

PRAGMATICS IN THE CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT: *Structured and systematic study of pragmatics in linguistics has assumed a central dimension since the middle of the century to meet the new vistas opened up for investigation in the field. Pragmatics as language in use views its study from the context-based perspective by real people in real situations, whether spoken or written within a political, social, cultural or religious milieu. But poor pragmatic knowledge, as often observed in ESL learners in discursive events has been unequivocally been devastating as, for example, when such errors are seen as insult on the participant, not grammatical resulting from the learning process. This paper aims at lucidly elucidating the need for pragmatic instructions in the classroom. It also examines pragmatics in actual language use by exemplifying with scalar implicature and the cooperative principles whose firm knowledge all over the world has enhanced communicative events as reality.*

KEYWORDS: Pragmatics, Scalar Implicature, Cooperative Principles, Conversation.

INTRODUCTION

A recent introduction in the domain of language teaching/learning is the application of principles and practices of inter language pragmatics explicitly in the language classroom. According to Bardovi – Harlig (1996); Rose (2000), inter language pragmatics pertains to learners use and acquisition of linguistics patterns in a second language. Until a few decades ago, pragmatics was looked at as “a large, loose and disorganized collection of research efforts”, where any linguistics rascal can dump their findings (Horn, 1988). At present, pragmatics is a sub-discipline of linguistics which has been systematically investigated like other major divisions of semiotics such as semantics and syntax with copious attention by scholars (Ndimele, 1999).

What is Pragmatics?

Various researches into the field of pragmatics have also attracted diverse views in terms of its definition. According to Fasold (2006, p.137), pragmatics “concerns both the relationship between context of use and sentence meaning, and the relationship among sentence meaning, context of use, and speakers meaning”. In stalmaker (1972, p. 383), we gather that pragmatics is “the study of linguistic acts and contexts in which they are performed”. In both definitions, however different their linguistics structures are, “context of use” runs through all. Similarly, Syal and Jindal (2012) in their contribution note that pragmatics attempts to relate meaning to context of utterance and views language as action which is perform by speakers.

Although pragmatics has drawn the definition of numerous scholars, Levinson’s (1983, p.24) view seems most appropriate. Pragmatics is defined by Levinson as a branch of study which is concerned with “the ability of language users to pair sentences with contexts in which they would be appropriate”. Clearly apt and explicit, pragmatics describes language from the point

of view of the users, especially as regards the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using their language for social interaction, and the resultant effects of each language use among participants in communication or speech event.

In trying to elucidate the above, Levinson (1983) puts side by side pragmatics and semantics, saying both study meanings as expressed by human language. But the dividing line is that in semantics, meanings are investigated with respect to the relation of signs to their designata, while in pragmatics theory, meanings are studied with respect to the relations of signs to their users and interpreters. In essence, semantics meanings are devoid of context, pragmatics meanings are rather context based. Pragmatics studies how language is used by real people in real contexts, whether in writing or spoken discourse, and is highly influenced by contexts, be it political, social, religion, culture or economics. Hence, Mey (2001, p.6) writes that pragmatics studies “the use of language in human communication as determine by the conditions of society”.

Ndimele (1999) talks of two types of meanings in human communication, namely linguistics meaning and pragmatics meaning. According to him, linguistics meaning is often expressed explicitly, while pragmatics meanings are implicit. Pragmatics meanings refer to those meanings in structures which are not clearly stated in words but which are understood in the course of interaction. Pragmatics meanings are recoverable with the aid of three factors which include: the situation in which an utterance is produced, shared previous knowledge of the interlocutors and the linguistics context in which an utterance occurs (Ndimele, 1999, p.105-100).

Why Pragmatics in the Language Classroom

The significance of pragmatics instructions in the language classes have been the focus of many linguists including Bardovi-Harlig and Mahan-Taylor, (2003); Mey, (2001); Syal and Jindal, (2012); Shokuohi and Razael, (2015). Hitherto, language use problems were left with the traditional linguistic research to grapple with, but recently, pragmatics took over to provide novel solutions to these novel problems (Mey, 2001). Mey writes that many of these problem areas have been opened up to pragmatics from “outside” and these include: problems of conversation and turn – control (ethnomethodology); problems of argumentation (philology); problems of language use in educational settings (applied linguistics); problems of human interaction and computer software and design, and a lot more problems.

