Rudeness: An Important Element of L2 Competence

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The current paper will call for an expanded definition regarding the concept of L2 competence. To be communicatively competent in a second language, one must be able to interact in a variety of situations. Appropriately responding to rudeness is an important and often neglected key element in the definition of communicative competence.

Keywords : second language (L2) competence, language competence, language performance, rudeness.

Introduction

Beebe (1995) refers to a myth that exists within the field of pragmatics that rudeness is simply failed politeness. She further extends this notion by stating that rudeness serves the functions of getting power and venting negative feelings. Furthermore, Kasper (1990) makes an important distinction between motivated and unmotivated rudeness which will be elaborated on later.

Rationale

Because current definitions of communicative competence do not include responding to rudeness, the purpose of this paper is to call for an expanded definition of communicative competence. In order for a second language learner to be considered communicatively competent in English, he/she must be able to appropriately respond in a variety of situations. Encountering rudeness is common in English speaking countries, and thus, should be included in the definition of communicative competence. First, an overview of the definition of communicative competence will be provided. Then, a discussion of rudeness and politeness will be provided, followed by a discussion of a specific study related to rudeness. Finally, an expanded definition of the notion of communicative competence, incorporating responding to rudeness, will be called for.

Review of the Literature

An early definition of communicative competence is that put forth by Noam Chomsky. Chomsky (1965) makes the twofold distinction between competence and performance. Competence refers to the unconscious knowledge of language, which the ideal speaker/listener can say. Acquiring competence is independent of the acquisition of sociocultural features. Performance, on the other hand, is the use of the language in actual situations. Performance does not necessarily reflect competence (e. g. false starts made by native speakers). Thus for Chomsky, what a speaker knows is more important than the usage of that knowledge. Scholars (Hymes 1972, Canale & Swain 1980 and Bachman 1990) have since called for an expansion of this definition.

Hymes (1972) proposed a four-pronged definition of communicative competence. Hymes proposes an extension of Chomsky's dichotomy to reflect the abilities of actual users. This definition included what is:'formally possible' (grammatical factors), 'feasible' (psycholinguistic factors e.g. memory limitation), 'appropriate' (sociocultural factors-the intersection between the linguistic and

cultural) and 'in fact done' (this is the probably that it will occur). For the purpose of the current paper, the 'appropriate' portion of Hymes' model will be of particular importance.

Another influential definition of communicative competence is that put forth by Canale and Swaine (1980). Their model includes grammatical, sociolinguistic, and strategic competence. The parts of the model that concern the current paper are sociolinguistic and strategic competence. Sociolinguistic competence includes sociocultural rules of use and rules of discourse. Strategic competence includes both verbal and non-verbal communication strategies, and thus handles breakdowns in communication. For Canale and Swaine, communicative competence refers to both knowledge and skill. This is an important contribution to the definition because a second language learner needs to have both knowledge and ability to use that knowledge in order to be communicatively competent.

Bachman (1990) proposes the notion of 'communicative language ability' as a basis for language testing. It includes three components: language competence, strategic competence, and psychophysiological mechanisms. Under language competence, he makes a distinction between grammatical competence on the one hand and pragmatic competence on the other. Bachman categorizes sociolinguistic and pragmatic competence together. These categories of his model will concern the current paper.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide an in-depth analysis of previous definitions of communicative competence. This paper is mainly concerned with sociolinguistic/pragmatic competence because rudeness falls under this category.

A complicated problem arises when we attempt to measure the rather subjective categories of communicative competence such as sociolinguistic competence. Sociolinguistic competence refers to the ability to appropriately use the target language "social rules of speaking"

(Wolfson, 1989). For example, American English speakers often give a very clear reason when refusing an invitation such as, "I'd love to go, but I'm having dinner with my friend on that day." An example of a Japanese refusal is, "I'd love to go, but it is not convenient for me. Please invite me again." Therefore, sociolinguistic knowledge is an essential part of being communicatively competent. Clearly, for most of the previously mentioned scholars, sociolinguistic competence is an important aspect of communicative competence. However, rudeness is not included in the definitions of sociolinguistic competence which is a part of communicative competence.

