The Effect of Social Factors on English Language Acquisition

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1. Abstract

The goal of the current paper is to consider the effect of social factors on language acquisition, focusing on the processes of English second language acquisition (ESL). My argument is based on the assumption that communication is a form of social interaction and thus the role of social factors on language acquisition and usage can and should not be ignored. Fundamental to this position is the idea that language is inherently ambiguous, a premise upon which the field of pragmatics is based (for a discussion, see Thomas, 1995). In other words, the interpretation of meaning in all communication is dependent on context, which includes a vast myriad of social factors. To illustrate this position, examples are presented including a discussion of cross-cultural research on value systems (e.g., Hofstede, 1991) as well as research on thanking (e.g., Long, 2010), requesting (Hill et al., 1986) and greeting (Mizutani, 1981) behavior in Japanese and English.

2. The Ambiguous Nature of Language

A commonly held stereotype about the Japanese language is that it is ambiguous. Such statements are usually made in comparison to a language such as English (particularly American English), which is commonly assumed to be direct and unambiguous. Such beliefs, rather than inform about the objective reality of language, provide insight into stereotypes regarding representative members of these two groups : Japanese and Americans.

Whether Japanese is inherently more ambiguous than English or not is an empirical question beyond the scope of the current paper (for a discussion of this issue see, Ide, 2006 ; Thomas, 1995). However, for the current study, suffice it to say that all languages (English as well as Japanese) are ambiguous by nature. The goal of the current section is to provide evidence in support of this statement as well as to explain the theoretical basis upon which it stands.

One of the great challenges facing translators and interpreters is the faithful representation of meaning on multiple levels when converting utterances from one language into another. As an example of the difficulty inherent in this task, consider the following :

1) "I love you"

How does one go about translating this phrase ? The most straightforward method, often employed by novice translators, is to seek out corresponding words and grammatical forms in the target language and to mechanistically replace them to arrive at the following solution.

2) 私（僕, 俺）は あなた（きみ, おまえ）を 愛しています（愛している）。
[watashi (boku, ore) wa anata (kimi, omae) o aishiteimasu (aishiteiru)]

Of course such a straightforward translation is problematic for a number of reasons. First, the English personal pronoun "I" has a number of counter parts in Japanese : 私 (watashi), 僕 (boku), and 俺 (ore) to name a few. The same goes for the personal pronoun "you" : あなた (anata), きみ (kimi), and おまえ (omae). We also run into a problem in choosing the type of ending for the verb "love" : ます (masu) vs. いる (iru). When confronted with such options, it becomes clear that the type of information encoded in lexical and grammatical items is not necessarily identical across languages. In the case of Japanese, as is apparent from the simple example presented above, information regarding the relationship between interlocutors (e.g., hierarchy, closeness) as well as certain contextual information (e.g., formality) is encoded in personal pronouns and verb endings in a way that is not found in English.

However, there is an even greater problem facing translators and interpreters. That is, the very nature of the meaning of the above example depends on the context within which it is uttered. In other words, to make the appropriate choice regarding the above options and arrive at a translation of optimally equal value to that of the original utterance, we must make use of contextual information.

Pragmatics, an area within the field of linguistics, is based on this very premise. In other words, pragmatics takes as its starting point the idea that there exists a fundamental gap between the surface meaning ("locutionary" meaning) and the intended meaning ("illocutionary" meaning) of utterances (e.g., Searle, 1969 ; Thomas, 1995). Moreover, the goal of pragmatics is to uncover systemic explanations for how speakers arrive at appropriate interpretations of utterances, specifically considering the relationship between language and context. To further illustrate this point, consider the above example (1) ("I love you") when uttered in following three contexts.

3) when said by a man/woman to his/her lover
4) when said at the end of a long-distance telephone conversation by a father to his adult son
5) when said by soldier to a fellow soldier who is dying on the battle field

These examples illustrate how an identical utterance can take on different meanings depending on the context. It can be argued that all of the examples shown above share a common core meaning in that they express a strong emotional connection between the speaker and the hearer. However, the nature of the connection is clearly distinct. In the case of (3), it is one of passion ; in the case of (4), parental concern ; and in the case of (5), a bond formed in the face of great peril.

The significance of these differences become clear when presented with the task of translating the utterance "I love you" in each of these three contexts into Japanese. In the case of example (3), it could be argued that the passionate connection intended by the speaker is fairly accurately expressed in the translation shown in example (2) (this, of course, does not address the issue of choice of personal pronouns and verb endings discussed above). Such a translation, however, is clearly inappropriate for examples (4) and (5). An appropriate translation of these examples must accurately convey the intended meaning of parental affection and concern expressed in situation (4) and the bond of camaraderie expressed in example (5).