Pragmatics instructions have been identified to “facilitate learners” sense of being able to find socially appropriate language for the situations that they encounter “(Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003). Kasper & Rose (1999) have argued that learners show significant difference from native speakers in the areas of language use such as the comprehension and execution of certain speech acts, including greetings and leave taking, and conversational management such as short responses. Explicit pragmatics instructions will bridge the gap shown by even proficient English users who have been found wanting in pragmatics stance, that is, pragmatics lessons in the classroom at various levels will unveil the “secret rules” of the use of English.

Poor pragmatics knowledge in users of English has far reaching consequences than even pragmatics errors, as these are often interpreted along social and personal lines instead of errors emanating from the learning process (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan - Taylor, 2003). Among others, pragmatics mistakes may cause communication failure between interlocutors, make a speaker a brusque social interacting object and even appear rude at times. Even successful conversation

in the real world depends on the cooperation between interlocutors and requires a certain amount of knowledge underlying their aptitudes toward the continuity of the speaker; indicate understanding, show support or disagreement and so on. The hazards of potential lack of pragmatics knowledge also include unintentional insults to interlocutors and denial of requests.

Explicit teaching of pragmatics studies has a direct bearing on the learners. Locastro (2012) notes that learners benefit from their teachers and ideally become autonomous learners, doing pragmatics to solve communication problems and pushing their competence level in their society. In corroborating with the foregoing, Bouton (1994) notes that left to their own, learners do not get enough of the target pragmatics experience in and out of the classroom and that what makes for the “secret rules” of English is that pragmatic is shrouded in a mighty cloud. The classrooms for him are especially suited to provide both input and interpretation of pragmatics discourse and the starting point becomes making language available to learners for observation. These speech acts may include invitations, requests, apologies, asking questions, giving orders, complaining, and so on. Pragmatics instructions which highlight features of language and language use can be beneficial to the learners.

Cortazzi and Jin, (1999); Fantini, (1997); Kramsch, (1998) are among those who share the cultural dimension of pragmatics as an object which can be well addressed in the classroom. Pragmatics instructions provide students with linguistic tools and help learners understand actions that are appropriate in relevant contexts. Bardovi-Harlig and Mahan-Taylor (2003) note that the classroom provides a safe place for learners to learn, to experiment, try out new forms and patterns of communication in an appropriate environment. In all of these, Brock (2005) sums up the roles of teachers when he reminded them of the simple acronym S.U.R.E. representing – see, use, review, and experience in relation to pragmatics in EFL classroom. In his words, See –Teacher can help their students see language in context, raise consciousness of the role pragmatics, and explain the functions of specific communicative events. Use-Teacher can develop activities through which students use language in context (simulated and real) where they choose how they interact based on their understanding of the situation suggested by the activity. Review-Teachers should review, reinforce, and recycle the areas of pragmatic competence previously thought. Experience-Teachers can arrange for students to experience and observe the role of pragmatics in communication (Brock, 2005, P.20).

Pragmatics in Actual Language Use

A major concern of pragmatics is speech act theory, the brain child of Austin’s (1962) insights of how to do things with words. Speech act theory describes how language is used to accomplish things or acts which are locutionary acts, illocutionary acts and perlocutionary acts. Within the second language contexts, pragmatics studies encompass among others, speech acts, conversational structure, conversational implicature, conversational management, discourse organization, and so on. This work exemplifies with scalar implicatures and the cooperative principles of speech as pragmatic events in the society.

Scalar implicature in pragmatics is made popular by the early works of Grice, (1975); Levinson, (1983); Horn, (1972); Hirschberg, (1985) among others. In pragmatics, scalar implicature derives its strength from attributing an implicit meaning beyond the explicit meaning of an utterance suggesting that the person making the utterance obviously has reasons for not using the more informative term on the same scale. The implication for the above reasoning is that the choice of the weaker characterization suggests that the speaker’s knowledge of the fact that none of the stronger characterization holds on the scale. Kratzer (2003) notes that scalar

implicature arises in a situation where a speaker qualifies a statement with language that conveys an inference to the listener that the speaker had a reason for not choosing the more informative or stronger term. A typical example is the use of "some" in the structures:

- 1) John has some oranges in the basket.

The above statement implies that "John does not have all the oranges" in the basket.

- 2) Some teachers can afford a new drilling machine.

"Some" in the above structure gives rise to an inference or implicature that not all the teachers can afford a new drilling machine.

