Module: Applied Linguistics I

Lecture Number: 05

Level: Fourth Year (Secondary)

Academic Year: 2019-2020

Pragmatics: Speech acts and politeness

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The aim of the present lecture is to introduce the field of pragmatics, a sub-field under the study of language (linguistics). The lecture starts first with defining pragmatics, highlighting its main objectives and the key issues it studies. From the latter two main ones are of particular interest for us. These are *speech acts* and *politeness and face*. Defining some key terms here is very crucial for our coming lectures on the application of the *contrastive* and *interlanguage* approach in the field of pragmatics.

1. Pragmatics

As can be read from the website of the International Pragmatics Association, pragmatics is broadly defined as "the science of language use [– the] functional (i.e. cognitive, social, and cultural) perspective on language and communication." In a more detailed depiction, pragmatics seeks to fulfil the following objectives:

- Exploring language use
- Understanding the relationship between form and function and language and the context.
- Examining the language-language-user relationship
- Studying meaning in context (in use)
- Unravelling how meaning generates
- Researching the speaker meaning
- Investigating the meaning of utterances

The above list indicates the broad scope of pragmatics and thus it is no surprise that this discipline is interested in diverse topics. These include: terms of address, deixis (use of language for reference), interaction, mitigation, politeness, speech acts, presupposition (taking some proposition for granted), stance-taking, development of pragmatic competence by non-native speakers. Among these topics, the areas of *speech acts* and *politeness and face* are our main concern here.

The term 'utterance' is very recurrent in this lecture (and the ones to come), so it merits a brief definition here. An 'utterance' is a sequence of sounds produced by a speaker in a communicational context. It can take the form of a complete sentence or a fragment of a sentence.

2. Speech Act Theory

In his ground-breaking publication, *How to Do Things with Words*, the philosopher of language J. L. Austin (1962) suggests that we do not use language only to talk about things, so what we produce can be either true or false (he called such utterances *constatives*). But we also use words to do things (he called such utterances *performatives*). This assumption laid the

foundation to the so-called *speech act theory* (SAT). As examples, when someone utters the following structures, he/she is not describing with the words produced but – rather – doing things:

- May I have one? (performing a request)
- I'm so sorry for what happened. (performing an apology)
- No, thanks. (performing a refusal)
- It's totally unacceptable. (performing a complaint)
- Those cowards should pay for what they have done to our people. (declaring a war)

Austin shows how a single utterance can perform three types of actions concurrently. These are:

- **A locutionary act:** what the utterance means (in the traditional sense of the word *meaning*) or the propositional meaning.
- **An illocutionary act:** what is performed by the utterance. In this case, saying is synonymous to doing (promising, complimenting, arguing, warning). This is the primary concern of the SAT.
- **A perlocutionary act:** what effect the speaker's utterance has on the listener (e.g., feeling content after receiving an apology is an example); this is what Austin calls the "uptake".

In this context, Austin (1962, p. 108) writes:

[W]e perform a *locutionary act*, which is roughly equivalent to uttering a certain sentence with a certain sense and reference, which again is roughly equivalent to "meaning" in the traditional sense. Second, we said that we also perform *illocutionary acts* such as informing, ordering, warning, undertaking (...) i.e. utterances, which have a certain (conventional) force. Thirdly, we may also perform *perlocutionary acts*: what we bring about or achieve *by* saying something, such as convincing, persuading, deterring ... (Italics original).

In Table 1, we illustrate how can one utterance perform these three acts:

Speaker: *It's hot in here.*	
Locutionary act	Speaker *describes* the weather inside the room.
Illocutionary act	Speaker *requests* the hearer to open the window or turn on the air conditioning.
Perlocutionary act	The hearer *stands up and opens* the window or *turns on* the air conditioning

Table 1: The Three Acts Performed by an Utterance.

The utterance in the table is an example of an *indirect speech act*. The speaker could have produced a *direct speech act*, saying *stand up and open the window/turn on the air*

conditioning – for instance. Of course, there are certain conditions that interact to make the production and interpretation of an utterance a successful communicational cooperative process. For example, one does not request someone whom he might not have the right to request (e.g. the teacher has the right to ask one of his students to write the date) or request something that the hearer cannot afford to provide (e.g. you cannot ask a stranger to lend you large amount of money) and so on.