It may well be that no appropriate translation exits. This is the case when the intended meaning expressed by the speakers in the given context is inappropriate (i.e., would not be expressed) in the culture for which the translation is targeted. This fact, in and of itself, again illustrates the strong relationship that exists between language and culture and also raises the question of the underlying nature of that relationship in general (for a discussion see, Wardhaugh, 1986).

Examples similar to those shown above abound. Without belaboring the point, suffice it to say that language is clearly ambiguous on multiple levels (e.g., the lexical, grammar, phrasal) and contextual information allows interlocutors to fill in the blanks between words in order to arrive at accurate interpretations of meaning in the processes of communication.

As 'context' includes of a vast array of information regarding social norms, expectations and values shared by the members of a given language community, an understanding of social factors is crucial in the usage and acquisition language. It has in fact been argued that the mastering of the appropriate *interpretation* and *application* of utterances constitutes the very core of what scholars refer to as 'communicative competence' (e.g., Sueda & Fukuda, 2003 ; Trenholm & Jensen 2000).

3. Cultural Values

As noted above, the interpretation of utterances is intrinsically tied to context. Moreover, gaining an understanding of the correct interpretation and usage of such linguistic forms is central to overall communicative competence. In order to properly address this issue, a consideration of cultural values is necessary. Researchers have long recognized the effect of cultural values on a wide variety of human behavioral patterns, including communication.

The widely cited Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis (e.g., Sapir, 1921) is one example of an attempt at explaining the relationship between language and thought. According to this hypothesis, the structure of language (e.g., lexical and grammatical) directly effects the way individuals think. In other words, language provides the cognitive tools of thought and thus the nature of those 'tools' determines the nature of the final product (e.g., cognitive reality). Over the years, much controversy has surrounded this hypothesis and there is by-no-means a consensus regarding its validity (for a recent discussion and review, see Deutscher, 2010). However, there are few who deny the existence of a strong relationship between language and culture.

There also exists a large body of research into cross-cultural differences in values systems. Hofstede's research is a classic example of one such attempt (Hofstede, 1991). Among the five 'universal' human values that Hofstede identifies in his study of over 100,000 IBM employees working in 50 different countries, the most widely cited among researchers of Japan is the distinction between individualism and collectivism.

According to Hofstede, the collectivism/individualism continuum represents the universal struggle between individual and group needs. When these two needs are in conflict, individuals from cultures which place a higher value on collectivism (e.g., Japan) will tend to give precedence to group needs. In contrast, those from individualistic cultures (e.g., the United States) will place the needs of the individual over those of the group.

Psychologists have further developed this concept to account for the way in which individuals view themselves in relation to others, specifically in-group and out-group members. According to this view, the Japanese draw a more marked distinction between in-group and out-group members compared with members of more individualistic cultures such as the United States (e.g., Nisbett, 2003). This distinction, referred to as 'uchi-soto' (inside-outside) in Japanese, has been commonly cited by scholars as an influencing factor on the communicative behavior of Japanese (e.g., Gudykunst & Nishida, 1994).

Of course research on cultural values must be viewed critically. Much of such research has been carried out using survey questionnaires, a methodology which is clearly limited. Also, there can exist significant individual variation in the degree of affect of cultural values on behavior (for discussion, see Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2003). For these reasons we must avoid making sweeping generalizations when attempting to predict the behavior of individuals from specific groups.

However, there is also much research supporting the idea that value systems affect language usage at a variety of levels. In particular, research regarding thanking (e.g., Long, 2010), requesting (Hill et al., 1986), and greeting (Mizutani, 1981) indicate significant cross-cultural differences in behavior as well as the values underlying such behavior. The following section presents a discussion of this research.

4. Gratitude

As noted above, the interpretation of utterances is fundamentally dependent on context. Moreover, pragmatics is the field in linguistic dedicated to the systematic explanation of the nature of this process. Perhaps the most influential theory which has addresses this issue is Speech Act Theory (Searle, 1969).

According to Speech Act Theory, a large percentage of human communication is carried out with the main function of maintaining social relationships (and not the transmission information). In other words, language is a means of performing social acts, hence the title "Speech Act Theory". Specifically, this theory proposes that interlocutors are able to interpret ambiguous utterances because they understand the nature of the social action that is being performed. As an example, consider the following dialogue carried out between a professor and a student who arrives late to class.

