetry in forms of address

The discussion on the topic of ‘interruption’ presented above triggered other interesting reflections by the interviewees on how certain forms of address can also be interpreted as inappropriate in certain contexts.

Forms of address, originally seen as a sociolinguistic phenomenon, are prone to contextual influences. The sociolinguistic variables – power, solidarity, etc – associated with them are also prone to high variation when different cultural contexts are compared. C.C. and B.T, for instance, mentioned another sign of “rudeness” identified in their first contact with Brazilian culture<sup>7</sup>, namely, the fact that students talk to their instructors by calling them ‘teacher’ instead of ‘Mr.’ or ‘Ms.’ plus the surname.<sup>8</sup>

An analysis of the American system of address was done by Brown and Ford (1964). The principle of choice in American English is the use of first name (FN) or title plus last name (TLN). Generally, reciprocal FN indicates high solidarity; reciprocal TLN indexes low solidarity; and asymmetrical FN-TLN points to a difference in class position and status. Foley (1997) states that T alone can be used instead of TLN and that this is typically done for high status positions or occupations or when the last name is unknown, so that extreme social distance is needed, as in *doctor*, *madam*, etc. The author argues that “the generalized title has an impersonalizing effect on the addressee, so that absolutely no claim of solidarity based on shared

---

<sup>7</sup> This interpretation was, however, reported to be overcome as the interviewees got more acquainted with the Brazilian culture.

<sup>8</sup> This point refers back to the example given in the introduction.

personal interests is possible” (FOLEY, 1997, p. 318). The interpretation related to impersonalization and a lack of solidarity (or negative politeness) provided by interviewees might be the root of the interviewees’ perception of the vocative ‘*teacher*’ as non-appropriate, because it might conflict with the generally friendly and personal atmosphere of English classes.

My suggestion is that this is a failure resulting from direct translation from the vocative used in Portuguese, ‘*professor(a)*’. The use of ‘T’ only in this context, in Portuguese, does not necessarily imply a lack of solidarity, as this vocative is taken to be simultaneously respectful and friendly. That is, there is, at the same time, an acknowledgment of the status of the teacher<sup>9</sup> as well as an attempt to maintain positive politeness, which can only be made clear when a comparison with TLN, in the same situational content, is made. That is, using ‘*Senhora Silva*’ – Ms. *Silva* – to refer to the teacher, in this situation, is regarded as a sign of social distance in Brazilian Portuguese and is likely to be associated with formal contexts. These reflections serve as an evidence for the consideration of forms of address as a sociopragmatic phenomenon. Therefore, cross-cultural asymmetries in the use of forms of address fall unquestionably in the realm of sociopragmatic failure.

#### 4.5 A case of accommodation

At this point, two reflections on pragmatic failure are in order. Firstly, while it is legitimate to speak of pragmatic failure, the analyst should be careful not to assign this type of phenomenon exclusively to speakers of English as an L2. For this article, the focus is on the perceptions of American interviewees on Brazilian learners’ pragmatic failures or, more specifically, on their sociopragmatic failures. However, it is also possible to investigate the perceptions Brazilian speakers of English as an L2 have of pragmatic failures by American speakers of English, as well as those by speakers from other nationalities.

A second point is that, even though the analyses above intend to shed light on the phenomenon of pragmatic failure resulting from different contextualization conventions, other sociopragmatic phenomena can also arise from the encounter of two (or more) sets of contextualization conventions, namely, sociopragmatic accommodation, as shown below.

---

<sup>9</sup> Cases like ‘*doctor*’ and ‘*madam*’ are also possible in Portuguese.

When discussing excerpt 2 above, C.C. points out that she has noticed herself starting to use ‘*do you understand?*’ after not having succeeded, many times, in getting her message across when using expressions like ‘*does that make sense?*’. This is confirmed in the recording of her class, in which she herself uses the expression, as shown below:

- 01 T mitt romney on the other hand ah: is a  
republican and in general the republicans  
are much more conSERvative.
- 02 T they want to keep things the same and they are  
to the RIGHT, okay?
- 03 T °hh republicans generally want to spend less  
money from the federal government directly  
HELping the people
- 04 T what that means is that they have less  
influence on people's daily lives and the  
STates (.) make more decisions.
- 05 T so the federal government doesn't spend money  
and say ALL the states have to do this for  
all the people-
- 06 T republicans say EACH state knows what's good  
for people in each state
- 07 T does THAT make sense?
- 08 S2 i didn't understand what it means eh:: RIGHT.
- 09 T AH okay.