Examining the illocutionary acts – the main focus of SAT as already said above – closely results in the classification based on the attitudes expressed by the speaker (S), which produce an effect on the attitudes of the hearer (H) via-à-vis a state of affairs (p) or doing (D) something (Table 2, based on Bach 1994, p. 10):

Illocutionary Act	Attitude Expressed	Intended Hearer Attitude
Statement	Belief that p	Belief that p
Request	Desire for H to D	Intention to D
Promise	Firm Attention to D	Belief that S will D
Apology	Regret to D-ing	Forgiveness of S for D-ing

Table 2: Classification of Four Illocutionary Acts in Terms of S/H's Attitudes

Illocutionary acts (or performatives) can also be grouped based on a five-category classification: Representatives, Directives, Commissives, Expressives, and Declarations. Table 3 below includes definitions and example:

Type	Definition	Examples
Representatives	The speaker is committed to the truth of a proposition.	*affirm, believe, conclude, deny, report* etc.
Directives	The speaker pushes the hearer to do something.	ask, challenge, command, insist, request etc.
Commissives	The speaker is committed to a certain course of action.	*If you don't stop fighting, I'll call the police; I'll bring you a toy train tomorrow.*
Expressives	The speaker expresses an attitude about a state of affairs	*apologize, deplore, congratulate, thank, welcome* etc.
Declarations	By uttering some words, the speaker changes a situation.	*I resign; I baptize; You're fired; War is hereby declared.*

Table 3: Classification of illocutionary Acts

Another central issue in the field of pragmatics – the study of language use – is that of politeness and face in interactions.

3. Politeness and Face

A dictionary definition for the term *politeness* runs as follows: "behaviour that is socially correct and shows understanding of and care for other people's feelings." In pragmatics, researchers are concerned with the ways people convey (im)polite attitudes as they

speak; this is known as linguistic politeness (Cambridge Dictionary: https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/politeness). Brown and Levinson (1987) are two researchers who have studied linguistic politeness thoroughly. For them the concepts or *politeness* and *face* are inextricably intertwined. A simplified definition to *face* is that it is *the positive image* that one attributed to self and others in face-to-face communication. In this regard, *face* can be said to be lost, maintained, or threatened; in interactions, interlocutors are considerate to each other's' face and they work (e.g. choose their words carefully) so as no one's face is lost (i.e. each one's face is saved). *Face* has two different – but interrelated – aspects: *positive* and *negative*. The former reflects one' desire that his/her wants are noticed and approved by others, while the latter is one' desire to be able to do what he/she wants. Applying the pragmatic of face on requests, an utterance like *Give me a cigarette, dear* is said to be a direct request (imperative *give*) and it invites to consider what the speaker and hearer have in common (the address term *dear*); this is a positive-face/politeness strategy. On the other hand, the utterance *Could you spare a cigarette?* signals deference (respect/politeness) to the hearer and gives him/her the opportunity to freely not to comply (through using the ability modal verb *could*). It should be born in mind that the terms *positive* and *negative* are sometimes considered as problematic by scholars in the field of politeness research, because one may think that positive politeness is better that negative politeness, which is definitely untrue.

Cultures can thus be classified based on the politeness system prevalent in each. In this regard, we can distinguish between *negative-face based politeness* and *positive-face based politeness systems*. In a negative-face based politeness system/culture, people strive to establish peaceful and harmonious relations. It is the reason why people from such cultures avoid impingement (restricting their hearers' freedom of action) and individual rights. The British English culture is considered a prototypical of such politeness system. The British are said to value independence and privacy, of themselves and others (hearers): "Britons want to be left alone and their decisions to be respected" (Cebrian Puyuelo, Curell Gotor, & Fernández Montraveta, 2018). On the contrary, in a positive-face based politeness system/culture, people work to make their addressee feel a sense of in-group membership with them. People in such cultures are keen on expressing their agreement, interest, and sympathy. The Arabic culture is an exemplary of this system. In Arab societies, people are publicly available to each other and are inclined to establish a common ground with their interlocutors.

From the above discussion, it is suggested that when people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds meet in intercultural communication, *communication breakdown* or *miscommunication* is highly likely. For example, Arabs find it acceptable to request a stranger to help, even in tasks like carrying one's groceries, meanwhile the British may not choose to request for help in such communicational situations, considering it as an invasion of one' personal territory and an impingement on his/her freedom of action. And even if they are obliged to do it, they would employ many *mitigating strategies* to make their request sound very polite and less restricting for the addressee (we will deal with requests and request mitigating strategies in the next lecture).

This lecture is an introductory one to the coming ones on how speech acts and politeness/face have been researched in different languages and cultures and how language learners (including ESL/EFL learners) develop the so-called pragmatic competence while learning the target language (we shall illustrate with the speech act of request).

Follow-up questions

Having read the lecture, you are invited to address these follow-up questions:

1. Do you think that the acquisition of pragmatic norms by non-native speakers is easy or difficult? Justify.
2. What is the difference between the three acts: locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary?
3. How can we categorise the following speech acts:
   "I'm awfully sorry! I didn't mean it" - "I'll be back."
   "I promise. I'll make it up to you" - "Who has left the door OPEN (shouting)"
   "Give me a cup of coffee. Make it black." - "Cograts! You've done a great job"
   "We found the defendant guilty." - "don't touch." - "we will not do that."
4. Can you analyse the following dialogue in terms of speech illocutionary act/force?
   A: Good morning!
   B: What's so good about morning?
5. Can you spot a naturally-occurring speech act performed in your mother language (Colloquial Algeria Arabic or Berber) and describe the context of its production and interpretation?
6. Can you give an example of a request that is considered impolite and a threat to the face of both the hearer and the speaker? Describe a potential context of its occurrence and interpretation.

References

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