

Understanding Utterances: The Need for Pragmatic Competence

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ABSTRACT

The colossal time spent on learning grammatical rules of a language may still not make a learner proficient in that language. The sociolinguistics perspectives have moved to the notion that there is more to learning a language than learning about rules and grammar. Since the use of a language is seen as a social activity, the concept of 'communicative competence', that is, knowing what to say, to whom, and how to say it appropriately was seen as an important element of teaching a language (Hymes 1965; Saville-Troike 1985). However, this concept is enormously complex. Before a speaker should know what to say and to whom in an appropriate way, s/he needs another competence, i.e pragmatic competence, to understand the meaning of utterances in context. This is because the divergent of what is said and what is implied have made communication difficult with many opportunities for mistakes and understanding to occur. This paper addresses the need of pragmatic competence to be taught along the other language skills.

Keywords: *Pragmatic competence, utterance, pedagogical implication.*

Introduction

Communication in our contemporary world today has been dominated by a handful of international languages. Even the present scenario in

Malaysia has stressed the importance of competence in English, making it as one of the dominant languages in the education system. Unfortunately, however, Bell (2002) has argued that language education has been seriously out of step with the communicative requirement of the world we live in. For instance, vast resources on language teaching which have been spent on textbooks, language laboratories, e-learning, for that matter, have produced disappointing results. In addition, '[it is estimated that it takes] 1765 hours of teaching to get from no English to the level of competence required for further study or a job' (Schellekens 2001: 46), yet, this amount of colossal time spent on teaching language proficiency does not really produce competent bilinguals.

Essential to successful communication and competence in English, (or in any second or foreign language learning) is the knowledge of use of the language. The lack of such knowledge may lead to miscommunication and misunderstanding in communication. The adverse effects in a long term may be resentment, ethnic stereotyping and negative labeling to name a few. This paper addresses the significant need of pragmatic instructions in the English language teaching as it may sensitize learners to the importance of pragmatic issues and heighten their metapragmatic awareness. The instructors, on the other hand, may be kept alert to the variation in pragmatic competence of the learners.

Pragmatic Competence

The concept of pragmatic competence is relatively new, as the term came into view during the 1980s. The term pragmatic is initially defined as 'meaning in use' or 'meaning in context'. Recent definitions of this term equate it with 'speaker meaning' or utterance interpretations' (Thomas 1995: 20-21). Thomas (1995: 22) 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'. 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' (op cite: 182). Pragmatic competence, thus, as Thomas (1983) points out, should not be seen as synonymous as 'communicative competence'.

While communicative competence as seen as 'a kind of 'mixer' which performed the function of balancing available linguistic form chosen by drawing on the linguistic competence of the user, against available

social functions housed in some kind of social competence' (Bell 1976: 210-11), pragmatic competence requires several levels of knowledge which include grammatical, psycholinguistic and social competence. Semantic rules are needed to provide the possible senses and references of an utterance. However, pragmatic principles are also essential 'to assign sense and reference to speaker's words, and the force or value to the speaker's words' (Jamaliah Mohd Ali 1999: 22).

Why is this competence important? In communication, being fluent and proficient in the language used is one thing; the ability to understand and interpret the intended meaning of the utterances is another. For example, the inquiry, "What are you laughing at?", is not meant as a question. A person who is not able to interpret this question correctly may fail to recognise that it is actually meant as a command to stop laughing.

Thus, the following section looks at the types of pragmatic failure and the effects they have on communication.

Pragmatic Failure

One of the main concerns in communication is the misinterpretations of what have been said. What one says and the listeners believe him or her to be saying may be rather different. The inability to interpret the intended meaning of an utterance is what we call pragmatics failure. When this happens, communication breakdown between the involved parties is more likely to happen. One example of this is cited by Kamisah (2000: 41) from Motley and Reader's empirical assessment of communication breakdown in the context of unwanted escalation of sexual intimacy between men and women as a result of failure in understanding the pragmatics of the utterances. The women's 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 are not understood as a refusal by men. Thus, a listener should be made aware that what a speaker means in uttering a sentence usually diverges from what the sentence means. Therefore, a listener should also be aware that meaning 'was an ingenuous refinement of the crude idea that communication is a matter of intentionally affecting another person's psychological states' (Grice, in Gauker 1998: 1).

There are two types of pragmatic failures as proposed by Thomas (1983); pragmalinguistic failure and socio-pragmatic failure. The former deals with the language itself, in terms of grammar and vocabulary, while the latter is more to the cultural aspects of the speakers and listeners, in terms of customs, styles and beliefs, to name a few. And in between these two types of failures, there are always failures in understanding the illocutionary act of the utterances.

Illocutionary Act

Illocutionary act is referred to by Austin (1955: 99-100) as ‘performance of an act *in* saying something as opposed to performance of an act *of* saying something’. In other words, there are myriads of ways in which we use speech – and it makes a great difference to the sense that we make out of the speech used. The same speech, for instance, may be used in different senses ranging from advising, suggesting, informing or announcing.