The definition of communicative competence has grown to encompass the notion of sociolinguistic/pragmatic competence. Studies related to pragmatic competence usually focus on specific speech acts (e. g. Beebe and Takahashi 1989, Cohen & Olshtain 1981) or the acquisition of polite routines (Marriott 1995). While these studies have studied sociolinguistic/pragmatic competence as it is currently viewed in the literature, they have not specifically attempted to measure learners' ability to respond to rudeness. Therefore, it is first necessary to expand the definition of communicative competence to incorporate rudeness in order to provide a basis for future studies. Next, attention will be devoted to how rudeness is viewed in the linguistic literature.

Lakoff (1989) initially suggests that speakers operate within a simple dichotomy: polite vs. non-polite. However, she maintains that it is better to make a threefold distinction: polite, non-polite, and rude. 'Polite' utterances are those that are in accordance with the rules of politeness: whether or not they are expected in a certain type of discourse. 'Non-polite' behavior does not follow the politeness rules, nor is it expected to follow them. There are certain contexts such as a classroom or therapy session where interlocutors are not expected to follow usual politeness rules. For example, therapists often ask extremely personal questions that in other situations would

not be considered polite. 'Rude' behavior neglects to use politeness strategies when they are expected. This is done in a manner whereby the utterances are interpreted as intentionally and negatively confrontational. According to Lakoff's (1989) threefold distinction, rudeness should be easy to recognize since there is no other way to interpret those utterances.

Kasper (1990) defines rudeness as deviant from the socially established norm, and is both confrontational and disruptive to the social equilibrium. Both Kasper (1990) and Lakoff (1989) define rudeness as clearly recognizable, thus requiring redress. Therefore, it is safe to say that polite behavior is unmarked while rude behavior is marked. Marked forms are semantically and morphologically more complex than their unmarked counterparts (Lakoff, 2000). Marked forms are easily recognizable by native speakers as deviant. While native speakers of English are usually able to recognize rudeness, this is much more difficult for nonnative speakers because some rudeness strategies (e. g. irony) are very subtle. In addition, there is both situational and geographical variation in interpreting whether or not an utterance is rude. For example, an utterance that is considered rude by an interlocutor from a rural area might not be considered rude to an interlocutor from New York City where rudeness is a part of everyday life.

Expanding further on this point is the notion of conversation style. Beebe (1997) brought up Tannen's (1984 ; 1990) notion of differing "conversation styles." Tannen (1984; 1990) attests that a "high involvement" speaker shows interest in what the other speaker is saying through "cooperative overlap," which she distinguishes from "interruption." "High considerateness" speakers, on the other hand, usually wait until the other person's turn is finished before beginning a turn. When the term "interruption" is used, a negative value statement is being made about that particular speaker's actions; he/she has violated the other speaker's turn taking rights. Overlap

refers to simultaneous speech which supports what the other interlocutor is saying, thus being cooperative in nature. Therefore, if a "high involvement" speaker interacts with a "high considerateness" speaker, the speaker in the latter category may not have an opportunity to take a turn. The "high involvement" speaker may, in turn, interpret the "high considerateness" speaker's lack of overlap as not being interested. Speaker of both conversation styles may view the other interlocutor as rude. Thus what constitutes overlap or interruption varies within speech communities. Tannen characterizes speakers of Jewish ethnicity living in New York as high involvement. Moreover, Schiffrin (1984) discusses argument between people of Jewish ethnicity as sociability. Therefore, this further exemplifies the fact that rudeness is very difficult to classify due to variations in conversational styles, which may lead to differing conceptualizations of what constitutes rudeness. In any event, it is too simplistic to classify rudeness as failed politeness because of variation in conversation styles and conceptualizations of rudeness.

Clearly there is much variation in classifying rudeness depending on the norms of one's native speech community. For this reason, to be considered communicatively competent one must be able to respond to rudeness across various situations.

