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The Impact of Pragmatics on the Intentional Statements of Learners

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Abstract

Our research aims to study the pragmatic content in the interactions of university students regarding a specific topic: the preference for the language of study at the university. It involves analyzing conversations that take place between academics, through which we will uncover the unsaid elements of the speakers. We will attempt to demonstrate the illocutionary force behind seemingly simple statements.

Keywords : Pragmatics, Interactions, Students, Language , sentences.

Introduction

This research aims to analyze a questionnaire administered to French language undergraduate students at the University of Médéa in Algeria. The goal is to understand the pragmatic intent behind the statements of these students during conversations with their professor, while giving them the freedom to express themselves on the topic of language contact in their personal lives.

1. Theoretical Framework and Research Work

1.1 Data Collection

As part of our research on the impact of pragmatics in student discussions, our focus in this study is to describe and uncover the implicit pragmatics through interactions with students and their written responses.

Interaction is the cornerstone of communication between individuals: *"When an encounter begins, whether direct or mediated, the participants already maintain a certain type of social relationship"* (Goffman, 1974:38). This means that when interactants communicate, linguistic phenomena emerge.

The data in our corpus were collected through interviews with first-year undergraduate French students regarding their studies in the French language and their preferences for foreign languages to continue their educational journey.

1.1.1 Methodology

The description of the study consists of examining the manifestations of pragmatic elements in the students' responses. This research focuses on pragmatics and its various manifestations in the statements collected, as well as the exchanges with the students, considering these as an interactional context that needs to be analyzed:

"Interaction, this communicative production" (Kerbrat, 2005:97), involves an enunciative operation within a specific context. There exists a relationship: "between, on the one hand, the social event of interaction between an individual acquiring a language and other, generally more competent individuals, and, on the other hand, the actional processes of this individual" (Dausensdschon, 1993:03). These productions occur in contexts where both teacher and learner are actively involved.

2. Pragmatics

Pragmatics has undergone three significant stages in its history: its birth with Anglo-Saxon language philosophers Austin, Searle, and Grice; its cognitive orientation, shaped by Sperber and Wilson; and its integrated approach, developed through the works of Ducrot and Anscombe.

In this study, the objective is to introduce each participant to this foundational theory and to highlight its role in interaction, fostering familiarity with this relatively young discipline whose roots date back to the 1950s-1990s.

The aim is to grasp a discipline that claims to analyze the *use of language*, encompassing all phenomena involved in the interpretation of sentences that are neither covered by syntax nor semantics. Starting with Perelman, rhetoric in the 20th century became a concern for linguists, particularly language philosophers (Auroux) and semanticists, who integrated it into theories of language in use.

What is pragmatics?

From the Greek *pragma*: action. Initially, pragmatics found its place alongside syntax and semantics in a broad sense, as per Morris's (1938) framework for language analysis.

Syntax deals with the relationship between signs. Semantics deals with the relationship between signs and reality. Pragmatics deals with the relationship between signs and their users, encompassing everything related to the interpretation of statements in a broad context (deictics, illocutionary acts, evaluators, implicit meanings, connectors, etc.).

Pragmatics developed from the theory of speech acts. This theory demonstrates that the function of language is not essentially to describe the world but also to perform actions. It originated with the posthumous publication in 1962 of a series of lectures given in 1955 by John Austin, titled *How to Do Things with Words*. The French title of this work, *Quand dire, c'est faire* (1970), perfectly illustrates the aim of this theory. Following Austin, it was further developed by J.-R. Searle in two works: *Speech Acts* (1972) and *Expression and Meaning* (1982).

Pragmatics describes a component of language analysis.

For instance, consider a literal statement and the meanings attributed to it in context: "I've heard some interesting things about you" – an exchange between colleagues that, under a seemingly benevolent appearance, conceals an unpleasant insinuation.

As a discipline, pragmatics can be defined, following Moeschler, as "the study of language use in relation to the study of the linguistic system" (J. Moeschler and A. Reboul, 1994: 14). Language is not only used to communicate or write but also to influence the interlocutor or even the surrounding world.

2.1. Speech Act Theories

Pragmatics emerged with the discovery of a particular type of verb: performatives, which have the unique characteristic of accomplishing the act they denote.

