

Speech Act Behavior Observations

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Abstract

The question how speech act strategies can be taught most effectively and how a learner becomes an active socializing agent seems to be still unanswered. The target language learners tend to respond the way they would in their native Georgian as soon as they get deeper into the conversation, sometimes their participation in the speech act is fully inappropriate to the situation and causes misunderstandings, especially when the performance has to include more open-ended and novel strategies. The researcher studied the students' behavior in the five categories of a speech act: representations, directives, expressives, commissives, and declaratives. The objective of research was to collect the data in order to see a real picture in the classrooms, to get nearer to the native speakers' norms, to move toward using more suggestions, fewer rejections, less mitigation and aggravation. A conclusion was made that the issues in the language classroom were caused by the inappropriate input-when the learners had received more linguistic than pragmatic instructions, not considering sociolinguistic forms.

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Introduction

It is a commonly admitted assumption nowadays that in addition to temporal and spatial dimensions, language (verbal and nonverbal signs) directly indexes socio-culturally meaningful realities including social acts and stances (affective and epistemic), which can further index identities (e.g., social roles, status, relationship, and gender) and activities (sequences of actions) (Ochs, 2002).

Over the past three decades we witnessed a dramatic shift from an intuitively based approach to a speech act description to an empirical one, both quantitative and qualitative. The source of strategies has been growing, from where we can derive lots of stimuli for a successful acting of speech roles. However, speech act behavior and commanding its strategies still constitute an area of concern for a second/foreign language learners/teachers. The learners are not showing a satisfactory level of mastery of the speech act set (Olshtain & Cohen, 1991) and are reporting about having difficulties with fine-tuning to them. They fail to develop a full range of formulas and lack a broad linguistic repertoire for performance.

There is much evidence that acquisition of native-like production by non-native speakers may take many years and that socio-cultural strategies and sociolinguistic forms are not always "picked up" easily (Cohen, Olshtain & Rosenstein, 1986). The question how speech act strategies can be taught most effectively and how a learner becomes an active socializing agent seems to be still unanswered. The problem of preparing a course of instruction to fill gaps in speech act behavior is still of paramount importance (Cohen, 1996). That makes us think that teachers and course books must carry and convey a valuable input and insight how to com-

prehend and produce speech acts, develop socio-cultural and sociolinguistic competences. That means choosing speech strategies according to the age and sex of the speakers and their social class and occupation, their roles and status in the interaction, determining whether a speech act set is appropriate or not, selecting the right linguistic forms with the ability to maintain the control over the actual language forms and their usage, foreseeing culture-specific situational factors in order to prevent cross-cultural clashes or a complete breakdown of a communication.

As the speech acts reflect highly conventionalized, patterned, routinized language behavior, some parts of the adjacency pair and turn-taking structure seem predictable, like:

- 1.-How are you?
-Fine, Thanks.
- 2.-This is my office.
- Good to know it.
- 3.-Hi, Tina.
-Hi! Nice to see you again.
4. - Sorry.
-That's all right.
5. - Thank you.
- You are welcome.
- 6.-How do you do!
-How do you do, etc.

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Yet there are still various and rather confusing strategies to choose, depending on the socio-cultural context. Observations showed that the target language learners tend to respond the way they would in their native Georgian as soon as they get deeper into the conversation. Moreover, sometimes their participation in the speech act was fully inappropriate to the situation and caused misunderstandings, especially when the performance had to include more open-ended and novel strategies. That suggests that formulaic language and its rightful exploitation may not be acquired as easily.

Here we treat the formulaic language as a chunk of language, repeatedly used in verbal, interactional routines and other contexts. It is an important in many ways notion within the theory of Language Socialization. First, as with other language resources and practices, formulaic language is an end of socialization in the sense that it is something novices have to learn to use in grammatically, pragmatically, and sequentially relevant ways, as a means of engaging with others in the course of and in the constitution of everyday interaction and activities (Garrett, 2008, p.190). Formulas succinctly capture the illocutionary force of a contribution by virtue of the fact that the speech community in which they are used has tacitly agreed on their form, meaning and use. It is a source for conveying the norm, values, identities and stances of members of the target community.

Methods for collecting speech act data

I tried to study the students' behavior in the five categories of a speech act: representations, directives, expressives, commissives, and declaratives.

