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PRAGMATICS IN CONVERSATION : A HALLMARK FOR DIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

This paper is about conversation. In specific, it is about what happens when people talk to one another. Our main focus is what may happen when two or more people exchange words for some reasons. Why does one person say one thing and the other reply as he or she does? In conversation, diversity is the hallmark. There is a wide range of alternatives to choose from when we want to say something. However, these alternatives, may sometimes lead to problems in communication. We usually do not realize that what we intend to say is not exactly perceived by the people we talk to. Many instances of rudeness, stubbornness, inconsiderateness, or refusal to cooperate (which are not the original intention of the speaker) are actually the results of the hearer's failure to grasp the pragmatics of the speech uttered. This paper looks at the failure of interpreting pragmatics in conversation and the problems that may arise from it.

Keywords : Conversation, Pragmatics, Interpretation, Utterances

INTRODUCTION

In today's society where cultural diversity is common in all contexts of interaction, good and successful communication has become a great challenge. Communication is not a simple process as it seems. As claimed by Tannen (1995 : 138), "communication isn't as simple as saying what you mean." This is because, in most interaction, diversity has become the hallmark. There is a broad alternatives to choose from when we want to say something.

However, more often than not, these broad alternatives may present problems in our communication. By employing an alternative, we do not always or even do not usually say what we mean. We can mean something quite different from what our words say, or even just the opposite. At the other end, what we intend to say may not be exactly perceived or interpreted by the listeners or the people we talk to. This incorrect perception and interpretation may lead to breakdowns in communication in the forms of misunderstanding and misinterpretation. These may eventually lead to conflicts in the relationship among the members of the conversation.

Several studies and observations have reported that most breakdowns in conversations in the forms of misunderstanding and misinterpretation are due to the failure of understanding the pragmatics of the speech uttered (Alston, 1980; Wolfson, 1981; Bennet, 1991; Blakemore, 1992).

Thus, the following sections of this paper will take a closer look at pragmatics and how its failure can account for breakdown in conversations.

Pragmatics defined

The term pragmatic is initially defined in the 1980s as 'meaning in use' or meaning in context'. The more recent definitions equate pragmatics with 'speaker meaning' or 'utterance interpretations' (in Thomas, 1995 : 20-21).

Thomas (1995), herself, sees pragmatics as 'meaning in interaction' (22). Thus, the definition suggests that meaning is not something that is '... inherent in the words alone, nor is it produced by the speaker alone, nor by the hearer alone' (22). In other words, making meaning involves the 'negotiation of meaning between speaker and hearer, the context of utterance (physical, social and linguistic) and the meaning potential of an utterance' (182).

The success of conversation also hinges on the listeners' ability to understand the meaning intended through recognizing the implicature of the utterance. For example, when someone says :

"It's hot in here",

there are several interpretations of the utterance can be derived. For instance, the speaker may be :

a. only giving a comment about the condition of the room;
b. requesting for someone to open the windows; or
c. requesting someone to switch on the fan.

The listener may respond differently to the utterance, depending on his / her interpretation. If he or she thinks that the speaker may mean as (a), he or she may respond affirmatively or negatively to the speaker's comment. On the other hand, if the utterance is interpreted as (b) or (c) he or she might respond to it appropriately by opening the windows or switching on the fan.

Similarly, the question "What are you laughing at?", is not meant as a question. A listener, who are able to imply this correctly, knows that it rather functions as a command to stop laughing.

Let us take another simple situation – a request of asking for the time. There are several possible ways of asking the time. For instance :

Do you have the time?
Do you know what time it is?
Can / Could you tell me the time?
I wonder what time it is!
You don't have the time, do you?
What time is it [please]?
Do you have / Got / any idea what time it is?
I wonder how we are doing for time?
Anybody have the time?
It must be getting late!
Do you have a watch?
Is it two o'clock yet?
It must be time to go.
(Wardaugh, 1986 : 164)

What we see here is a range of ways and strategies indicated to the listener that the speaker is asking for the time. Although each and every one of the request is designed differently, if the listener can well implicate it, the response for each will be similar – an indication of the time. If not, different answers will be given as the reply.

Another clear example is shown in Kamisah's, (2000 : 38-39) shopping experience with her husband. The following exchanges took place :

Exchange 1

      Kamisah   :   That's a nice dress.

