The convergence of meaning and the interlanguage knowledge

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There is somehow a wrong, misleading belief in language teaching that only the systemic knowledge is of paramount importance in the interactive process of negotiating meaning. This belief is put under scrutiny and investigated hereby. In this investigation several types of knowledge which, I would suggest, are needed in this process, are highlighted. These start with the systemic one and ends up 'above' language with the socio- cultural knowledge of the target language.

The notion of meaning is a key element in discourse interpretation. Its significance for language teaching is considerable. In fact, an effective reader/listener has to recognize different types of meaning so that to face the slippery phase of converting types to tokens, and hence achieve a full convergence of meaning. This convergence involves not only the recognition of the discursive meaning, but also the acquisition of all the signification a linguistic type might acquire when converted as a token in different contexts of use. These concepts may require some explanations. Indeed, one should distinguish between two kinds of linguistic description that take very different perspectives on language. Type description considers language as an abstract knowledge and has to do with descriptive grammar. Token description, on the other hand, considers language as an actual behaviour and has to do with the actualization of knowledge of language rules in context. The difference between types and tokens is but, we would suggest, a difference between semantics and pragmatics. This leads us to another distinction closely related to Widdowson's 1990 who distinguishes between two types of meaning: the symbolic and the indexical one. The former is semantic and is related to the sentence. The latter is pragmatic and is related to the utterance. This particular meaning cannot be achieved unless it is referred to «some relevant aspect of the world outside language in the situation or in the mind» (ibid: 102).

The indexical meaning is inherent either to context or to our shared mutual knowledge. Language itself can mean only what it encodes. When two persons are negotiating meaning, each one needs to know not only what the other knows, but also that they both know that they know. It would seem to follow that meaning is not in the text. It is rather negotiated in an interactive process between writer and reader, speaker and hearer, where both parties have to adjust so that to key in a shared intended meaning. Therefore, meaning is built up through a process at the end of which, if it is successful, both interlocutors would give each lexical item its intended pragmatic significance. The text is static, made alive in interaction. In this process a lot of elements have to be taken into account. Not only our knowledge of the system is necessary, but also other elements that were until recently ignored by educationists. These elements are to be found, we would say, above language and outside it. Among these elements is the notion of schematic knowledge which is defined as being the prior knowledge that one has about the beliefs, attitudes and culture that sets the normal patterns of an established practiced linguistic behaviour. Let us dwell on this point. Indeed, this knowledge does determine our interpretation of the indexical meaning by referring it to what is a normal, familiar scheme in one's society. It would be misleading and intellectually naïve if one thinks that negotiating meaning is a simple matter of relating particular types to particular tokens. Though in this reference -which is actually realized through interaction- the knowledge of the linguistic code is necessary, it is not enough. It is a complex interactive activity

whereby writer/ reader, speaker/hearer have to relate their discourse not only to the systemic knowledge as I have already pointed out, but also to the schematic one.

There is a need, once the necessary linguistic tools acquired by learners, to provide them with the pragmatics systems of the target language. These refer to the appropriateness of use which is culture specific. The purpose is not to provide them with new information but to help them acquire and successfully use a new type of knowledge necessary for the convergence of meaning. This is what is termed the pragmatic knowledge.

Since the idea of interlanguage pragmatic knowledge was introduced into language education, it has received more and more attention in language courses. Though limited in number, studies investigating the relationship between language education and interlanguage pragmatic development have yielded- in their majority- findings which favour the teaching of L2 pragmatics (pragmatic routines: House (1996) and Yoshimi (2001), apologies: Olshtain and Cohen (1990) and Tatiyama (2001), implicatures: Bouton (1996) and Kubota (1995), Compliments: LoCastro (2000) and Rose and Ng Kwai-fun (2001) and so on.

