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Pragmatic Role of Culture in Using Ostensible Invitations across Persian and English Languages

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Abstract. I first begin with the definition of speech acts with a view to providing a distinction between the traditional and modern view of speech acts and then the focus will be on making the distinction between ostensible speech acts vs. genuine speech acts. Finally, my observation relates to the Ahmadi& Rasekh (2010) paper describing the pragmatic features of two culturally Persian culture, north and centre with respect to the use of genuine and ostensible invitations in English based on ten discourse situations and utterances chosen for data collection. The data is compared with the structure of invitations in English reported by Isaacs and Clark (1990). It is concluded that that the socio-linguistic factors might prove useful to understand better the dynamics of failure to recognize the correct function of speech acts in EFL educational settings since these difficulties are reported in Ahmadi and Rakesh's paper.

Keywords: Speech Acts, Genuine Speech Acts, Pragmatic Features

1   Introduction

The term 'speech act' has been contributed by J. L. Austin and it refers to communicative activity which analyses the role of utterances in relation to the behaviour of speaker and hearer in interpersonal communication. Austin and Searle conceptualize the speech acts as comprising of locution (Langue) and illocution (Parole). It is an 'act of speech' that might involve:

a) Locutionary act is defined with reference to the intentions of speakers while speaking; 'which are mere acts of saying, or uttering words with sense and reference.

b) Illocutionary force which means the effects they achieve on listeners. What is of vital importance is the illocutionary force of an utterance which is the performance of a speech act, considered as an invitation. According to Searle, an invitation is a directive used to get the addressee to do something. Invitation can be understood as a particular form of persuasive speech act. It is generally intended to produce a particular response (acceptance). As an illocutionary action an invitation means using language in

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interaction and the effects their use of language has on the other participants in an act of communication (Crystal, 2003). Thus the pragmatics of any speech act focuses on an 'area' between semantics, sociolinguistics and extra linguistic context.

The different taxonomies of illocutionary acts have been proposed by Austin, Searle, Vendler, Ohmann, and Fraser but Searle's taxonomy has been taken as a reference standard. All five of these taxonomies converge into two kinds of illocutionary act: (1) illocutionary acts that combine commissive' with directive illocutionary force (e.g., offering, inviting, challenging), and (2) illocutionary acts that require two participants (e.g., giving, selling, contracting) (Hancher, 1979).

c) Perlocutionary effect of their utterances). Examples of perlocutionary acts include frightening, insulting and persuading. e.g. a speaker may intend to persuade X to do Y, but instead succeed in getting X to doZ) (Crystal, 2003).

A warning may frighten B, a question may get B to provide certain information, and an order may get B to do what was ordered. These reactions are traditionally called perlocutionary effects or perlocutions (see Austin, 1962; Davis, 1979).

1.1 Redefining Speech Acts : Traditional vs Modern View

Speech acts and such speech act invitations in the conventional sense are taken to be granted. Questions such as what kind of Speech act invitation, genuine or ostensible needs to be investigated for unraveling the socio-pragmatic culture that were once regarded as secondary to other issues such as functions of language. However, we believe that these issues deserve close attention, because Speech act invitations are not as simple as they appear to be, and if subjected to critical examination it will have significant implications for EFL/ESL teaching situation. As Mills observes:

> Recent research in cross-cultural pragmatics has begun to provide convincing evidence that each culture does indeed possess its own interactional style 'in contrast to Linguist representing the more universal school of pragmatic thought(Searle 1990.1975.Hymes 1990,Fraser ,1985) continue to claim that the strategies for realizing Speech acts, conveying politeness, and investigating? the force of illocutions are essentially the same across languages although they grant that each culture views the appropriateness of these strategies differently(1992:65).

1.2 Ostensible and Genuine Speech Acts.

Isaacs and Clark (1990) define ostensible invitation as extending an invitation that many a times don't intend to be taken seriously as opposed to genuine speech acts which is used to get the

addressee to do something. They substantiate this definition by illustrating the following example:

Mary(A) says, "Let's do lunch sometime, she may appear to make an invitation, and when Justin(B) replies, "Yes, let's," he may appear to accept.

Ostensible invitations as the above data suggest, 'constitute a coherent class of speech acts that are identifiable by a small number of properties'(ibid:496).

(A invited B to event E)

1. **Pretense A pretends to make a sincere invitation.**
2. **Mutual recognition A and B mutually recognize A's pretense.**
3. **Collusion B responds appropriately to A's pretense.**
4. **Ambivalence Wben asked, "Do you really mean it?" A cannot sincerely answer either "yes" or "no."**
5. **Off-record purpose A's main purpose is tacit.**

Mary's invitation is known as Ostensible invitation and Justin's as Ostensible acceptance. Isaacs and Clark argue that ostensible invitations are part of a class of ostensible speech acts. Isaacs and Clark view of ostensible invitations differs slightly from Wolfson's (1981, 1989), description as ambiguous invitations.

1.3 Cross-cultural variations in Ostensible and Genuine Invitations Across English and Persian Languages.

Brown and Levinson (1987 [1978]) has remained the most seminal and influential starting point for studying cross-cultural and interlinguistic politeness (Leech, 2007). Its main contention is that the concepts of positive face(work) and negative face(work) are particularly useful in this context, being applicable to a wider range of interactive moves. As Brown and Levinson pointed out, the various techniques of positive politeness and negative politeness 'operate, respectively, as a kind of social accelerator and social brake for decreasing or increasing social distance in relationships, regardless of FTAs' (1987:93 cited in Holmes, 1990:159).