For example, "I promise to come" is, in itself, the fulfillment of an act, that of promising to come. These are explicit performatives (*bet, bequeath, baptize, swear, wish, thank, etc.*) used in appropriate circumstances (first person, present tense).

Performativity can also be modified by the co-text:

"I often promise to come" or "The session opens at five o'clock."

Austin also recognized the existence of implicit (or primary) performatives, such as "I'll come." All statements, therefore, carry an illocutionary force, combining three types of acts:

- **Locutionary acts:** the act of saying something.
- **Illocutionary acts:** acts performed by the very act of saying them (direct effect).
- **Perlocutionary acts:** indirect effects produced by the statement.

Illocutionary acts can fail if conventions are not respected. These concepts were later refined and systematized by Searle in *Speech Acts* and *Expression and Meaning* (1979).

Searle defines illocutionary acts as actions performed through linguistic means (*to promise, to command, to thank*), including assertion, injunction, and commitment.

Examples of illocutionary acts include:

- **Assertives:** *Grammar is difficult.*

- **Directives:** *Bring me an apple.*
- **Commissives:** *I'll be on time for the meeting.*
- **Expressives:** *I'm very happy to see you.*
- **Declarations:** *The session is open.*

The pragmatic weight of statements is evident in the responses of students: Statements are transcribed verbatim, including errors:

1. **Student01:** *"The French language is established in the field of computing and administration. That's why we want to learn it."*
2. **Student02:** *"I like the French language because it is easy to pronounce."*
3. **Student03:** *"Kabyle, my mother's native language. Classical Arabic represents my identity. English is among the most widely used languages in the world, the language of technology."*
4. **Student04:** *"I'm comfortable with Classical and colloquial Arabic because they are my native languages. As for English, I'm proficient in speaking and writing without errors."*
5. **Student05:** *"I use English at home and with my friends because I like it a lot and I've mastered it."*
6. **Student06:** *"We use several languages at the same time, including French and Algerian Arabic, because our society needs to speak French. Besides, Arabic is the mother tongue of the country."*

In the statements above, the pragmatic dimension is evident at first glance, reflecting how these rituals of exchange highlight the frequent use of pragmatic forms regarded as acts and commitments. However, among these speakers, some clearly express opposition and refuse to use certain languages directly. This is reflected in the following responses:

7. **Student07:** *"Our mother tongue is used for all subjects and circumstances; for example, we use French at university, the same for English."*
8. **Student08:** *"The language we love is Algerian because it is our mother tongue, and it is the one we feel most comfortable with."*
9. **Student09:** *"I don't use Algerian Arabic in university courses, though sometimes in shops."*

Allowing students to express themselves freely reveals the richness and orientation of their thoughts. Thus, some responses show a total refusal to use a language, such as Arabic, in academic contexts, as in the case of the 9th student

2.1.2. Explicit, Implicit, and Presupposition

Some statements may carry a meaning far removed from their apparent form. For example:

"It's hot" could imply: *Open the window, turn off the heater, give me a drink, I can take off my jacket, I have nothing else to say, I want to go to the pool, etc.*

In addition to explicit content, implicit meanings may arise, sometimes dominating the statement's meaning.

- **Semantic implications:**
- *Pierre is single = He is not married.*
- *Pierre has read all of Balzac's novels = Pierre has read "Le Père Goriot".*
- **Presuppositions:**
- *Pierre has stopped smoking = He used to smoke.*

If negated (*Pierre has not stopped smoking*), the presupposition (*He used to smoke*) remains valid.

3. Pragmatic Interaction

As Kerbrat-Orrechioni notes, *"Throughout any communicative exchange, participants—referred to as interactants—exert mutual influence on one another. To speak is to exchange, and to change through exchanging."* (Kerbrat-Orrechioni, 1990:06).

Language classroom interactions have been a privileged field of research over the past two decades, driven by studies on language acquisition within interactionist or sociocognitive frameworks, where interactivity is fundamental. This interaction typically involves both teachers and learners.

BANGE (1992:13) demonstrates that the term "interaction" contains "action," thereby defining interaction as a reciprocal "social action." According to interactionists such as GOFFMAN, the term interaction means "encounter." He asserts: "By interaction, we mean all the interaction that occurs on any given occasion when members of a group are in continuous presence of one another" (Blanchet, 1995:145). He used the term "encounter" because he observed that members involved in an interaction remain in constant presence of one another. In other words, it is a network of encounters between two or more actors.