Our experience as foreign language teachers has shown that there is a need for instruction on pragmatics. In a modern world, where formerly distinct ways of living are brought increasingly into sharp contact, and people from different cultures have to share the same space, at least virtually, this need has become more urgent. The rapidly evolving and the widespread use of Internet communication tools such as e-mails, instant messengers, and forms of synchronous chat that have not only facilitated, despite its complexity, intercultural language communication but also proposed a huge shift in second and foreign language education and moved learners from simulated classroom-based contexts toward actual interactions with expert and native speakers of the target language. These Internet mediated interactions are actually broadening for the French second / foreign language learners the discourse options and engaging them in contact with their age- peers under less controlled conditions that would normally be the case in intra-class small group or class discussion. Thus, learners with less opportunities for travel, are nowadays frequently in less stressful unconscious learning conditions via this computer mediated discourse which is quite often informal and unpredictable be it asynchronous as in the case of e-mails or synchronous as with instant messenger: Yahoo, Google, Skype and chat websites). However, the use of all these Internet communication means require not only a fast processing of language knowledge but also a good competence in language use. While having to follow up the rhythm imposed by the native interlocutor, learners in such cases have also to process rapidly culture-specific expressions that they are often bombarded with. Knowledge of turn-taking mechanisms and exchange structures: the way in which the native interlocutor holds or passes the floor, when and how to overlap, to get into and out the conversation are all necessary in such situations. These mechanisms cannot simply be lifted from one language to another via translation. We have to teach them to our students if we want them to join in successfully. A good level of proficiency in grammar has proved to be not enough. Indeed, without instruction on pragmatics a learner of high grammatical proficiency will not necessarily show a wide range of pragmatic competence. Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989:10) reported that «Even fairly advanced language learners communicative acts regularly contain pragmatic errors, or deficits, in that they fail to convey or comprehend the intended illocutionary force or politeness value». Some studies (e.g. Yamashita 1996, Hill 1997; Roever 2005) showed that high language proficiency participants had better performance in tests of pragmatics than low language proficiency participants in English as second language context. What is valid for English is also valid for French either as a second or a foreign language. Indeed, language proficiency is necessary for pragmatic ability but not sufficient for it. On the other hand, other studies (e.g. Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford 1991, 1993; Omar 1993; Takahashi and Beebe 1987) showed disparities between learners' grammatical development and pragmatic development. They reported that even learners who exhibit high levels of grammatical competence may exhibit a wide range of pragmatic competence when compared with native speakers in conversations. Bordovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998:234) relates this disparity to two main reasons: «input and the salience of relevant linguistic features in the input from the point of view of the learner». However, the universal pragmatics principle states that unlike children in L1 acquisition, L2 learners are usually pragmatically competent in their L1, hence they bring a supposedly universal pragmatic knowledge to the task of L2 learning (ibid: 164). Though this is true, we may argue that not all pragmatic knowledge is universal. Some is specific and culture dependent, and can therefore be a potential source of misunderstanding and inappropriate communicative behaviour as we shall see. Only few of pragmatics is universal. Learners need to be instructed on L2 pragmatics.

Whatever the learners' case is, whether they have no pragmatic knowledge of the target language or possess some pragmatic universals that they do not act upon, teachers must intervene and incorporate an awareness L2 pragmatics in their teaching. This is a prerequisite condition if they wish truly to implement an approach that enables their students to communicate effectively. We should, in fact, in our attempt to lead the French second /foreign language learner to proficiency goes far beyond linguistic competence, and take into account pragmatics. While developing knowledge and understanding of how the new language works, the learner must also develop an awareness and a sensitivity to sociocultural patterns of behaviour. It is only skilfully combined linguistic and pragmatic knowledge that can lead to communicative competence in foreign language learning. Communicating with speakers of other languages is a complex behaviour that requires both linguistic and pragmatic competence. Whether we speak in our mother tongue or in a foreign language, we are influenced by sociocultural norms and constraints that affect the way we communicate.

What we are pinpointing at is the issue of the extent to which pragmatic interpretation and discourse structure are culture specific, and the extent to which they need to be – or can be – taught. In order «to do things with words» or to use, Hallidays's terms, to move from meaning potential to meaning realization either as addressers, that is as language producers, or as addressees, as language interpreters we need, additionally to the formal knowledge of the system a knowledge of use. This, as to Morgan (1998:656) points out, involves «convention of usage, convention governing the use of meaning-bearing expressions on certain occasion, for certain purposes» (ibid).