Other studies show that the structure of ostensible invitations in Persian is more complex than in English. The features suggested for ostensible invitations in English are present, but these are not sufficient to distinguish ostensible invitations from genuine invitations in Persian (Eslami,2005).

Invitations that meet the criteria for being genuine invitations in English can be classified as ostensible by Persian speakers. In contrast to the claim made by Isaacs and Clark regarding English speakers that ''ostensible invitations are rare in most situations'' (1990: 494), other

observations show that Persian speakers use a considerable number of ostensible invitations in their daily activities as a manifestation of ritual politeness (*ta'arof*) (Eslami,2005).

The study concludes that enhancing face (Brown & Levinson 1987) for both interlocutors is the main underlying factor in using ostensible invitations in Persian. In Persian, the speaker, in adhering to societal norms, enhances his / her face as well as that of his / her interlocutor by using ostensible invitations in everyday language (Eslami, 2005).

2   Result of The Study: The Present Study

The framework for data collection and data analysis designed by Isaacs and Clark (1990) and their results were used in this study.

1. The results of the data analysis revealed that there was significant cultural differences in the degree of ostensible invitations across Persian and Canadian (Ahmadi & Rasekh 2010).

2.   The Persian participants used more ostensible invitations in order to save face and showing politeness to the addressee in comparison with English speakers use of invitation as positive and considered as genuine invitations (Ahmadi & Rasekh ,2010).

3. Iranian advanced EFL learners often fail to recognize the correct function of speech acts in EFL educational settings; they demonstrate problems in facing different sociocultural situations of invitation exchanges. These difficulties are due to difference between English and Persian cultural scripts and also speech act strategies (Ahmadi& Rasekh,2010).

4. Persian EFL learners transfer some strategies from their native language into the target language (Ahmadi & Rasekh ,2010).

5. Ostensible invitations used by Canadian participants were different Persian speakers with a low knowledge from Gorgan and Isfahan (Ahmadi & Rasekh,2010).

6. The effect of regional differences in using ostensible invitations was found to be significant (Ahmadi& Rasekh, 2010).

3   Conclusion

My understanding of Ahmadi and Rasekh (2010) work is an attempt to begin to tie together theories of social interaction and group communication that may offer new opportunities to explore the use of ostensible invitation among Persian users as non-native speakers of English. It may be significant to consider how different social structure in terms of status, authority and sentiment (positive or negative emotion) influence the group interaction (Shelly & Troyer,

2001) in addition to the variables reported in the paper as regional difference, transfer and language. This in turn, may highlight the complexity of ostensible speech acts(Eslami,2005) and the relative degree of ostensible invitation reported by Ahmadi and Rasekh. Further it would show that Persian speakers use of considerable no. of ostensible invitation in their routine activities which is considered as ritual politeness (*ta'roof*) (ibid).

One very significant factor reported by Ahmadi and Rasekh (2010) is the reference to the cultural differences in the degree of ostensible invitation and here cultural background (Schooler,1996 cited in Shelly & Troyer,2001:440) and a range of social factors (Brown& Levinson 1978,1987) might influence group participation and it is therefore possible to analyse the effect that different social factors have on the nature of invitation strategies which non-native speakers use. It is likely that the socio-linguistic factors might prove useful to understand better the dynamics of failure to recognize the correct function of speech acts in EFL educational settings since these difficulties are reported in Ahmadi and Rakesh's paper. The degree of social distance between the participants (See Brown& Levinson's model of politeness,1978 cited in Holmes, 1990:156) might throw more light on the different participants playing the role of brother, friend, son, distance acquaintance, elderly female relative, aunt, cousin, brother's wife, niece, colleagues, boss [reported in different discourse situations used in the study.

It is worth considering to correlate the linguistic and non-linguistic factors that have been described by Brown& Levinson(1978,1987 cited in Holmes, 1990:175) as 'a factor which must be taken into account in estimating the weightiness of a face-threatening act' or to understand the use of high degree of ostensible invitations by the Persian participants in order to save face and showing politeness to the addressee in comparison with English speakers use of invitation as positive and considering them as genuine invitations (Ahmadi and Rasekh, 2010).

On the other hand, elicited responses or choosing the favoured option in a given condition is likely to be misleading since there are risks of generating minimal or fixed response strategies and we never know the range of responses if otherwise approached through ' real encounter'. Ahmadi and Rasekh (2010) have shown a wide range of respondents, but participants were required to choose and evaluate the genuineness of the invitation based on 3 controlled conditions.

The ideal methodology (Wolfson, 1986:697 cited in Holmes,1990:165) would be take up two-pronged approach by 'combining aspects of both 'ethnographic observation and elicited response' to explore the range of spontaneous utterances in a given context.

4. Implications for ESL/EFL teaching:

ESL/EFL learners use of a target speech act may be governed by their own socio-cultural expectation which cannot be explained in 'universal categories' rather it varies extensively across speech communities. This 'awareness and understanding will contribute to comprehend other culture and their people, and to communicate with them appropriately and effectively (Garcia, 1996: 276).

Notes

1. Several **categories of speech act** have been proposed, viz. <u>directives</u> (speakers try to get their listeners to do something, e. g. begging, commanding, requesting), <u>commissives</u> (speakers commit themselves to a future course of action, e. g. promising, guaranteeing), <u>expressives</u> (speakers express their feelings, e. g. apologizing, welcoming, sympathizing), <u>declarations</u> (the speaker's utterance brings about a new external situation, e.g. christening, marrying, resigning) and <u>representatives</u> (speakers convey their belief about the truth of a proposition, e. g. asserting, hypothesizing). The criteria which have to be satisfied in order for a speech act to be successful are known as felicity conditions.

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