Three groups of respondents with 65 students were selected. They were Georgians, bachelor students, the age varied from 18 to 20. We tried to involve different levels of study – from the beginners to the intermediate. All respondents were volunteers.

In the process of investigation I have widely used observation of naturally occurring data within the group and group-teacher mode (group- a Georgian teacher, group- a native speaker), a role-play, discourse completion tasks, oral report interviews, and acceptability ratings.

The observations showed that the students were very much encouraged after their successful communication with native speakers, but they were not able to turn to the wide range of formulas acquired before.

The discourse completion tasks allowed us to focus on specific speech act realizations and manipulate social and situational variables. Here are some samples of assignments a student had to fill in:

Assignment 1

Classmate: I have been trying to get through your mobile for at least forty minutes!

You: _____

Classmate: You know, I was standing outside in such cold.

You: _____

Assignment 2

Professor: I am really upset about the way you had done your paper.

You: _____

Assignment 3

Boss: Well, you are late again, aren't you?

You: _____

Boss: Try to come on time!

You: _____

There were suggested different attitudes from the boss' side, etc. We have offered 100 patterns for all kinds of categories.

As to the oral report interviews, I held them this way: after being tape-recorded in eight role-play interactions, the respondents were asked to listen to them again and to provide a retrospective oral report on how close to real life they felt their performance to be, how dominated they were by the interlocutor, how sensitive they were to the tone, other prosodic (intonation and word stress) or paralinguistic cues, to the offences they faced up, what linguistic difficulties came up, what cultural differences hindered their success, as well as how they felt and acknowledged the social balance. Sometimes I had to play the tapes or the videos several times to make the respondents pay attention to the details, as most of them were overwhelmed by the situation and remembered very little of the experiences. It emphasized one more time that under the natural circumstances or in the tense environment the students lost some control and were out of the role.

A very interesting set of different American and British series served as an excellent basis for comparison.

Whenever there was a concern with the pre-elocutionary aspect of speech acts, questionnaires were used to record perceptions of videotaped speech act interactions.

Finally, the follow-up interview provided further insights regarding the production or perception of naturally occurring speech acts, a role-play or discourse completion data.

One of the most striking findings with our students is that they were not sensitive to certain sociolinguistic distinctions, although at a glance native and non-native speakers did not seem to differ markedly in the use of the main strategies.

I started with reading and listening to the dialogues/ speech acts. This approach worked to show explicitly how good they were at perceiving of speech acts.

The wrong understanding of the realia by Georgian students was clear. The students initially read or listened to speech acts and then had to define the attitude between the communicators. Surprisingly enough, Georgians found

Americans more direct and the English - more polite and modest than themselves. Some believed that Americans used more adjectives, and the English-more modality. The students thought that the usage of modality (modal words and verbs) indicated to inferiority and admitted that it was not at all appropriate to a Georgian household. After listening to some teenagers talk, Georgians regarded it impolite, rude, and even arrogant - the way some young people responded to the elderly or strangers. Not in the least the male-female subcultural norms influenced perceptions about politeness. Females appeared to be more supporting the politeness norms, but they could not get the real attitudes in the text. The examples of the dialogue below illustrate the type of the texts to define.

Dialogues

Pattern 1:

- *Darling!*
- *Yes, honey!*
- *Could you bring coffee in?*
- *Sure, it won't take me long.*

Pattern 2

- *Mum. Can I make sure about something?*
- *Please, do. You are welcome. Let's have a seat.*

Pattern 3

- *Hi!*
- *What school are you in?*
- *Eton.*
- *Good, you are really smart then!*
- *Thank you. It is really tough.*

Apologies

Even with such common and widely used semantic formulas as "excuse me" and "sorry" it is very frequent that Georgians use 'sorry' about eight times more than native speakers and they do not differentiate much between these two.

Georgian students intensify their expression of apology significantly more. The mostly charged words are "very" and "really" with the overgeneralization of the latter one, attributed the same semantic properties with "very".

The speech act of apologizing consists of the following strategies or formulas:

1. An expression of apology
2. An explanation or account of the situation which indirectly caused the apologizer to commit the offense
3. Acknowledgement of responsibility
4. An offer of repair
5. The promise of non-recurrence

The obtained data show that Georgian speakers pre-

fer self-supportive formulas, which means that they support their own face by denying guilt or by providing an explanation to the offence, whereas native speakers tended to support the face of the complainer by admitting their own guilt, using hearer-supportive formulas.

