THE ANALYSIS OF THE CROSS-CULTURAL VARIATIONS OF SPEECH ACTS IN MODERN LINGUISTICS

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Annotation

This article is devoted to the study of the theory of speech actions and its role in modern linguistics, which is of theoretical and practical relevance. We have every reason to believe that numerous linguists have made significant contributions to the study of diverse aspects of speech actions in modern linguistics.

Introduction

In our everyday life we as a rule perform or play quite a lot of different roles – a student, a friend, a daughter, a son, a client, etc. When playing different roles our language means are not the same – we choose different words and expressions suitable and appropriate for the situation. We use the language as an instrument for our purposes. To speak a language is to express thoughts in the form of linguistic utterances that employ words and follow combinatorial rules. A speech act, though, is not merely the expression of a thought. It is the vocalization of a certain representation of the world (external or internal) aimed at making official the display of an intention to change a state of things and at changing things by the public display of that intention. A speech act is a public utterance; it cannot be a silent thought, and its effects are obtained in virtue of its being a public thought.

Many speech acts are culture-specific. This is particularly so in the case of institutionalized speech acts, which typically use standardized and stereotyped formulae and are performed in public ceremonies. A good example is provided by the speech act of divorcing. In some Muslim cultures, under the appropriate circumstances, the uttering of a sentence with the import of (1) three times consecutively by a husband to his wife will ipso facto constitute a divorce. By contrast, in Western cultures, no one (no matter what his or her religion is) can felicitously use.

    (1) to obtain a divorce.   *(1) 'I hereby divorce you.'*

But how about non-institutionalized speech acts? First of all, as said above, any given speech act may be culture-specific. Rosaldo, for example, observed that the speech act of promising has no place among the Ilongots – a

tribal group of hunters and horticulturalists in the Philippines. She attributes the absence of this speech act in the conceptual repertoire of the Ilongot to a lack of interest in sincerity and truth in that community. The Ilongot, argues Rosaldo, are more concerned with social relationships than with personal intentions. On the basis of anthropological evidence such as this, Rosaldo claims that the universality of Searle's typology of speech acts cannot be maintained. Another example of this kind has been reported for the Australian aboriginal language Yolngu. According to Harris (1984: 134–135), there does not seem to be any speech act of thanking in the Yolngu speaker's repertoire. Conversely, a given speech act may be present only in certain cultures. For example, in the Australian aboriginal language Walmajari, one finds a speech act of requesting that is based on kinship rights and obligations. The verb in question is japirlyung, and the speech act may be called 'kinship-based requesting,' because it conveys a message meaning roughly '*I ask/request you to do X for me, and I expect you to do it simply because of how you are related to me*'. Thus, for the speakers of Walmajari, it is very difficult to refuse a kinship based speech act of requesting. 'Exotic' speech acts such as the kinship-based requesting do not seem to be present in other East Asian or Western cultures. Secondly, given a particular situation, pertinent speech acts are carried out differently in different cultures. For instance, in some East Asian and Western cultures, if one steps on another person's toes, one normally performs the speech act of apologizing. But apparently this is not the case among the Akans, a West African culture. As reported by Mey, in that culture, such a situation does not call for apologies but calls for the expression of sympathy: ''The focus is on the person to whom the bad thing has happened rather than the person who has caused the bad thing'' (Mey, 2001:287). Another example: while in English, thanks and compliments are usually offered to the hosts when leaving a dinner party, in Japanese society, apologies such as o-jama itashimashita 'I have intruded on you' are more likely to be offered by the guests.

A similar speech act of apologizing is performed in Japanese upon receiving a present, when a Japanese speaker is likely to say something like sumimasen –the most common Japanese 'apology' formula or one of its variants. Conversely (as pointed out by many authors), apologies can be used in a much broader range of speech situations in Japanese than in English. Thirdly, in different cultures/languages, the same speech act may meet with different typical responses.

Fourthly, the same speech act may differ in its directness/indirectness in different cultures. Since the late 1970s, a great deal of research has been

conducted on how particular kinds of speech acts, especially such face-threatening acts as requests, apologies, and complaints are realized across different languages. Of these investigations, the most influential is the large-scale Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Patterns Project (CCSARP). In this project, the realization patterns of requesting and apologizing in German; Hebrew; Danish; Canadian French; Argentinean Spanish; and British, American, and Australian English were compared and contrasted. In the case of requests, the findings were that among the languages examined, the Argentinean Spanish speakers are the most direct, followed by the speakers of Hebrew. The least direct are the Australian English speakers, while the speakers of Canadian French and German are positioned at the midpoint of the directness/indirectness continuum. Building on the CCSARP, strategies for the performance of certain types of face-threatening acts in a much wider range of languages have since been examined. These languages include Catalan, Chinese, Danish, Dutch, French, German, Greek, Hebrew, Japanese, Javanese, Polish, Russian, Thai, Turkish, four varieties of English (British, American, Australian, and New Zealand), two varieties of French (Canadian and French), and eight varieties of Spanish (Argentinean, Ecuadorian, Mexican, Peninsular, Peruvian, Puerto Rican, Uruguayan, and Venezuelan).

As a result of these studies, it has now been established that there is indeed extensive cross-cultural variation in directness/indirectness in speech acting, especially in the realization of face-threatening acts (FTAs), and that these differences are generally associated with the different means that different languages utilize to realize speech acts. These findings have undoubtedly contributed to our better understanding of cross-cultural/ linguistic similarities and differences in faceredressive strategies for FTAs.

A number of studies have recently appeared that explore speech acts in interlanguage pragmatics. Simply put, an interlanguage is a stage on a continuum within a rule-governed language system that is developed by L2 learners on the way to acquiring the target language. This language system is intermediate between the learner's native language and his or her target language.

Some of these studies investigate how a particular type of speech act is performed by non-native speakers in a given interlanguage; others compare and contrast the similarities and differences in the realization patterns of given speech acts between native and nonnative speakers of a particular language. The best studied interlanguage is that developed by speakers of English as a second

language. Other interlanguages that have been investigated include Chinese, German, Hebrew, Japanese, and Spanish.

Conclusion

A few recent formal and computational approaches to speech acts and speech act theory are worthy of note. One important theoretical development is the integration of speech acts with intentional logic, resulting in what is called 'illocutionary logic'. Similarly, Merin (1994) has endeavored to produce algebra of what he calls 'social acts.' Finally, recent formalizations of various aspects of speech act theory in artificial intelligence and computational linguistics can be found in Perrault (1990), Bunt and Black (2000), and Jurafsky (2004).

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