Wardaugh (1986: 164) gives a range of ways and strategies of a request asking for the time:

- 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.

Although each and every one of the request is designed differently, they meant only one thing, that is, asking for the time. Thus, the response for each should and would be similar.

Similarly, a comment like ‘It’s hot in here,’ may be intended as a comment of the condition of the room, a request to open the windows, or to switch on the fan, or may even be a complaint, thus, a suggestion to go out of the room. Thus, one needs to interpret the intended meaning of the utterance to give a correct and appropriate response.

Pragmalinguistic Failure

Pragmalinguistic failure is defined by Thomas (1983: 10) as,

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 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 force in the target language.

Several instances in cross-cultural communication have highlighted this type of failure. Jamaliah Mohd Ali (1999), for example, has given the common use of the word 'send' among most Malaysians every time we meant to say taking someone to a place. Thus, the misuse of the word 'send' as in 'I *send* my children to school', can be rampantly observed in Malaysian speakers' speech. Using such word when speaking to a native speaker would cause confusion as to send children to school (which means packing them in a box and post the box to school) is unthinkable.

Hayes (1996) also cites the confusion with the meaning of the word 'tea' among foreigners in England. As 'tea' most commonly means a drink or some light food taken at tea time, most foreigners will be surprised that 'tea' could mean 'dinner' in some parts of the British Isles, and 'dinner' at some other parts is 'lunch'.

Obviously, these pragmalinguistic failure, which results from treating words in the first language and target language as semantically equivalent, has prevented some kind of global intelligibility among the speakers. There have been many recurrences of miscommunication and problematic talk as a result of this (Coupland, Giles & Wiemann 1991). For example, a 'flat' to an American would be equivalent to an 'apartment'. However, it is rather doubtful if a Malaysian would agree to such equivalence. Similarly, the 'first floor' of a building means differently in British English and American English.

Norhayati Ismail (<http://pertinent.com/pertinfo/business/yaticom1.html>) 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 version was 'Pepsi Brings Back Your Dead Ancestors'. The commercial effect of such slogan on this product is imaginable.

Robert Axtell in his book, **'The Do's and Taboos of Using English Around the World'** illustrates another disastrous effect of such failure:

... 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 phoned and enquired 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 had concluded that the American thought their thinking was apart.

(in <http://pertinent.com/pertinfo/business/yaticom2.html>)

Another common example is the reply to the phrase, 'Do / Would you mind ...' when asking for favour from someone in the Malaysian context. Malaysians way of asking for help or favour would normally start with, 'Can you help me ...', and the response would either be affirmative or negative. Thus, taking for granted in English, a request for a favour would be done similarly, 'Do / Would you mind ...' is more often than not, replied with a simple 'yes'.

Socio-Pragmatic Failure

This failure stems from cross-culturally different perceptions of what is considered as appropriate linguistic behaviour. In other words, this 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)

Essential to the success of any cross-cultural communication is the understanding and awareness of the cultural differences in our perceptions and expectations. Thus, these aspects cannot be taken lightly as Mortenson (1997: 180) strongly argues that,

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.

Cultural beliefs and expectations have significant ramifications on the way people communicate and socialize. Thus, there have been many instances of misunderstanding in communication due to these differences. One has to be sensitive toward these differences so that mutual understanding and intelligibility can be achieved. For example, although Malaysia has becoming more exposed globally through work, study and travel, the cultural yoke, in terms of the way people speak and socialize, is still deeply ingrained. One of the ways that revolves Malaysians at large is speaking indirectly.

Asmah Hj Omar (1996) has identified that in speaking indirectly, the use of imagery is quite profound. More often than not, in enquiring a sensitive topic, imagery is used to replace some exact words that may appear crude and uncouth to the hearers.

Kamisah and Norazlan (2003: 192) illustrates that to ask somebody with:

‘Bila lagi nak kahwin?’
(*When are you getting married?*)

may appear very blunt, inconsiderate and insensitive on the speaker’s side, thus, the replacement of :

‘Bila lagi nak merasa nasi minyak?’
(*When are we going to eat nasi minyak?*) [special rice served at Malay wedding reception]

is considered more amicable. Thus, the non-Malays need to understand not only the meaning of this imagery but the force behind such utterance. Adding to this are the extensive use of metaphors, idioms and wise sayings – which are quite integral in the way people in this society speak.

Another type of indirectness that is very profound among the Malays is the use of contradiction. Asmah Hj Omar (1996) has identified two applications of this style in conversation, that is, amicable and antagonistic.