The greatest difference was caused by less usage of the two subgroups of formulas –acknowledgement of responsibility and an offer of repair. Even in case they were too concerned about the offence. Though they were more explicit in apology and using more intensifiers than native speakers did.

After some instruction the Georgian-like apology: "You were waiting for me for long? Oh, sorry. I did not want. Will you forgive me? I will never do it again. I had a problem ..." - sounded shorter and got the following form: "Oh, I'm so sorry. It dropped out of my mind."

Before the training intensifiers were absent in situations, then it was reconstructed in 98% cases.

Refusals and rejections

The research showed that Georgians were very direct in refusals. They avoided modality and other specific language devices. The kind of phrases like: "I am afraid" was not used at all. However, the regret was shown in a very intensified way.

In rejections there dominated three semantic formulas: explanations, alternatives, and rejections.

There was evidence that native speakers made suggestions more than four times as often as they rejected advice:

"But why don't we..." "If I may offer ..." etc.

Georgians seemed to answer a direct "no" and often repeated it several times, while expressing rejection. It made a foreigner a bit embarrassed and intimidated.

Request

The empirical study showed that, irrespective their knowledge of request formulas in the spontaneous speech, the students started with the imperative "Give me a coke!" or declarative "I want a marker." Then it was changed to the appropriate "I will have a coke".

The students were presented a scale of imposition, from the most direct and imposing to the most indirect and least imposing, i.e. from the elliptical imperatives to polite requests- "Could you give me a coke?" or with a more polite end "Could I take a marker, please?" I witnessed a satisfactory progress after showing the students the scale and the constituents of a speech act set, and made them competent at identifying performative and semantic prerequisites for the realization of the goals.

The sequence of utterances were similar: apology-reason-request or with some interchange that did not alter the meaning at all. There were identified as a veiled obligation, a veiled favor, and a true favor. The participants emphasized

the internal monologue and debated with themselves which phrase to choose to better and quicker reach the goal.

Compliments

The study revealed that Georgian girls complemented 59 % more than the natives did in the same situations. Georgian boys seemed more reserved than Georgian girls. And native English-speakers were ruder, if they could not interpret the compliment in the right way. Georgians were found to accept a compliment with a greater difficulty than Americans. Georgians felt surprised or embarrassed, and refused or justified the compliment, even tried to apologize.

Complaints

We used some categories here -an opener, an orientation statement, an act statement, a justification of the speaker, a threat, a remedy, a closing, persuasion, and an indirect agreement. It was evident that female non-native English speakers made more complaints and, on the other hand, they were found to commiserate, while the male non-native English speakers were prone to contradict, argue and give advice. The common practice in this section was the overusing of "must".

Conclusions

The objective of research was to collect the data in order to see a real picture in the classrooms, to get nearer to the native speakers' norms, to move toward using more suggestions, fewer rejections, less mitigation and aggravation. A conclusion was made that the issues in the language classroom were caused by the inappropriate input-when the learners had received more linguistic than pragmatic instructions, not considering sociolinguistic forms.

I believe that the following three trends in teaching would ensure a better feedback from the learners:

- 1) Clarifying the types of intensification and downgrading;
- 2) Showing subtle differences between speech act realizations;
- 3) Considering situational features of discourse.

My observations showed that if learners are given an appropriate instruction in the formal classroom, then teaching can assist them more than the everyday communication with native speakers.

In my opinion the implementation of lessons on speech acts should follow the following steps:

1. Diagnostic test: problem situations and their multiple choice solutions. If a student's choice is "Forgive me, please" and not "I am really sorry. Are you ok?" "it means that a student is far from the awareness of the role. After this kind of test it becomes easier for the teacher to plan teach-

ing roles and procedures.

2. Model dialogues. Students will have to identify roles, situations, and the goals of the situation. It will help students with sensitizing to the socio-cultural factors that affect speech acts. This stage is loaded with different sets of patterns and training.

3. Role-play activities. They require supplying the students with rich information about the interlocutors and the situation. Students receive a card, listen to the recording, and watch a video. Here there are different variables.

4. Feedback. It should offer help, when the students talk about their expectations, awareness of similarities and differences between speech act behavior in their culture and the target language.

The information provided should be accurate which works and turn the learners into self-confident demonstrators of membership of a particular speech society.

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