Cook (1989:42) argues that a second /foreign language learner has to be embarked in the exploration of three areas: language system, paralanguage and culture knowledge. Unless these components: language system, paralanguage and cultural knowledge to which we include the knowledge of the pragmatic systems are taught as a whole, they cannot be efficient in foreign language learning. Until recently – the early eighties – language teaching has focused on the three elements of the language system: pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary. This is mostly due to the fact that linguistics as a discipline has always impinged on language teaching. The implicit assumption was that what is relevant in linguistic description must necessarily be directly relevant to pedagogy. This is not always true. Even Chomsky expressed scepticism about the significance of linguistics for language teaching (see Widdowson 1990:09). So, the idea went on that once the student masters these discrete components of language, s/he can later integrate them with success in any communicative situation. But, I do take the view that no matter how successful we are in the mastering of these components, we need to be taught both the cultural variation of any pragmatic discourse interpretation - whatever its variation might be – and the fact that its interaction with the form is language specific. This may seem a somewhat a fanciful claim, but no less a person than Hymes (1972:279) has made such a suggestion when asserting that the acquisition of competence for use must go side by side with the acquisition of competence for grammar (cf Hymes' model of communicative competence). That is what foreign language teachers either tend to forget or totally ignore. They should be fully aware that the teaching foreign languages must be conducted not only for students to learn how to use the tool, but also to cultivate cross- cultural awareness and pragmatic competence. This, as I have said, should be conducted through offering learners important aspects from the educational fields of the humanities and social sciences. It is only then that they can hope to unfold the splendid and extraordinary language and culture before the learners' eyes. The stimulation and enthusiasm will be such that learners will be actively involved in the act of learning, moving thus, to use Widdowson's terms, from the act of teaching as authoritarian to that of authoritative, from teacher's authority to learner's autonomy without undermining the former's role. This in fact is the objective set behind the implementation of the Competency Based Approach.

The relative failure of foreign language teaching is, we would argue, a failure not only in the grasp of the cultural elements of the language, but also in the use of the linguistic knowledge as a resource for creating and interpreting discourse that is obviously loaded with all its sociocultural dimension. Language figures centrally in our lives. It is a means through which we not only communicate but also commune. It has, as Kramsch (1998:3) said, a cultural value and thus, it symbolises cultural reality. This makes learning about culture and the way it is reflected in discourse prerequisite. An utterance cannot be understood, unless it has first met certain required culturally defined conditions or contexts. This seems to us a key point for success in any foreign language learning. There is a raising awareness that learning about a foreign language also involves understanding something of the culture within which this language is embedded. This

involves, as it is advocated by McCarthy and Carter (1994:165), «an aesthetic understanding, appreciating the creative play and invention of language use». If meaning is social as it is advocated by Halliday, then it is useless to teach fixed, normative cultural patterns of discourse. We should rather replace these prescribed cultural facts and behaviour by an intercultural approach makes evident the disparities between L1 and L2 cultures and use these disparities as a tool which instead of hindering pragmatic awareness and communicative competence fosters it. Textbook designers do not seem to be aware that our concern should be no so much with the amount of information given, but with making learners aware of and encouraging them to use the new cultural information, no matter how little it is, in a way that influences positively on their strategic communicative choices. The problem here seems to derive from a failure to set instructional objectives that are more likely related to real-life competencies.

It is not enough to tell learners about the culture of the target language- this is not a course on civilisation- but we should rather teach them how some cultural aspects influence the native speakers' use of language. This is done through activities and tasks that deal with the appropriateness of use.

