

Speech Acts and Its Relation to Culture Los Actos del Habla y Su Relación Con La Cultura

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Abstract:

Learning a language is also learning about how language is used in context according to any given situation. As part of the language use, speech acts are important because they convey different functions like apologizing or complaining. These functions are the same across languages, but the form in which they are expressed and the situations where they are uttered may vary. It is common that language learner transfer their knowledge of these social conventions from their mother tongue into the target language reflecting their own culture at the same time. This is a strategy that the learner uses to make sense of the language he or she is learning, but it is important for the student to become familiarized on how these speech acts change in order to be use the language appropriately.

Keywords:

Speech acts, culture, pragmatics, sociolinguist

Resumen:

Aprender un idioma es también aprender como ese idioma es usado en contexto de acuerdo con la situación. Como parte del uso del idioma, los actos del habla son importantes ya que expresan diferentes funciones tales como disculparse o quejarse. Estas funciones son las mismas en diferentes idiomas, pero la forma en que son expresadas y las situaciones en las que son dichas pueden variar. Es común que el aprendiz de una lengua transfiera sus conocimientos sobre estas convenciones sociales de su lengua materna a la lengua meta reflejando en este acto también su cultura. Esta es una estrategia que el alumno usa para entender el idioma que está aprendiendo. Sin embargo, es importante para el alumno familiarizarse en cómo estos actos del habla cambian, de tal forma que pueda usar el idioma apropiadamente.

Palabras Clave:

Actos del habla, cultura, pragmática, sociolingüística

Introduction

Pragmatics is the study of the language used in real life. This real life implies that context has a determinant role on how language should be managed in an appropriate way. When mentioning pragmatics, a topic emerges with it and it is speech acts. It is known that speech acts are part of everyday interaction and they are present in every culture. Also, they are part of people's common exchanges. They are used to perform social functions like apologizing, inviting, refusing, requesting, etc. These functions evoked by them are not universal or general. They vary in the way they are formed and in the moment they are given depending on the culture. This particular feature of speech becomes more interesting when we look at speakers of English as a foreign language because they need to be aware of the social implications

of the language they are learning in order to be fully competent. Here is where the importance of this paper relies on. The role of culture when uttering a speech act to achieve a certain social function in a language that is used as a lingua franca around the world.

Some research has been made to contrast speech acts produced by native and non- native speakers of the English language. Those analyses of speech acts have been led to compare the American culture with the Korean, Japanese or Arabic ones and little has been done to contrast the American or British culture with the Mexican one even though the United States and Mexico are countries very close to each other. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to analyze and compare speech acts pronounced in conversations by native speakers of English and Mexican learners of that language. By doing

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this, it is pretended to provide a clearer idea of how much cultural factors influence the way utterances are produced and the way they are interpreted by these three cultures. Also, this report will look at the forms selected by these participants when they deliver a speech act. This deals with the fact that “inferring the function of what is said by considering form and context is an ability which is essential for the creation and reception of coherent discourse and thus for successful communication” (Cook, 1989, p. 35).

Definition of Speech Acts

The most common definition of speech acts is the one proposed by John Austin (1962) “doing things with words”. It means an act that a speaker performs when making an utterance. Austin (1962) distinguishes three forces. The first one is the locutionary force which according to Cook (1989) it is the literal meaning of the words, the illocutionary force that is the intention or function that a statement has and the perlocutionary is “if one’s utterance actually makes another person do something” (Chaika, 1994, p.152). Paul Grice (1975) proposed the following as the maxims of speech acts: the maxim of quality is to be true and not say what you believe to be false; maxim of quantity, make your contribution as informative as is required; maxim of relevance and maxim of manner, avoid ambiguity and any unnecessary wordiness. When referring to speech acts is involved the fact that real life interactions require not only knowledge of the language but appropriate use of the language within a given culture. When we speak, our words do not have meaning in and of themselves. They are affected by the situation, the speaker, and the listener. In addition, “true meaning often lies not in the actual words but in a complex of social knowledge” (Chaika, 1994, p 152), so speech acts carry social implications and culture has a role in getting meaning.

Categories of speech acts

I previously introduced the definition of speech acts that is “doing things with words” (Austin, 1962). This is the intention of the speaker when delivering an utterance that also involves meaning within a context and the function of the utterance or its purpose, in other words “what that piece of language is doing or how the listener is supposed to react” (McCarthy, 1991, p.9). So far, I have already mentioned the forces and maxims of speech acts, now I will describe the classification of speech acts that will be helpful for the later analysis of conversations between native speakers and non-native speakers of English.