      Husband   :   Yes

Exchange 2

      Kamisah   :   That's a nice pair of shoes.

      Husband   :   Do you want to buy them?

Exchange 3

| Kamisah | : | That's a nice necklace. |
| Husband | : | Let's move on. |

In all the exchanges she only had one intention in mind, that she would like to buy the dress, shoes and necklace (Kamisah, 2000). However, she did not say it directly, only hoping that her husband would understand and respond and act what she hoped for. However, as mentioned before, saying what you mean does not necessarily be understood exactly by the listener. Thus, in the exchanges, appropriate replies, or actually the replies that were hoped for, were not given.

Pragmatics Failure : An Overview

What we say, and what our listeners will believe us to be saying may be rather different. There may be occasions that the intent of what we say may go unrecognized by our listeners. When this happens, a breakdown in the conversation is more likely to occur due to the failure to understand the pragmatics of the utterance.

Thomas (1983) defines the term pragmatics failure as the inability to understand what is meant by what is said. This failure can results in the breakdown of conversation and to the extreme, even conflicts among the speakers.

Consider this exchange between two friends, where X is asking Y to gout some where with him :

X	:	Let's go and watch a movie.
Y	:	I have a headache.
X	:	I have some aspirin.

In this exchange, it is obvious that Y does not understand that X's reply is meant to be as a refusal. Thus, it seems here that by offering the aspirin, X may think that Y will go out and watch the movie after taking the medication.

Kamisah (2000 : 41) cites Motley and Reader's empirical assessment of communication breakdown in the context of unwanted escalation of sexual intimacy between men and women as an example of how indirect phrases of the speaker fail to be implicated by the hearer. Motley and Parker show that replies with the intention of stopping male sexual advances such as :

'I have a headache.'
'I am not sure we're ready for this.'
'I am having my period.'

often fail to be implicated by men as a refusal. Hence, this is in line with Grice's conversational implicature that what a speaker means in uttering a sentence usually diverges from what the sentence means. Thus, his theory of meaning '... was an ingenuous refinement of the crude idea that communication is a matter of intentionally affecting another person's psychological states' (in Gauker, 1998 : 1).

Thomas (1983) proposes two kinds of pragmatic failures – **pragmalinguistic failure** and **socio-pragmatic failure.**

Pragmalinguistic failure refers to :

> ... the situation in which the force of the utterance is attributed with a pragmatic force different from that intended by the speaker due to inappropriate transfer of speech act strategies from one another, of the transferring from the mother tongue to the target language utterances which are semantically / syntactically equivalent, but which because of different "interpretative bias" tend to convey a different pragmatic in the target language.

(Thomas, 1983 : 101)

There are some examples that highlight this failure in communication. For instance, Jamaliah Mohd Ali (1999) has highlighted the common use of the word 'send' among most Malaysians whenever we meant to say taking someone to a place or a destination. It is common to hear this utterance :

"I send my children to school everyday."

Speaking to fellow Malaysians may not present any problem since to most of us, 'sending the children to school' means we go together with the children to school, either by walking together, or using some mode of transportation. However, to the native speakers of English, this can cause a confusion since 'sending the children to school' means packing them up, probably in a box, and post them to school. The word 'take' is more appropriate for this context.

Norhayati Ismail (http://pertinent.com/pertinfo/business/yaticom1.html) gives another interesting example of pragmalinguistic failure due to treating words in the first language and target language semantically equivalent. Norhayati cites an example of the direct translation of the Pepsi-Cola slogan into Chinese. The slogan "Come Alive With Pepsi" was translated into Chinese and the equivalent meaning of the translated slogan was "Pepsi Brings Back Your Dead Ancestors". The consequence of this translated slogan to the market of this product is imaginable.

Norhayati gives another example cited from Axtell's book, **Do's and Taboos of Using English Around the World**, that illustrates this point in a story which involves a business discussion between an American business man and a Japanese customer:

> … The American concluded his business discussions with his Japanese customer with, "Well, our thinking is in parallel." They bid goodbye, but weeks and months passed with no further word from the customer. Finally, frustrated, the American phone and inquired about what had happened. "Well," the Japanese replied, "You used a word I didn't understand. Parallel. I looked it up in my dictionary and it said parallel means 'two lines that never touch.' The Japanese concluded that the American thought their thinking was apart.