(...)

- 10 T that kind of thinking is moderate is coming into the MIDDLE.
- 11 T RIGHT?
- 12 T <<pointing to the board where it was written 'Republicans' and 'Democrats'> so tha:t a LEADER takes a little bit from here and a little bit from here>
- 13 T oKAY?
- 14 T do you underSTAND [that?]
- 15 S2 yes.
- 16 S1 yeah.
- 17 T we don't want the exTREMES left right or-
- 18 T yeah LEFT right ((laughs))
- 19 T We WANT <<bringing hands together in front of her chest> that.>

In turn 7, the teacher uses what according to her would be common in American English. However, after turn 8 is performed by a Brazilian learner, she bends this norm so as to adapt to her interlocutors' style in turn 14. Bou-Franch (2013) reports that pragmatic transfer is currently assumed to be bidirectional, i.e., it is possible not only from L1 to L2, but also from L2 to L1, as is the case in this excerpt.

Therefore, this case involves a type of accommodation (GILES; JOHNSON, 1987) that can be labelled, at first sight, as structural or pragmatic. From an analytical point of view, however, this kind of accommodation can be regarded as sociopragmatic, because the speaker bends the conventionalized sociopragmatic norms related to the use of this structure in her L1 speech community and adapts to contextualization conventions of the new speech community (the Brazilian one, in this case). This might be an instantiation of what Blum-Kulka (1991) refers to as an 'intercultural style', which results from extended intercultural contact.

## 5. Discussion

The interviews conducted and the qualitative linguistic interpretations provided above led to important findings in relation to sociopragmatic failures that will be recalled below.

On the level of syntactic structures, the use of undifferentiated negative tag questions by Brazilian learners was highlighted and connected with an evaluation, by the American interviewees, that the learner lacks in assertiveness. A linguistic analysis of the structure led to the conclusion that this is a transfer from Brazilian Portuguese to English. The activity-level inference that it is related to, in Brazilian culture, is the minimization of imposition and not necessarily a 'lack of assertiveness'.

On the level of illocutionary forces, different locutions indexing different activity-level inferences have been presented: *I understood X I understand; what x sorry; I have a doubt x I have a question*. Interviewees regarded some of those as related to a more 'implicit character' emphasized in the Brazilian culture. The linguistic analysis showed that direct preparatory sequences for certain speech acts are preferred by the interviewees instead of non-conventional indirect forms. On the contrary, for the Brazilian culture, avoiding imposition through indirectness seems to play a more important role than for the American interviewees.

However, in terms of discourse asymmetry, 'rudeness' or 'aggressiveness' were reported by American interviewees exactly in contexts where conventionalization cues commonly associated with 'imposition' are identified in discourse, such as turn interruption and loudness of speech. It seems that these signs are not necessarily cues of imposition, but cooperative signs in interactions for Brazilians, at least in the situational contexts described by the interviewees.

As for forms of address, it was pointed that a vocative frequently used by Brazilian learners, namely, *Teacher*, is a result of a complex combination of acknowledgement of status and positive politeness. American interviewees might have interpreted it as a form of negative politeness that conflicts with the general positive-politeness-oriented atmosphere of English classes. This conflict might have resulted in their assessment of *Teacher* as inappropriate.

Even though asymmetric uses of sociolinguistic features might be the easiest and best fit to cases of sociopragmatic failure, all the findings above show that other linguistic phenomena might also lead to diverging assessments of language in use. Examples given above are

structural, pragmatic, discourse, and sociolinguistic asymmetries that can potentially lead to asymmetric social expectations and social assessments, as represented in Figure 1 (section 2).<sup>10</sup> Finally, I showed that there is an alternative to ‘sociopragmatic failure’ in cross-cultural interactions, namely, ‘sociopragmatic accommodation’.

A limitation to the study presented here is the fact that Brazilians were not interviewed as a means of establishing cross-interpretations. However, I believe the findings have the potential to play an important hypothesis-generating role (KASPER; BLUM-KULKA, 1993, p. 12) in the fields of ESL teaching and learning and pragmatics.

In terms of ESL teaching and learning, it is important that teachers and learners be aware of sociopragmatic differences so as to be able to ‘accommodate’ sociopragmatically to their conversation partners. As for linguists, the bottom line of the reflections presented above is the confirmation that researchers interested in language in use should not do away with micro-analytic qualitative methods of investigation. This type of look into data can make analysts aware of situational characteristics underlying general linguistic theory.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank CAPES (Coordenadoria de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior). This project would not have been possible without the financial support provided for my M.A. and Ph.D. studies. I would also like to thank the blind reviewers for their careful reading and for their questions and suggestions.