Teacher : "Thank you very much!"
Student : (a) "Your welcome"
(b) "Sorry I'm late"

Judging solely from the surface meaning of the teacher's utterance (thank you very much), response (a) from the student would be appropriate. However, in consideration of the context, this is clearly not the case. However, there remains the issue of explaining how such a conclusion can be accurately reached by the student. According to Speech Act Theory, the student has an understanding of the social act of "thanking" and based on this knowledge is able to assess that the teacher's use of the phrase "thank you" is, in fact, not an expression of gratitude and thus does not warrant the use of "your welcome" as a response.

According to the theory, speech acts must fulfill certain conditions to be realized. For example, according to Searle, one fundamental condition that must be met in order for an utterance to qualify as an expression of gratitude is that it must be preceded by an act which is of benefit to the individual who expresses the gratitude. In the case of the above example (i.e., a student arriving late to class), it is clear that this condition is not met. In this way, interlocutors make judgments regarding utterances based on an understanding of such conditions in order to arrive at accurate interpretations of speaker meaning.

It is crucial, therefore, to understand the relevant conditions of a given situation. Moreover, as these conditions and the values underlying them can vary across cultures, a systematic consideration of these issues is necessary for successful second language acquisition. As an example consider the following interaction in Japanese.

A : kore wo otoshimasita yo [You dropped this]
(Picks up handkerchief and hands it to B)
B : (a) sumimasen [I'm sorry]
(b) arigato [thank you]

In the above example, both the apology expression "sumimasen" and the gratitude expression "arigato" are possible responses. However, both research and casual observation confirm that the apology expression "sumimasen" (I'm sorry) is far more common. Of course, as noted above, we can not determine the meaning of an utterance based solely on the surface form. In other words, we should not be hasty in assessing that the above speech act is in fact an act of apology at all.

Based on the Searle's conditions, as discussed above, the above is clearly a gratitude situation. However, scholars of Japanese (e.g., Long, 2010 ; Nakata, 1989) point out that an interpretation of the 'conditions' pertaining to the above speech act can in fact differ across cultures.

As noted by Searle, the above situation entails a previous act carried out by the receiver of the expression of gratitude (i.e., picking up and handing the handkerchief to B). However, in carrying out the very act which serves as the object of gratitude, B also incurs a certain physical and psychological burden. According to Searle, the incurring of a burden on behalf of someone is one of the necessary conditions to the speech act of apology. In other words, on closer examination the act of 'gratitude' simultaneously fulfills the necessary conditions for 'apology.' Moreover, as the above example illustrates, the interpretation of the situation (and the resulting behavior) can differ across cultures.

As reported in previous studies (e.g., Coulmas, 1981 ; Ide, 1998), it is quite common for apology expressions to be utilized by Japanese in situations that are considered by English speakers to be situations of gratitude. This point underscores the social nature of language in general and the culture depended nature of speech acts such as gratitude/apology in particular. As these utterances serve as a verbal form of social action, they provide a valuable window into the social norms and values of a given culture.

Regarding Japanese, Long (2010) argues that the way gratitude is expressed reveals the high value placed on role-relations in Japanese society. Long's study, for example, reveals that the probability that an apology expression will be used in a gratitude situation increases relative to the degree to which the expectedness of the act decreases. In other words, the less likely that an act will be performed (given the specific nature of role-relations), the more likely an apology expression will be employed. In this way, gratitude can be seen as marking the boundaries of role-relations in Japanese.

5. Requests

Similar to gratitude, requests are also a form of social action as defined within Speech Act Theory. Consider the following example of multiple ways to request someone to open a window.

6) "It's hot in here"
7) "Can you open a window ?"
8) "Open the window"

Example (7) is a subjective statement regarding the air temperature. Example (8) is a question regarding ability. Only example (9) is a direct request to open the window. Regardless, all three of the above examples have a similar speaker meaning. That is, they are all requests to open a window. What is the difference between these and more importantly, why do these differences exist ?

One crucial point to be considered is the fact that language serves at least two distinct functions (1) to convey information ; and (2) to maintain social relationships. In the above, we see a combination of these two functions interacting to create a variety of ways to make the same request.

A cross-cultural comparative study by Hill et al. (1986) illustrates this point. In their investigation of requests, they reveal interesting similarities and differences in how Japanese and Americans balance the need to convey information with the need to maintain social relations.

For their study they investigated how speakers of Japanese and English request to borrow a pen from multiple interlocutors of varying power distance and solidarity (e.g., a professor, a stranger, a significant other, a younger sibling). Their results indicate a number of interesting findings.