Our students cannot acquire the pragmatic dimension unless they are introduced to the culture of the foreign language. There is no other way of doing without it. The achievement of proficiency ultimately depends on the degree of awareness of what is pragmatically distinctive of the target language. Students must learn when and how to use appropriately particular expressions in particular contexts. However, it should be noted that we must not get confused between telling learners about the culture of the target language- this is not a course on civilisation- and teaching them how some cultural aspects influence the native speakers' use of language. This latter- which is related to the domain of Interlanguage Pragmatics, is done through activities and tasks that deal with the appropriateness of use. Discourse Completed Tasks (DCT) have been proved to be pedagogically very useful.

The aim, as we have already pointed out, is to facilitate learners' ability to find socially appropriate language for the situations they encounter and give them choices about their interactions in the target language. This -seems to us- is the positive impact of an instruction aimed at raising learners' pragmatic awareness. The goal, as Bardovi-Harlig (2003:38) argue, is not to insist on conformity to a particular target language, but rather to help learners become familiar to the pragmatic practices of L2 that shape the daily communicative behaviour of native speakers. The issue of language imperialism, we think, should not be raised by any mean. Learners can always maintain their own cultural identities while participating fully at L2 communication.

Up to date, language teachers still hesitate to teach pragmatics in the classroom. This is largely due to an ignorance of the theoretical background that this teaching involves, and the limited number of available pedagogical resources.

Indeed, pragmatic awareness should be our main objective in foreign language teaching. It is the teachers' responsibility to make their learners aware that languages differ in the way they use different speech acts, conversation routines and so on. What works in one culture does not necessarily work well in another, though it is true that some pragmatic knowledge is universal and some aspects may be successfully transferred from the learner's native language. Praising a girl of being fat, for instance in Western Africa is considered a compliment; while in European and even some Arab countries it is perceived as an insult. Compliments are one type of speech acts that differ considerably from some Arabic variations to French for instance. Arabs, in genral, have the tendency to over exaggerate when complimenting as in the following example: «You have been so terrific. I will never forget your performance today». Said to a native French this expression would be considered as inappropriate and exaggerated. S/he might consider it as offending. Under certain circumstances, it may even be considered as a speech act of sarcasm. Even when accepting a compliment, Arabs tend either to return it or relate the object of compliment to the speaker's assistance. This might sound insincere to native speakers or even embarrassing to them as they do not expect this behaviour from us. In Western culture, words with strong feeling like «excellent, terrific, fabulous' are rather adopted for encouragement than complimenting, whereas this is not the case in Algerian culture.

An example of intercultural communication was mentioned in a study carried out by Anthony J. Liddicoat and Chantal Crozet in (Rose and Kasper 2001:128-129). The starting point of their investigation was a unit of teaching that focused on the question «T'as passé un bon weekend? ». They noticed that in Australian English, the question is generally a conventional form of a greeting sequence on Mondays. It is a formulaic question followed by a reciprocal answer (extract from Béal 1992: 28 in ibid):

Woman: Did you have a pleasant weekend?
Man: I did. What about you?
Woman: I did too.

Most of the time, the exchange finishes at this point and it is extended only if it is followed by another question. However, in French the question is not ritualized. It functions to initiate a topic and hence requires a quite long exchange and by the same token it contrasts with the Australian equivalent. Here is the extract of a French commenting on his frustration so far as this topic is concerned:

Oui, ben oui, je me sui rendu compte que c'est vraiment des formules de politesse ! (Petit rire de dérision). A la limite si on vous pose la question, c'est qu'on veut vous dire 'Bonjour. Comment ça va ? en fait ils attendent pas la réponse. Si on pose cette question en français, c'est qu'on s'y intéresse, parce qu'autrement on dirait, « Bonjour, comment ça va ? » C'est tout. Bon, mais si effectivement on demande, « Alors, vous avez passé un bon weekend ? » ça encourage à dire : « Qu'est ce que tu as fait ? … » alors que ici (en Australie), à la limite, non c'est bon. « Bonjour, comment ça va ? » et puis on écoute pas. Ou si effectivement, si on développe, bon à la limite, ils en attendaient pas autant ! (Petit rire) …moi je suis toujours resté avec mon réflexe français, j'ai pas changé, si on me demande comment … comment était le week-end, je vais vous dire ce que j'ai fait pendant mon week-end. (Béal, 1992:206-207).