---

<sup>10</sup> Even though distinguishing among types of asymmetry might facilitate linguistic analyses of sociopragmatic failure, the bottom line of these findings is not the distinction of types of asymmetry *per se*, but the fact that sociopragmatic failure is a broader phenomenon than assumed by Thomas (1983).



## References

- BLUM-KULKA, S. Indirectness and politeness in requests: Same or different? *Journal of Pragmatics*, Elsevier, v. 11. n. 2, p. 131-146, 1987. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166\(87\)90192-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166(87)90192-5).
- BLUM-KULKA; S. Interlanguage pragmatics: the case of requests. In: PHILLIPSON, R.; KELLERMAN, E.; SELINKER, L.; SHARWOOD SMITH, M.; SWAIN, M. (Org.). *Foreign/ second language pedagogy research*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 1991. p. 255-272.
- BOU-FRANCH, P. Pragmatic transfer. In: CHAPELLE, C. A. (Org.). *The Encyclopedia of Applied Linguistics*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013. Available at: <[onlinelibrary.wiley.com/book/10.1002/9781405198431](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/book/10.1002/9781405198431)>. Retrieved on: 12 sept. 2014.
- BROWN, R.; FORD, M. Address in American English. *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, University of Toronto, v. 62, n. 2, p. 375, 1961. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0042862>.
- BROWN, P.; LEVINSON, S.C. *Politeness: some universals in language usage*. Cambridge University Press, 1987. [First published in 1978 as part of GOODY, E. N. (Ed.): Questions and Politeness.]
- CLYNE, M.; BALL, M.; NEIL, D. Intercultural communication at work in Australia: complaints and apologies in turns. *Multilingua*, De Gruyter, v. 10, n. 3, p. 251-273, 1991. <https://doi.org/10.1515/mult.1991.10.3.251>.
- ECONOMIDOU-KOGETSIDIS, M. "Please answer me as soon as possible": pragmatic failure in non-native speakers' e-mail requests to faculty. *Journal of Pragmatics*, Elsevier, v. 43. n. 13, p. 3193-3215, 2011. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2011.06.006>.
- FOLEY, W. Language and social position. In: FOLEY, W. (Org.) *Anthropological Linguistics: an introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1997. p. 192-214.
- GILES; H.; JOHNSON, P. Ethnolinguistic identity theory: A social psychological approach to language maintenance. *International Journal of Sociology and Language*, De Gruyter, v. 6, p. 69-110, 1987.
- GUMPERZ, J. J. *Discourse strategies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511611834>.
- GUMPERZ, J. J.; COOK-GUMPERZ, J. Introduction: Language and the communication of social identity. In: GUMPERZ, J. J. (Org.) *Language and social identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982. p. 1-21. <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511611834.003>.