MAINGUENEAU (2002) highlights the importance of interaction in enunciation by affirming that "enunciation does not rely solely on the enunciator: interaction is essential" (PERRET-CLERMONT, 1936:36). This implies that interaction requires collaboration between the teacher and the learner. According to P. CLERMONT, "it is a situation of encounter between two actors (...) a common action among several individuals" (op. cit.: 67).

According to PHJONNAERT and C. VANDER BORCH et al., the didactic relationship can be defined as a set of interactions between a teacher and learners aimed at achieving specific teaching and learning objectives, within a determined temporal and spatial framework, typically in a school context (CUQ, 2003). P. CLERMONT defines interaction as a communication process where different participants, also referred to as "interactants," exert mutual influence over each other (Ibid., 1996:67).

Dubois emphasizes that interaction is defined as communication involving verbal exchange between two speakers, one producing a statement directed at the other, soliciting their attention and/or an explicit or implicit response (1973:80).

The LAROUSSE dictionary offers the following definition: interaction is described as a mutual influence between two phenomena or two people, with "verbal" implying the use of an articulated linguistic code (Larousse, 2010).

According to Goffman, a pioneer of interactional linguistics, interaction is merely a sequence of actions and reactions limited by time and space. Conversely, for Goffman, interaction encompasses society as a whole, which operates based on the same principles. "Interactions are the atoms of society. They forge all the rigidity and flexibility, all the color and uniformity of social life, which is so obvious to us and yet so mysterious." Interaction refers to all interactions that occur whenever members of a specific group are in constant presence of one another, and the term "encounter" can also be appropriate (Vion, 1992).

J-J. Gumperz defines verbal interaction as an exchange of speech between participants who mutually influence each other. Thus, "to speak is to interact" (Gumperz, 1989:13).

The *Petit Robert* defines interaction as "a reciprocal action" (1994), particularly in the context of verbal exchanges between the teacher and the learner, or among learners themselves.

MAINGUENEAU (2002) again underscores the importance of interaction in enunciation, asserting that "enunciation does not rely solely on the enunciator: interaction is essential" (PERRET-CLERMONT, 1996:36). This underscores the necessity of collaboration between teacher and learner. According to P. CLERMONT, "it is a situation of encounter between two actors (...) a common action among several individuals" (PERRET-CLERMONT, op. cit.: 67).

Speech markers such as greetings, introductions, non-verbal cues, and attention-capturing elements (e.g., "you know," "you see," "right?") are phatic markers designed to capture and verify the recipient's attention. On the recipient's side, these regulators take diverse forms, either non-verbal (e.g., frowning, nodding, brief smiling, postural shifts) or verbal (e.g., exclamatory morphemes, partial or full reformulations, brief comments).

Cosnier identifies three possible attitudes in reception:

- **Proper functioning** (signs of good reception of the message)
- **Dysfunction** (request for clarification: *What? Huh?*)
- **Stop** (erratic gaze, disengaged posture)

It is observed that the absence of regulators has a powerful inhibitory effect on the speaker. Similarly, in case of the speaker's failure, the listener compensates by multiplying signals. These elements are essential for the smooth progression of verbal interaction.

Verbal communication exchanges involve a continuous adjustment between interlocutors, often manifesting as anticipation. This may involve adjustments from Speaker 1 (S1) to Speaker 2 (S2) beforehand and throughout the exchange, or vice versa, through reactions or regulation. It can even include completing an S1 statement, known as "word theft."

Example:

Before a long weekend

S1: "And get some rest!"

S2: "Why?"

S1: "Because we have two days off, right? But honestly, you seem really full of energy!"

(Realizing afterward the ambiguity of the initial statement, S1 adjusts with an appropriate follow-up.)

Just like the speaker, the listener should also be considered an active participant. As such, the utterance becomes the product of collaborative effort.

The Concept of Competence

Example:

- Student 10: *French is the language of the colonizers.*
- Student 11: *Classical Arabic is more important because it is the language of the Quran.*

4. Prioritizing Dialogical and Oral Interactional Forms

Syntax analyses of language have generally been based on written materials. However, the role of various types of connectors and regulators is fundamental in oral communication. The study of conversations thus involves authentic oral exchanges, which are recorded and transcribed. Even a basic examination of these transcripts reveals clear differences between oral and written forms.

