CROSS-CULTURAL PRAGMATICS OF INTERACTIONAL COMPETENCE

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Abstract. Interactional competence involves knowledge of the relation between language forms and the social contexts in which they are applied. The paper aims at focusing on the concept of interactional competence within the framework of cross-cultural pragmatics. The study expresses its author's belief that non-native language users' interactional competence to use contextually and situationally appropriate linguistic forms to express the pragmatic intent in question is to be developed at the tertiary level of language studies. The case study was based on the analysis of the speech act of compliment. The research findings indicated that instances of miscommunication resulted from differing beliefs regarding the speech act production and perception. The research has resulted in a conclusion that non-native language learners' interactional competence can be advanced if the contributions on the speech act theories and an empirical research carried out into the area of the speech act are considered in the developmental process of non-native learners' interactional competence.

Key words: cross-cultural pragmatics, interactional competence, interactional identity, speech act, and miscommunication

INTRODUCTION

The paper focuses on a recent research carried out in the area of applied linguistics. It concerns *cross-cultural pragmatics* as a subdomain of sociolinguistics and views *interactional competence* as 'the basis for contemporary understanding of the competence that is created by all participants in social interaction' (Young, 2008: 100). There are scholars (e.g. Boxer, 2002) who consider that cross-cultural pragmatics follows the principles of applied sociolinguistics and the terms *cross-cultural pragmatics* and *applied sociolinguistics* can be used interchangeably. In view of this, cross-cultural pragmatics supports an idea that individuals from different societies or speech communities interact considering the pragmatic norms of the culture they belong to. It often results in a clash of expectations which, ultimately, might give room to misunderstanding or might cause a risk of misperceptions of the linguistic behaviour on the part of the other interlocutors. Today, when cross-cultural communication is the norm not only across societies but also within them, different rules of interacting might cause stereotypes, prejudice and/or discrimination against the entire group of interlocutors. Research in the area of applied sociolinguistics can greatly aid in ameliorating these consequences.

Considering the above stated, it should be mentioned that it was Chomsky (1965) who made a conceptual distinction between the notion of *competence*

(what a speaker knows about a language) and *performance* (what a speaker does with a language). However, Hymes (1971) rejected this dichotomy and argued that 'there are rules of use without which the rules of grammar are useless' (Hymes, 1971: 278); as a result, his theory of communicative competence was put forward. Kramsch (1986) researched *interactional competence* and formulated that 'interactional competence is a relationship between the participants' employment of linguistic and interactional resources and the contexts in which they are employed' (Young, 2008: 101).

In the light of the above discussion, the present study has addressed the following research question:

Why does the cross-cultural discourse represent great potential for miscommunication and/or misperceptions on condition that the interlocutors belong to different speech communities and they possess different levels of interactional competence?

To answer the research question, the study has set its goals:

1. At a theoretical level, to examine the concept of *miscommunication* and to view the recent research carried out in the area of cross-cultural pragmatics;

2. At an empirical level, to analyze an implementation of speech act as it was realized in native/non-native language users' interaction in which the English language served as a means of communication in order to revisit the approaches taken to develop non-native language users' interactional competence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is generally accepted that cross-cultural communication occurs when two or more interactants belong to at least two different cultures.

Since the organization of concepts varies across cultures, the interlocutors are expected to possess the ability to display the linguistic behaviour that is considered to be adequate and appropriate to the communicative event. Even more, the interactants are supposed to behave in a flexible manner when confronted with actions, attitudes and expectations set up by representatives of foreign cultures.

The ability to react appropriately is known as *cross-cultural competence*. It is studied within the area of cross-cultural pragmatics, and it involves the study of interactional resources on the one hand (e.g. the interactional organization of the linguistic behaviour) and an appropriate selection of linguistic resources, on the other hand. In other words, cross-cultural competence implies the *pragmatic ability* to deal with the meaning as communicated by a speaker/writer and interpreted by a listener/reader. Interactional competence, in its turn, involves the knowledge of the relation between language forms used by an interlocutor and

the social contexts in which these forms are applied. In other words, interactional competence does *not* concern what an interlocutor knows about the language; it does not concern how he/she uses the language in a specified communicative event. Interactional competence regards what an interlocutor *does* with the language in interaction on condition that the interactants belong to different speech communities. Moreover, interlocutors' interactional competence varies 'according to what the other participants do […]: that is, it varies in different interactional practices' (Young, 2008: 106).