(http://pertinent.com/pertonfo/business/yaticom1.html

So diverged the implication of the word 'parallel' used that the results of the business deal is disastrous.

Another common example is the reply to the phrase, 'Do you mind …' when asking for help or favour from someone in the Malaysian context. Often, when we say, 'Do you mind helping me…,' the reply would be an affirmative 'yes'. This is very confusing since help will still be given gladly and willingly.

Socio-pragmatic failure, on the other hand, stems from cross-culturally different perceptions of what constitutes appropriate linguistic behaviour. In other words, this type of pragmatic failure occurs when :

> … the rules of the 'target language are violated due to the differences in the speaker's and listener's expectations, and assessments of the socio-cultural context of the interaction. When the size of the imposition, social distance, relative rights and obligations are miscalculated in a second or foreign language situation, the result may be inappropriate linguistic use.

(Jamaliah Mohd Ali, 1999 : 26)

The cultural differences in our perceptions and expectations is something that must not be taken lightly. As put forward by Mortenson (1997 : 180) :

> The tendency toward mutual misinterpretation stems from misguided beliefs that lead all too easily to the conviction that the ideas we signify by our words and gestures are the same (coincidental) as others signify by the use of those same words and gestures.

There have been many instances of misunderstanding and misinterpretation due to the differences in cultural beliefs and expectations. One example is the way people response to compliment. Different cultures response differently to compliment. The way people response depends very much on the cultural

upbringing and the expected behaviour in the society the live in. Let us have a look at some responses to this compliment:

> "That's a nice hat."

To an English native speaker, the response is most likely be a simple "thank you", or perhaps something like "I know you would like it" or "Do you like it?". Here, the meaning is straightforward and clear to both the speaker and listener – that the compliment is accepted by the person it is intended for.

However, a Malay is more likely to respond to this in a contradictory way. Thus, the response is highly to be something like

> "Alaaa..murah aje."
> (It's very cheap), or
>
> "Alaa..beli kat Pasar Malam aje."
> (I bought it at Pasar Malam only), or even
>
> "Mana cantiknya."
> (It's not beautiful).

One has to understand that in the Malay culture this seems to be the correct way of responding to the compliment. It is the cultural upbringing that whenever you are being complimented, you should side step it as not to bring the feeling of 'riak' or self-importance in you, which is against the teaching of Islam. Thus, the meaning intended is not actually to contradict the compliment – it is just a normal expected reply, or most probably a way of saying thank you for the compliment. However, this response may bring misinterpretation on the part of the person who gives the compliment (if he or she is not familiar with the Malay culture), that the listener may think otherwise.

Interesting enough, to an Australian Pakehan, the right and expected response to the compliment should be,

> "Please take it."

This may come as a shock to those who are not familiar with the culture. The person who gives the compliment may be giving an honest compliment, and may not think anything by it. However, if he does not take the hat, it would bring an insult to the person who receives the compliment.

Cultural and religious influence has ramifications on the way people talk. Malays, for example, believe that anything that they say or pray for, may come true, if Allah permits it. This belief is deeply ingrained in most Malays that whatever is going to be said need to be watched. Thus, even in anger, to curse someone is usually done in a softer way for fear that curse will become true. Consider this example,

> "Budak bertuah ! Habis pinggan semua pecah!"
> (What a blessed child! He's broken all the plates!)

The positive word of 'budak bertuah' (blessed child) contradicts the tone of anger and the context it is uttered. Thus, this shows that expressing anger can be done in several ways, and the listener should be able to imply the pragmatics of the utterance.

With the expansion of intercultural communication due to the mobility and contacts with people around the world, there are myriads of occasions where pragmatic failures occur. The above are just some examples of such.

CONCLUSIONS

With the expansion of contacts with people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, communication has now become complex and confusing. The divergent of interpretation of what is said, has made communication difficult with many opportunities for mistakes and misunderstandings to occur. Thus, it is suggested that both semantics and pragmatics to be regarded as necessary modules in any language teaching. In addition, the understanding of cross-cultural communication is also important as the common foul ups in this scope of interaction are due to the idiosyncracies of the speakers themselves – that they communicate without any groundwork, believing their words are successfully conveyed and correctly implicated.

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