Basically, there are five categories of speech acts according to functions. These are directives, commissives, representatives, declaratives and expressives. Directives are those which aim to make someone do something or stop doing it. Suggestions, requests, and commands are found under this category. Commands use the imperative form. Examples of these are: May I have your homework? open the window, this is a mess! Something relevant to mention about directives is that “variation in directive forms within a language must be sensitive to social constraints” (Hatch, 1992, p.123), so the settled restrictions in a group. Commissives involve promises, threats, offers or refusals like I won’t do it again or I can’t accept it. In the same way as directives, commissives vary “across language and culture groups” (Hatch, 1992, p. 125). The third category is representatives. Claims and assertions which are positive declarations that are made without necessary support and belong to this category. One example of them is “Da Vinci was the greatest painter ever” or “all the sodas are bad for health”, “perhaps he is the bravest man!” The next category is declaratives. These change the state and bring a new one. It is necessary that a person with authority and power say the declarative to have a change. The last category is expressives. The corresponding functions to this category are apologies, complaints, thanks, and compliments such as “I had a wonderful day”, “That’s terrible”, “You look very nice.” Expressives differ from language group to language group and they are influenced by social factor as well. From these five categories, there are three that are influenced by social factors, so I will focus on those.

For this paper, I will look for directives, commissives and expressives since they are the ones that are more closely connected to culture and that is what I am interested in. I want to know the relationship between speech acts and culture. To make it even more delimited I will be directing my attention towards suggestions, invitations, complaints, and compliments. These functions definitely differ from one culture to another since what may be seen as a normal compliment in the American culture like the phrase ‘You’re so cool!!!!’ could not be completely appropriate in the British one or the act of giving advice in the Mexican culture through the use of commands might be rude for Americas and British people.

Differences between English and Spanish (directives, commissives and expressives)

Let us have a look at how complaints, compliments, invitations, and suggestions vary in the American, British, and Mexican culture. First, complaints “are meant to contrast what is with what ought to be” (Hatch, 1992,

p.140), so there are ways to express dissatisfaction. They are categorized by Brown and Levinson (1978) as “face-threatening acts” because in some way they may be disturbing interactions. There are two types of complaints, direct and indirect. The indirect is the expression of dissatisfaction about someone or something that is not present. In contrast, the direct complaint is when the speaker reacts with displeasure or annoyance to an action that has affected the speaker unfavorably. (Olshtain and Weinbach, 1987). About complaints across culture, Americans are very direct when complaining and “addressee’s negative self-image is central” (Hatch, 1992, p.141) while British people are very reserve and try to avoid conflict when they complaint even though they like complaining. Mexicans tend to go around and around until they get to the point or they tend to overreact and create an epic conflict. Second, Compliments are expressions of like and dislike. They can be used to open a conversation or to show a link between the speakers. People often make compliments about qualities related to personal appearance, possessions, skills, or accomplishments. In English, compliments follow the form noun phrase, linking verb (is/ looks) and adjective or the form pronoun, linking verb (is), really, adjective and noun phrase. In Spanish, there are several combinations of forms, for example: the word *qué* followed by an adjective, an adjective and a noun phrase, and adjective plus a verb plus a noun phrase or a verb plus a noun phrase plus and adjective. On one hand, Americans usually use words like good, beautiful, great, and nice. On the other British people commonly say the word nice. Third, invitations are requests for people to do something or to go somewhere. Both American and British people invite someone by making an interrogative statement and using modal verbs to do it, but in Spanish a person invites someone by using a positive statement like “Vamos al cine” or using the phrase “te invito” without asking. Finally, suggestions are propositions that may lead the actions or thoughts of a person. In the English language they are usually made in response to someone who is asking for advice. The common way to do it is using modal verbs or in some cases the subjunctive. In contrast, Spanish native speakers give advice or suggest without necessarily answering a question. To do this people may choose among the imperative form, the word “deberías” and the subjunctive. All these characteristics are the main differences concerning with the functions stated before.

Some research on speech acts across culture.

In the field of speech acts and culture, there are divided opinions about the relation of speech acts across cultures. On one hand, Fraser et al. (1980) states “although languages may differ as to how and when speech acts are

to be performed, every language makes available to the user the same basic set of speech acts... the same set of strategies for performing a speech act”. It suggests that speech acts vary from culture to culture particularly in the way of delivering them, but when referring to the sets it includes the interactional goals of every speech act. In addition, it has been said by others that “speech acts operate by universal pragmatic principles” (Austin, (1962), Searle (1969, 1975), Brown & Levinson (1978)). On the other hand, Wierzbicka (1985) claims that “speech acts are not comparable across cultures”. Also, Wolfson (1989) says “the repertoire of speech acts for each culture is differently organized”. Research is still carried out in this theoretical view trying to dissipate these doubts and end the debate. However, recent research of speech acts based on empirical data has been focused on ‘the perception and production of speech acts by learners of a second or foreign language and in most cases considering the English language as the foreign one.