According to Yule (1996), the pragmatic ability is the ability to understand 'people's intended meanings, their assumptions, their purposes or goals, and the kinds of actions (for example, complimenting, responding to compliments) that they are performing when they speak' (Yule, 1996: 3-4). In view of this, it should be presupposed that the speaker's pragmatic ability is closely related to his/her *interactional identity*, which, according to Young (2008) is 'specific roles that people take on in interaction with specific other people' (Young, 2008: 111). Evidently enough, a speaker's interactional identity builds on his/her register, modes of meaning, the way how turn-taking is carried out, the ability to overcome the communicative difficulties or communication breakdown, the choice and sequencing of speech acts.

A *speech act*, according to Cohen (2008) is 'an utterance that serves as a functional unit in communication' (Cohen, 2008: 213-235).

Further, utterances have two kinds of meaning:

1. Propositional meaning, i.e., the literal meaning of the utterance;
2. Illocutionary or functional meaning, i.e., the effect that the utterance or written text has created on the reader or the listener.

In the light of this, a risk of miscommunication and/or a possibility of misunderstanding can result in a total communication breakdown, provided the listener has interpreted the meaning of an utterance in a way that has not been intended by the speaker.

Johnson (1985) points out that 'the interpretation of a message is essentially constructed by the perceiver; hence, the message sent is not necessarily message received' (Johnson, 1985: 325).

Hinnenkamp (2001) distinguishes three degrees of misunderstanding:

1. *Overt* misunderstanding: misunderstanding that is immediately recognized and subsequently repaired;
2. *Covert* misunderstanding: misunderstanding that occurs when recognition is gradual: it gets either gradually repaired, continues, or comes to a halt eventually;
3. *Latent* misunderstanding: misunderstanding occurs without any sound reason: an interactant has a feeling that he/she has been misunderstood and the issue under discussion remains unresolved (Hinnenkamp, 2001: 211-243).

Thus, it can be stated that miscommunication can happen among people from the same social and cultural background. However, interaction becomes more difficult and the likelihood for miscommunication multiplies when interactants come from different backgrounds. Gunthner (2001) asserts that 'what causes problems to interactional communication generally causes more severe problems to intercultural communication' (Gunthner and Luckmann, 2001: 55-85).

In addition, House (1989) lists the following causes for miscommunication:

1. Inadequate perception, which is a hearer-based type of misunder-standing. It can be easily repaired through a speech act of request for repetition, clarification and alike;

2. Inappropriate comprehension, which is located at various linguistic levels. This form of misunderstanding is much more difficult to resolve, because the language proficiency of a language user is involved. Kasper (1997) admits that a lack of the linguistic proficiency is a serious obstacle for both the production and the understanding of the message. The scholar argues that, for example, non-native speakers prefer literal over non-literal interpretation simply because many of them have not reached a proficiency level that enables them to uncover implicature (Kasper, 1997: 345-360);

3. Insufficient relevant knowledge;

4. Uncooperativeness;

5. Production difficulties.

Considering the above discussion, it should be admitted that there exist three domains that are most sensitive to the cases of misunderstanding and/or misperception if they occur in interaction/transaction among interactants belonging to different speech communities. The spheres that require language proficiency to avoid any misunderstanding or communication breakdown are:

1. Social interaction;

2. The domain of education;

3. Interaction in the workplace.

Thus, taking into account the selected theoretical writings on cross-cultural pragmatics, on cross-cultural competence, and on interactional competence several interim conclusions can be made:

1. Nowhere are discourse issues in pragmatics more important than in cross-cultural encounters, because interlocutors might possess vastly divergent norms and rules of interaction;

2. Cross-cultural interactional competence is increasingly critical in the societies in which neighbours, co-workers, and colleagues are likely to come from distinct linguistic and cultural backgrounds;

3. To ignore cross-cultural pragmatics entails running the risk of prejudice, stereotyping, and ultimately alienation. Understanding these differences opens doors not only for those who are in less powerful status, but for all of us.

METHODS

At an empirical level, the following research *methodology* was designed to approach the study from a qualitative research perspective. The investigation reported embodies a case study research type.

Consistent with qualitative-interpretive methodology, the study employed two research instruments:

1. Observational studies in order to investigate what opportunities for cross-cultural pragmatic input and conversational practice the language classroom offers;

2. Role-play interaction/interview as a linguistic strategy in order to collect simulated speech act data.

In addition, it should be stated that it has been a daunting task to obtain observational data on speech act occurrences because the speech act being studied may not often occur naturally.