First, they found power and solidarity significantly effected requests in both languages. Speakers used less direct or more polite expressions with interlocutors who were in higher positions of power and less close psychologically. However, they found these affects were far greater in Japanese. In other words, there was a sharp distinction between the use of certain forms with higher-ups and non-intimates compared with equals and intimates. In contrast, polite expressions in English exhibited a more even distribution with only a small handful of casual expressions being reserved for intimates such as family members.

The results of this research underscore (1) the effect of social factors on language use and (2) the variation in such effects that can be found across cultures. They also have significance for learners of English as a second language. As noted above, the appropriate interpretation and usage of utterances in context critically defines a speakers communicative competence. Therefore an understanding of these differences and their cross-cultural significance can not be ignored.

6. Greetings

Similar to requesting and thanking, greetings are another example of a speech act which exhibits marked cross-cultural difference in usage. However, it could be argued that unlike requests, the sole function of greetings is to maintain social relationships. In other words, the propositional content of greetings is in a sense all but absent. Consider the following interaction in support of this claim.

A and B meet in the elevator on the way up to their office

A) How's it going ?

B) How's it going ?

The response to a greeting is a greeting. This is not to say that there do not exist responses (e.g., fine) to such greetings. However, by and large such responses are the exception and, as the following illustrates, they are often quite inappropriate.

A) How's it going ?

B) Actually I'm not doing to well. I have a bit of a cold and my wife lost her job. Also, my kids are…

Clearly, in the context of a greeting, such an extended response is unusual if not highly inappropriate. A successful advertising campaign launched by the Budweiser/Anheuser Busch Corporation in the late 1990s utilized this fact with comedic results. Throughout the entire 3-minute advertisement, other than the final catch line "true, true" all 5 of the characters who appear utter almost nothing beyond the greeting "what's up ?" (pronounced "wazzzzup").

The humor lies arguably in two places. One, the exaggerated pronunciation of the greeting is, in and of itself, humorous. This is evidenced by a spin-off of the advertisement in which the same characters eating at a Japanese restaurant repeat the greeting "wazzaabi" in place of "wasabi" (the Japanese spice mixed with soy sauce when eating sushi). In other words, the play on sounds has comedic value.

However an interpretation more relevant to the current analysis is one which recognizes the way in which the advertisement exploits the nature of the act of greeting in and of itself. The advertisement exploits the fact that greetings are essentially void of propositional content and thus serve the sole purpose of recognizing a social relationship. Thus, they typically are not accompanied by a response of any sustentative informational content (as shown in the example above). The multiple repetition of this act is humorous, then, because it both captures this nature of the act of greetings, while at the same time exaggerates it thought repetition.

Given this aspect of greetings, their usage is necessarily highly sensitive to cultural values and exhibit a high degree of cross-cultural variation. This point is addressed by Mizutani (1981) with regards to Japanese. As a result of his research, Mizutani claims that greetings in Japanese are used primarily to recognize and reinforce in-group (not out-group) relations. He further contends that within a given in-group relationship (e.g., a company), greetings are used to separate interlocutors of varying distance. For example, he reports that "ohayogozaimasu" (literally translated as "good morning") is reserved for interlocutors with whom one works directly (e.g., the same section), whereas "konnichiwa" (literally, "hello") is used with employees with whom one has no direct working relationship within the company.

7. Summary & Conclusion

The current paper has considered the role of social factors on language acquisition, focusing primarily on issues significant to second language learners of English. The current discussion has highlighted the argument that communication competence is dependent on the successful interpretation and application of utterances in context. To illustrate this claim, I discussed the ambiguous nature of language itself and explained how this issue is addressed within the field of pragmatics. As part of this discussion, the role of cultural values was considered and specific examples of how values affect the use of language were provided for the speech acts of thanking, requesting and greeting.

Strikingly absent from the current discussion was a consideration of practical applications of these issues to the language learning process itself. Clearly, in recent years there has been a growing awareness of these issues among language teaching professionals. As a result, there has been much collaboration between sociolinguists and second language educators on both the theoretical and practical levels (e.g., Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989 ; Wolfson 1989).

As a result of such efforts, there has also been a marked growth in attempts to incorporate information regarding the effect of social norms on language behavior into educational teaching practices. However, much work remains to be done. One challenge to such efforts is the fact that often times this aspect of language use can only be acquired through actual hands on exposure and practice. In other words, much of what has been discussed here goes beyond the limitations of the classroom.

Needless-to-say, it remains a challenge for researchers and educators to further our knowledge regarding this subject and to continue to raise awareness of these issues both inside and outside of the classroom. Herein may lie the key to achieving true communicative competence if not heightened cross-cultural awareness.

8. References

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