This cross-cultural difference in conventionalization can further be illustrated by the use of exclamatory questions which are used conventionally in Arabic as complementing strategies as in:

What is this beauty!

Where as it is not in different varieties of French.

A lot of French textbooks that we have come across in the Middle East countries fail somehow to raise these particular points. To avoid such situations, the foreign language learner must be aware of the differences of some communicative acts between ethnolinguistically distant speech communities. Students who do not have access to the pragmatic norms of the target language may negatively transfer those of their own language to the target language. This negative transfer takes the form of translating some equivalent formulaic expressions which express certain speech acts in L1 that are different in L2. The real issue here is the recognition that what may appear to be identical utterances in two languages may actually have very different pragmatic and cultural meanings, and that this in turn affects the way in which language is used in such events. Awareness of differences like these is critical for language learners, particularly in their interaction with native speakers of the target language.

Very few foreign language learners sound like native speakers. One reason for that lies in the fact that language has always been taught as an idealised version that is not only standardised, but also decontextualised, i.e. deprived – in Halliday's sense- from its social semiotic dimension. Students are introduced to linguistic signs without being aware of their social and cultural motivation and the way they have been developed to express social meanings. They are presented with language items called sentences rather than with language items called utterances. Most of the problems that French foreign language learners face in intercultural communication are pragmatic. Teachers often choose not to stress pragmatic knowledge in their classrooms, focusing instead on linguistic knowledge. Eslami-Rasekh et al. (2004) warns that this might result in pragmatic failure when foreign language learners communicate with native speakers. The content of foreign language teaching courses has always been defined in terms of the formal elements of the code rather the identification of the concepts of these elements and what social functions or illocutions they account. It has never expunged grammar from the learner's curriculum. Although this may be a very positive point as it makes the learner prepared for the detailed descriptive analysis of the language so necessary for him to increase his understanding and awareness, it does not help much since it has been proved that «what people want to do through language is more important than mastery of the language as an unapplied system» (Wilkins 1976:42). Unfortunately, teachers seem to have no clear definition of what exactly is meant by communication or comprehensible input. The term communicative syllabus that derives from such notion sets out a variety of communicative abilities that the learner should be able to demonstrate

at the end of his course. However, devising activities that make students talk in the classroom without experiencing language in use in all its multifaceted dimensions, even if it may stimulate interest and encourage learners to speak, bears little if no resemblance to communication, though some honour it with the name. No matter how good the methodology applied in the classroom might be, it cannot compensate for the lack of one's ignorance of a key concept in language teaching.

Whether we teach language for communication or language as communication (Widdowson 1984:215), it is imperative that we take into consideration the findings and recommendations made in the field of discourse analysis and pragmatics. Proficiency in language learning, be it formal or pragmatic, requires a combination of the different types of knowledge of the target language (formal, schematic and pragmatic) with conversational skills and strategies. This will enable us to use the target language effectively and appropriately in various social and cultural contexts. The idea we are advocating throughout this article is to develop an approach to language teaching methodology that takes recent thinking in discourse analysis and pragmatics into account from both the linguistic and sociocultural perspectives. Language teachers, seems to us, are in need for a discourse/pragmatics perspective on language. The development of such an approach depends on providing learners with sufficient and appropriate input, though one must admit that research – based recommendations for instruction in pragmatics have not been examined in action. We still do not have a clear idea about the way this approach can be implemented in classrooms and how effective it is for students' learning of the targeted pragmatics feature (complementing, conversational structure and management). We have to admit that this particular field of inquiry is still in its infancy. It is clear that we are far from reaching a comprehensive understanding of pragmatic competence but progress has been made in recent years. However, even an incomplete understanding should not stop us from applying what we do know in the language classroom, as Rose (1997: 272) says:

…pedagogical efforts will, for the foreseeable future, be forced to take Morgan's approach to theory and research…That is, not to be concerned with definition, but to jump right in and – with the information that is available – direct our efforts towards what we think is pragmatics. The tyranny of the classroom will not allow for anything else…

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