When we look at variation between speech styles cross-culturally, it becomes much more complicated. For example, a comparative study concerning responding to rudeness was conducted by Beebe (1997). The researcher created Discourse Completion Tests (DCTs) for her subjects to respond to various rudeness situations. DCTs are written roleplays where the participants are asked to respond to certain hypothetical situations, in this case related to rudeness. She then categorized their responses as particular strategies for responding to rudeness. Examples include: sarcasm, opting out, and apologizing. Opting out of a situation refers to choosing not to respond to

the rudeness. Some of her participants actually wrote "say nothing" or "opt out" while others left the space blank on the DCT. Beebe's data showed that her Japanese subjects opted out more than both her Chinese and American ones. She attested this to Speech Accommodation Theory (Giles and Smith, 1979), which describes speech accommodation as adjustments made between interlocutors. The sociocultural style implored by the American subjects was one of convergence toward the speaker. If the speaker was rude, the listener returned the rudeness. As expressed by Beebe (1997), "rudeness begets rudeness" (p.1). Thus the American participants became angered by the rudeness, and would usually respond with a response that would also be considered rude. The sociocultural style used by the Japanese subjects was one of divergence which she attested to the importance of social status within Japanese society, thus the participants chose not to respond to the rudeness. As previously stated, sometimes due to differing speech styles, what is defined as rude varies between people. However, when a dichotomy exists cross-culturally, as shown by Beebe, this is an additional challenge for Japanese learners of English. Besides acquiring second language linguistic knowledge, they must learn to adapt their sociocultural syle as well.

Due to an incomplete awareness of the social rules of speaking, there are times when a second language learner's utterance can be viewed as rude by a native speaker, and in some cases lead to cross-cultural pragmatic failure--the inability to understand what is meant by what is said (Thomas, 1983). This is what Kasper (1990) termed unmotivated rudeness. Previous studies have shown politeness patterns are difficult to acquire as a part of one's interlanguage (Tanaka, 1988). Japanese native speakers' spoken English is their interlanguage. Tanaka (1988) has called for the importance of also teaching informal expressions to Japanese learners of English, so they are not viewed as overly formal. Similarly, Marriott (1995) conducted a study on the acquisition of the Japanese politeness system by Australian exchange students who participated in a study abroad program in Japan. She found that not only were deviations from the honorific system evaluated negatively, but they were commonly viewed as inadequate by native Japanese speakers. Attention has been given in the literature to the acquisition of politeness routines by non-native speakers, and thus has indirectly studied unmotivated rudeness. What has not been given appropriate attention is to responding to motivated rudeness as an important aspect of communicative competence.

Discussion

Being able to appropriately employ speech acts (e.g. apology, acceptance, refusal) and politeness formulas in a second language is an important, and well researched, area within the field of pragmatics. However, attention needs to be given to another aspect of communication-namely responding to rudeness, especially motivated rudeness. This is an equally important, and neglected, aspect of communicative competence. Native speakers are able to forgive an error in grammar or pronunciation; however, a pragmatic error does not usually go unnoticed (Wolfson, 1989). Native speakers, especially those who do not speak a second language, are often unaware of the pragmatic strategies they unconsciously use; however, when these strategies are either not used or used inappropriately by another speaker, these errors are easy to recognize. Unfortunately, improper knowledge and use of sociolinguistic rules of a language can mark an individual as an "outsider" of that particular speech community. This is particularly important in a culture such as the United States where one may encounter rudeness, especially motivated rudeness, on a daily basis. Moreover, it appears that Japanese and American speakers have different sociocultural styles. The sociocultural style of opting out is not usually used by Americans. If one utilizes this style, it is likely to

mark him/her as a linguistic outsider. Therefore, Japanese speakers of English need to be equipped with the linguistic proficiency to respond to rudeness that they may encounter when traveling abroad to avoid being evaluated negatively or as communicatively incompetent by native speakers of English.

Conclusion

The definition of communicative competence has undergone much development over the years and has come to include the necessary component of sociolinguistic competence. While sociolinguistic competence is an important part of communicative competence, being able to respond to rudeness is also an essential element of being communicatively competence. The definition of communicative competence needs to be extended to include responding to rudeness.

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