Other examples of the scalar implicature are:

- 3a) He won't necessarily get the offer.

- b) He will possibly get the offer.

- 4a) We shall be 100 of us at the ceremony.

- b) We won't be more than 100 of us at the ceremony.

- 5a) Mary has got some of the cars.

- b) The speaker believes that Mary has not got all the cars.

The utterances in "B" are possible interpretations or assumptions in "A" in communicative realities.

Griceans (1975) school has explained scalar implicature in terms of the maxim of quantity where participants in a communicative event are expected to be as informative as just required. The notion of this implicature (maxim of quantity) implies that if a speaker were in a position to make a stronger statement, he would have, but since he did not, it is believed that the stronger statement is not true and does not apply.

Similarly, in the cooperative principles, the British/American Philosopher H.P. Grice, (1989) has taught that when people communicate, they have something to tell each other, and that they need to cooperate in conversation in terms of mutually accepted, pragmatically determined context for the success of that linguistic exchange. The thesis has been abbreviated as CP and the four maxim can be seen in one subordinate cooperative principles- make your contribution such as is required, at the stage of which it occurs, by the accepted purpose of the talk exchange in which you are engaged" (Grice, 1975, P.47). The CP are working in actual language use without which communication would be practically difficult.

Two examples suffice here to illustrate the CP.

Ex 1. Dostoyevski and the rubber ball

When my daughter Sara was six years old, we stayed for couple of days at some friends' house. These people were lovers of books, and their whole living room was filed then: there were bookshelves all around and all the way up to the ceiling. While Sara was playing, somehow her little bouncing ball managed to get itself lost behind a row of books on one of the lower

shelves but since she hadn't seen it disappear, she didn't know where to look for it. Meanwhile, the owner of the books, who was reading his newspaper in an armchair nearby, had observed the ball's wayward course. So, when Sara asked him if he had seen her ball, he replied:

Why don't you look behind volume 6 of Dostoyevsky's collected work? (cf Mey, 2001, P.72-73).

In analyzing the above exchange from the view point of CP, one must confidently say that it is a non-cooperative one. This is borne out of the fact that the reply given by the owner of the books flouts the maxim of manner and that of quantity. Firstly, Sara was not given a reply that is pellucid enough because considering her tender age of six, the name of the Russian author "Dostoyevski" meant nothing to her coupled with other information with regard to identifying the book on the rich- book shelf. This clearly is in violation of the maxim of manner which requires a discourse participant to be perspicuous. But the reply to the little girl also ran foul to the maxim of quantity in that it provide too much and too little information with regard to how Sara would recover her lost ball. The answer would have been "your ball is behind those brown books", etc, because "volume 6 and Dostoyevski's collected works" meant nothing to a six year old child in any part of the world.

Exii. An exchange between 'A' and 'B.'

A- What's the headquarters of OPEC?

B- Vienna.

In the above exchange, B has unambiguously told the truth (quality), has satisfied A's request for information (relation), and the reply is in clear and brief manner (manner). In both scenarios, the pictures painted are different. In example one above, the adult interlocutor failed to observe the cooperative principles which requires him to cooperative with his conversational partner and so the consequence is very patent. In fact, it was said that he(the owner of the house) got up from his seat to get the small ball for the little girl because of his non-cooperative attitude in the communicative exchange. However, example two depicts cooperation by all participants as articulated by Grice's maxims and the result is smooth and successful communication where all are satisfied.

CONCLUSION

In the foregoing, we have viewed pragmatics as the study which is concerned with the ability of language users to pair sentences with the context in which they are appropriately used. In order words, linguistic contents are related to contexts of situation in which they are used to realize essentially pragmatic meaning of utterances which are based on the users' point of view. The need for pragmatic instructions have gained currency in recent times for the realization and identification of the fact that it facilitates learners' sense of being able to find socially accepted or appropriate language use as they encounter the variable context of situations.

Pragmatics doesn't occur in abstract, but in actual language use and therefore we exemplify with scalar implicature and the cooperative principles, all of which are communicative principles. In these conversational implicatures, we are referring to something which is implied in conversation. Mey (2001) notes that it is a thing left implied in actual language use, meaning

that utterances do not always carry their literal meaning. The thrust of Grice's reasoning implies that non-literal meaning be inferred from context and the CP in the special inference of implicature in a conversation. These pragmatic realities are not something for some to do but are something reasonable to be followed by all for a successful linguistic interchange in society.

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