The research was carried out at the University of Latvia, English Study Department during the period from September to December, 2009. The research population comprised a body of the 3rd year students (33 learners) doing the academic course programme *English Spoken and Written Communication IV*. To meet the research goals at an empirical level, the study had the following procedure:

1. The speech act of compliment was selected as a focus of the study;

2. To get acquainted with a range of responses paid to compliments, four recorded conversational situations were selected. Differences in the responses to compliments offered by native English speakers and Italian speakers of English were elicited. Both speaker groups offered their responses to compliments at the University of Minnesota, USA in the study period from February to May, 2008;

3. Four different conversational situations were selected for analysis. Non-native learners of English studying in the English Philology Programme at the University of Latvia were requested to pay an appropriate compliment in each situation. The students were asked to write in the blank lines provided what they thought to be the socially appropriate verbal response to the compliment. Since compliments could be responded to in more than one way, the Latvian/Russian origin students were requested to write down as many responses as they thought appropriate.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The corpus of 132 Latvian students' responses was obtained in total. The number of responses was compared with the equal number of responses offered by native language users obtained at the University of Minnesota in March, 2008. Then, the responses were categorized into four strategies; two of them will be briefly listed.

Strategy A; a case: thanking for a compliment paid: *You meet an acquaintance you have not seen for some time. After an exchange of greetings, he says: "You look so nice! Even nicer than when I saw you last"*

In the majority of cases, typical responses produced by the native language speakers were: "*Thank you; I appreciate it; Thanks, you made my day*".

The non-native language users' verbal reaction to the same compliment was: "Thank you; Thanks. Really; Thank you. It's rather nice, isn't it?

Strategy B; a case: expressing pleasure that the object of the compliment is liked: You are wearing a sweater. One of your friends meets you in the morning and says: What a nice sweater! You look great in it!"

By and large, the native language users produced very encouraging and enthusiastic responses to the situation under discussion:

"I am glad you feel that way! Thank you; I'm glad you like it. Thanks; I'm glad you enjoyed it; I'm glad you like it. Thank you; But what exactly did I look before?; Thanks. You look very nice, too."

In the same case, the non-native language users' linguistic behaviour could be considered as discouraging and unenthusiastic somewhat:

"Thank you, isn't the colour/ pattern too loud for this situation?; Do you think this colour really matches my face?; Really? Is that supposed to be a compliment?; Don't make me feel embarrassed!"

As regards Strategy A and Strategy B, the native language users applied the linguistic strategies to respond to the compliments paid, such as accepting thanks, agreeing, expressing gladness, joking.

As concerns the non-native language users, they applied the linguistic strategies to respond to the compliments received, such as accepting thanks, expressing a kind of embarrassment/ uncertainty, doubting.

Comparing the responses prioritized by the native language users with those produced by the non-native language users, we can observe a number of differences of compliment responding strategies applied, which can result in us drawing certain generalizations. The differences in communicative strategies applied to perform a speech act of complimenting were analyzed considering Leech's Politeness Principle.

Judging from the responses, the native language users tend to be mostly motivated by Leech's Agreement Maxim (Minimize disagreement between self and others. Maximize agreement between self and others).

The non-native language users of Latvian/Russian origin are likely to be motivated by Leech's Modesty Maxim (Minimize praise of self. Maximize dispraise of self).

CONCLUSIONS

Taking into account the interim conclusions drawn at the theoretical level of the study and considering the results gained at the empirical level of the study, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. All speech acts are face-threatening acts for interlocutors irrespective of the interactional identity of interactants.

2. The importance of cross-cultural pragmatics and the cross-cultural studies of speech acts is to be emphasized in the acquisition of the English language in a non-native speech community.

3. The study of speech act and the study of linguistic politeness offer insights into the specifics of cross-cultural communication thus bridging the gap between the non-native language users' communicative competence and interactional competence.

4. The study of linguistic politeness can explain the reasons underlying cross-cultural miscommunication in an international situational context.

5. To be successful in communication across cultures, the differences of social values among cultures are to be taken into account.

6. Instances of miscommunication result from differing beliefs regarding the speech act production and perception.

7. Miscommunication occurs if the fundamental differences of social values between two cultures are not examined and reconciled, particularly their respective beliefs in the criteria, determining and constituting the self-image,.

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