The contradiction is used amicably to suppress the feeling of ‘riak’ or self-important, which is not condoned in Islam. Thus, if someone gets a praise, it is customary to void it by contradicting as illustrated in the example below:

A : Pandainya awak!
(*How clever you are!*)

B : Mana ada! Biasa saja!
(*No, I am not. I am just like the others!*)

Non-Malays need to understand that B's reply is considered as appropriate to the praise. A 'thank you' reply is not usual, even though the person who gets the praise actually appreciates what he or she hears.

Antagonistic, on the other hand, is used to imply sarcasm, irony or even anger. This can be clearly seen in this utterance:

'Ye lah.. Awak memang pandai, saya bodoh.'
(*'Of course.. You are clever, I am stupid.'*)

The speaker's claim of the other's cleverness and his own stupidity indicates sarcasm. The intended meaning of the whole utterance is embedded in the particle 'lah' which could indicate the speaker's unwillingness to accept the other's view point. However, it is not the intention of this paper to look into this particular sociolinguistic element in detail.

Another style in indirectness is 'beating around the bush'. As a hearer, one should catch the intended meaning so as to give appropriate response. This style is very common among Malays (and perhaps in other societies as well) especially when asking for a favour or a request for help or to get some things. Quoting an example from Asmah Hj Omar (1996: 49) shows how speaking directly of one's intention is not a favourable pattern in Malay verbal communication:

Wife : Langsir ni dah comotlah! Malulah, kalau orang datang.
(*The curtains are already worn-out! It would be embarrassing if we have visitors.*)

Husband : Hai, elok lagi tu.
(*Ha, they still look good.*)

Wife : Ah, tengok tu! Tak nampakkah? Sini naik, sana turun. Sakit mata tengoknya.
(*Look here! Can't you see? One side goes up, the other side sags down. What an eye-sore!*)

There are various other discrepancies in the style of communication that is governed by culture. For instance, addressing an older person 'kakak' (older sister), 'abang' (older brother), 'pakcik' (uncle), and

'makcik' (auntie), even though they are not related at all to you, is considered as polite and showing respect in the Malaysian society. However, this may not be appropriate in other societies, and even within the Malaysian society itself, it may be considered as impolite, thus, may eventually cause conflict among the speakers and hearers. Consider this when you are out shopping at a supermarket, and approached by the salesperson, who you think look and might be older than you are, yet, he or she calls you 'kakak'. The effect of this so-called polite address may be damaging to the interpersonal communication, as Abdullah Hassan (2001: xxi) claims that the salesperson 'sudah tidak menghormati taraf pelanggan. Dia bukan ahli keluarga, oleh sebab itu, panggilan itu dianggap biadap (has not respected the customer's status. He / She is not a family member, thus, such address is considered rude').

With the expansion of intercultural communication due to mobility and contacts with people around the world, there are myriads of occasions where pragmatics failures can occur. The above are just a few of the abundant occurrences. If we were to include the discrepancies in non-verbal language and paralanguage, the examples of the failures will definitely be endless.

Pedagogical Implications

As language instructors, this issue has raised two big questions to us, as far as pedagogical implications are concerned : (1) need the pragmatic competence be taught to the L2 learners?, and (2) can it be taught, in the first place, if it does need to be taught?

The answer to both questions is no. As stressed by Kasper (1997: 1), 'competence, whether linguistic or pragmatic, is not teachable'. This is because competence is a 'type of knowledge that learners possess, develop, acquire, use or lose' (*ibid*). Furthermore, some pragmatic knowledge, such as conversational routine, communication strategies and communicative acts, is universal. This knowledge is 'free' (*ibid*), and transferable from the learners' L1. Unfortunately, however, learners do not always transfer this knowledge to the needs of new tasks in L2 at hand. Thus, they intend to interpret utterances at literal level, under-use politeness markings in L2, and under-differentiate context variables such as social distance and social power in L2 (Fukushima 1990; Tanaka 1988).

Pedagogically, it is clear that there is no need to provide the learners with something new. We only need to include the competence in our instructions by raising their awareness of the knowledge and abilities that they have already possessed, and then, provide them with opportunities to apply the knowledge and practice their abilities through classroom activities.

Conclusion

Communication in this age has become complex and to a large extent, confusing, due to the expansion of contacts with people of different background, linguistically and culturally. The divergent of interpretation of what is said, has made communication difficult with many opportunities for mistakes and misunderstandings to occur. Thus, as language educators, we need to evaluate principles of our teaching – that more often than not the stress is always put on the grammatical competence. Grammatical errors can be corrected, and the effects only reveal that the person is less proficient speaker in that language. Pragmatics failures, on the other hand, often result in breakdowns in communication, and at the extreme end, may cause conflicts in relationship between the speakers. Of course pragmatics is a ‘delicate area and it is not immediately obvious how it can be taught’ (Widdowson 1979: 13). However, we need to sensitize learners of the importance of pragmatic competence to equip them with the ability to express themselves and to respond appropriately in any communication that they involve in.

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