- GUMPERZ, J. J. The linguistic and cultural relativity of conversational inference. In: J. J. GUMPERZ; S.C. LEVINSON (Org.). *Rethinking Linguistic Relativity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. p. 374-406.
- JASPERS, J. Interactional sociolinguistics and discourse analysis. In: HANDFORD, M.; GEE, J. P. (Org.). *The Routledge Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, London: Routledge, 2012. p. 135-146.
- KASPER, G. Pragmatic transfer. *Second Language Research*, Sage Journals, v. 8, n. 3, p. 203-231, 1992.
- KASPER, G.; BLUM-KULKA, S. Interlanguage pragmatics: An introduction. *Interlanguage Pragmatics*, The Linguistics Journal, v. 3, p. 15, 1993.
- LEECH, Geoffrey N. *Principles of pragmatics*. United Kingdom: Taylor and Francis, 1983.
- MENDES DE OLIVEIRA, M. Inglês Americano X Inglês Brasileiro: comunicação intra e intercultural em sala de aula. 2013. 118f. Thesis (Masters in Applied Linguistics at the Federal University of Minas Gerais) – Faculty of Arts, Federal University of Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte, 2013.
- MESTHRIE, R.; BHATT, R. M. Pragmatics and Discourse. In: MESTHRIE, R.; BHATT, R. M. (Org.) *World Englishes: the study of new linguistic varieties*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. p. 131-155. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511791321>.
- MURATA, K. Intrusive or co-operative? A cross-cultural study of interruption. *Journal of Pragmatics*, Elsevier, v. 21. n. 4, p. 385-400, 1994. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166\(94\)90011-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166(94)90011-6).
- RONAN, P. Categorizing expressive speech acts in the pragmatically annotated SPICE Ireland corpus. *ICAME Journal*, De Gruyter, v. 39, n. 1, p. 25-45, 2015.
- SCHRÖDER, U. A. Pragmática intercultural no ensino de Alemão no Brasil. In: BOHUNOVSKY, R. (Org.). *Ensinar Alemão no Brasil: Contextos e conteúdos*. Curitiba: Editora UFPR, 2011. p. 147-170.
- SEARLE, J. R. Indirect speech acts. In: COLE, P.; MORGAN, J. L. (Org.). *Syntax and Semantics 3: Speech Acts*. New York. Academic Press, 1975. p. 59-82.
- SEARLE, J. R. A classification of illocutionary acts. *Language in Society*, Cambridge University Press, v. 5, n. 1, p. 1-23, 1976.
- SELTING, M. *et al. A system for transcribing talk in interaction: GAT 2*. Translated by Elisabeth Couper-Kuhlen and Barth-Weingarten. *Gesprächsforschung*, ResearchGate, v. 12, p. 1-51, 2011. Available at: <<http://www.gespraechsforschung-ozs.de/heft2011/px-gat2-englisch.pdf>>. Retrieved on: 10 July 2012.

SHARIFIAN, F. (Org.). *English as an international language: Perspectives and pedagogical issues*. Bristol, UK; Buffalo, NY: Multilingual Matters, 2009.

TANNEN, D. The pragmatics of cross-cultural communication. *Applied Linguistics*, Oxford Academic, v. 5, n. 3, p. 189-195, 1984.

TANNEN, D. Interactional sociolinguistics as a resource for intercultural pragmatics. *Intercultural Pragmatics*, De Gruyter, v. 2, n. 2, p. 205-208, 2005.

TAKAHASHI, T.; BEEBE, L.M. The development of pragmatic competence by Japanese learners of English. *JALT Journal*, Japan Association for Language Teaching, v. 8, n. 2, p. 131-155, 1987.

THOMAS, J. Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Failure. *Applied Linguistics*, Oxford Academic, v. 4, n. 2, p. 91-112, 1983.

## Appendix 1

GAT 2 (Selting *et al.*, 2011) – Summary of transcription conventions used in this article.

Sequential Structure	
[ ]	Simultaneous speech
=	immediate or fast continuation with a new turn or segment

Pauses	
(.)	Micropause
	short (0.2-0.5 sec.), intermediate (0.5-0.8 sec.), and long pause (0.8-1.0 sec.), respectively.
(-), (--), (---)	
	short (0.2-0.5 sec.), intermediate (0.5-0.8 sec.), and long lengthening (0.8-1.0 sec.), respectively.
:, ::, :::	
ah, eh, ahn	hesitation markers

Accentuation	
acCENT	focus accent
ac!CENT!	extra strong accent

Final Pitch Movements of Intonational Phrases	
?	<i>rising to high</i>
,	<i>rising to mid</i>
-	<i>level</i>
;	<i>falling to mid</i>
.	<i>falling to low</i>

### Other conventions

((cough))	description of non-vocal actions
<<coughing> >	description of non-verbal and paralinguistic actions with indication of scope (e.g., she was <<coughing> on the bus> at that time)
<<surprised> >	interpretive comment with scope (<<surprised> it is not POSSible>)
(xxx xxx)	part that was not comprehended by the transcriber. Each xxx stands for a syllable
(house)	supposed word
(house/mouse)	possible alternatives or supposed words
((...))	omission in the transcription

### Pitch change

↑	upwards
↓	downwards

### Loudness and tempo changes, with scope

<<f> >	= <i>forte</i> , loud
<<ff> >	= <i>fortissimo</i> , very loud
<<p> >	= <i>piano</i> , low
<<pp> >	= <i>pianissimo</i> , very soft
<<cresc> >	= <i>crescendo</i> , increasingly louder
<<dim> >	= <i>diminuendo</i> , increasingly lower

### In and out-breaths

°h, °hh, °hhh	In-breath according to duration
h°, hh°, hhh°	Out-breath according to duration

Data de submissão: 10/08/2016. Data de aprovação: 21/12/2016.