Among the empirical studies that have been done it is found the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP). This project consisted of comparing the speech acts performed by native speakers of different languages with the speech acts performed by learners of those languages. One of the important findings of this study was the fact that foreign language learners may use the same range of speech acts that native speakers do, but these learners use different strategies to do them. This suggests that foreign language learners should be aware of the social restrictions of the target language. They cannot just expect to translate the underlying social conventions that are proper of their culture into the new one and expect to function in an equal way as they do in their mother tongue. This is an issue that students should consider because it can damage communication as Riley (1989) suggests intercultural failure is “the result of an interaction imposing the social rules of one culture on his communicative behavior in a situation where the social rules of another culture would be more appropriate” (p. 234).

Sociocultural and Sociolinguistic ability

To make clear what is needed to develop speech acts strategies consider speech acts and culture as a unit where social and cultural factors constitute the social ability of the speaker to perform an utterance. When speakers are performing social exchanges, they need to be able to have a certain control of the speech acts sets “Speakers and hearers are successful speech acts users when they have control over the speech acts sets for a given speech act in the language in which they converse”. (Gass and Neu,1996, p. 22). This is referring to the pragmatic behavior that a person has to handle, the social

knowledge and the cultural rules dealing with interactional goals. This control depends on the acquisition of sociocultural and sociolinguistic abilities.

The sociocultural ability is the capability of the speaker to choose an appropriate speech act depending on four main factors that Gass and Nue (1996) suggest:

- 1) The culture that is involved
- 2) The age and sex of the speakers
- 3) The social occupations
- 4) People's roles and status in the interaction

These aspects determine when and where the speech is going to be pronounced.

The sociolinguistic ability is related to the way the speaker chooses the proper linguistic forms to express a function. For instance, asking, requesting, promising, complaining, refusing etc. This selection and use of linguistic forms will be based on the formality and informality of the situation, the sociocultural conventions, and the degree of confidence between speakers.

Conclusion

Culture is part of every human nature and it is present in many things people do. In the way they behave, get along with others, assume challenges, face problems, and speak. Whenever a person talks to another one from a different region or country, characteristics in speech may show up in the way words, phrases or sentences are articulated and assimilated. Culture and language cannot be seen as separated variables in the communication phenomenon.

Although compliments in the British and American culture share the same form and functions to be performed, there are still differences. The one uncovered in this paper was about style of speech. Intonation that can be used to determine the intention of a speech act. This led me to think that style of speech "may also tell listeners not to take what is being said: seriously, ironically" (Chaika, 1994, p.81). This was a component I had not considered before because I was looking for forms of the language, but reconsidering I took the extracts from spoken language I noticed it as a relevant point to be mentioned. Another interesting fact about compliments is that Americans use compliments to open an interaction as Mexicans do. Sometimes they compliment someone and then they set a topic to start talking. In contrast, British people use complains to open a conversation or to maintain it.

Complains are part of British people and Mexicans' daily interactions. Regarding the manner in which Mexican

complains, the results were very interesting. This type of speech acts is very common in this culture. Mexican people like to express their dissatisfaction about anything at any moment. In the first spoken interaction, Mexican language forms for complaining were transposed in the foreign language. This calls my attention because even when the students who have been studying English for some years, they have not acquired the pragmatic competence that allows learners to select from a variety of language forms the ones that fit a given context and participants. Students' utterances are affected by cultural forms of their mother tongue as choosing a form for strong advice to show disapproval.

The final point I want to mention is the use of invitations. Sometimes this speech act is taken as a request for invitation when its real function was finishing the interaction. This simple event is a very common cause of misunderstandings and prejudices towards American people. For them there is nothing wrong to do that. Actually, it is what they know as normal behavior. It would be very useful for an English learner to know this kind of social practices in order to be part of a speech community where this language is the means of interrelation.

There is no doubt about the presence of culture when speech acts are uttered. It is not always seen, but in some moment, it appears revealing that a person cannot take it away. It is molten in a person idiosyncrasy. Nevertheless, learning another language involves becoming bicultural. This means to know about people, places, and social interrelation, so learning English is not reduced to the language of the classroom, but to the language of the world.

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