Oral messages are primarily characterized by:

- Linguistic inaccuracies
- Syntactic and lexical simplicity
- Miscellaneous issues (errors, unfinished statements, hesitation markers, repetitions)

These challenges are often attributed to the cognitive overload of spontaneous oral situations and the speaker's anxiety level.

Goodwin demonstrated that communication breakdowns are often caused by the adjustment process or the lack of regulators, destabilizing the speaker, who unconsciously employs strategies to restore communication. This reinforces the idea of productive listening and the listener's responsibility in ensuring the success of exchanges.

4.1 The Communication Situation

Exchanges are always studied in context. It is essential to specify:

- The setting
- Number of participants
- Characteristics of participants (age, gender, socio-professional status, geographic origin)
- Relationships between participants (colleagues, family, friends, hierarchical, commercial, strangers)
- Timing and location (geographic and specific setting)
- The conversation's objective

The type of conversation must also be defined—direct, telephonic, radio, televised, or otherwise.

4.2 Analysis Practice

Observation, Data Collection, and Transcription

The process is inductive, moving from observation and data collection to analysis. Data collection presents challenges:

- **Recording data (audio or video):** Participants either know they are being observed, which affects the naturalness of the exchange, or they are recorded without their knowledge, raising ethical and legal issues (e.g., image rights). Sociolinguist Labov referred to this as the “observer's paradox.”

5. Transcription

Though paradoxical (analyzing speech through writing), transcription is necessary and selective based on research objectives. Maintaining frequent contact with recordings is preferable. Various transcription methods highlight prosody or, for instance, overlaps between interlocutors.

5.1 Analysis

Analysis can be:

- **Transversal:** Focused on specific objectives (e.g., markers of agreement in exchanges).
- **Longitudinal:** Examining the entire conversation either generally or with a particular focus.

In dialogue, three types of acts are generally recognized:

1. **Exchange** – Typically a ternary sequence: solicitation/response/reaction. It is incomplete if any expected components are missing.
2. **Sequence** – One or more exchanges forming a thematic or pragmatic unit.
3. **Interaction** – Covers everything from the beginning to the end of the interaction.

5.2 Thematic Aspect

The theme of an exchange reflects the cohesion, progression, and continuity between sentences, achieved through collaboration among interlocutors.

Conversations can be categorized as continuous or discontinuous:

- **Thematic Discontinuity (or transition with boundaries):**

May explicitly conclude a thematic sequence (“*Have we finished on this point?*”) or implicitly (“*Anyway, we’ll see.*”). Context-related theme shifts may also occur (“*Oh, that noise... it’s the new neighbors who moved in last week.*”).

- **Thematic Continuity:**

Built on a series of connections, starting with ratification (agreement on a theme explicitly or implicitly). Elaboration occurs through thematic development, such as descriptive, explanatory, narrative, argumentative, or casual discussions often triggered by external elements. These forms may interweave.

5.3 Discourse Markers

Characteristics of spoken French, discourse markers primarily ensure continuity in speech. They can be classified by function:

- **Structural Indicators:** Openers (*well, by the way*) or conclusives (*so, fine, well then*).
- **Co-construction Markers:** Often phatic markers (*you know, you see*) that seek the listener’s attention or agreement (*huh?*).
- **Discourse Markers:** Connectors (*so, then, therefore*) to structure narratives or arguments, or reformulation markers (*finally, that is to say, I mean*).

5.4. Interpersonal Relationships in Interaction

Interaction takes place within a social framework that follows certain rules. During the exchange, it is important to manage the “faces” of the participants. The individual presents themselves as having adopted a certain conduct (their “face”), which corresponds to the image they wish to project according to assumed social expectations. Therefore, in interactions, they must maintain this conduct to avoid losing face. However, interaction can pose a threat due to the incompatibility of individual desires. The goal is for each participant to avoid engaging in offensive actions and to repair any actions they have committed. During interaction, everyone takes the necessary precautions to maintain face.

5.5. Politeness in Exchange

Politeness is not limited to principles of good manners; it builds a true relationship with others and the world. According to Brown and Levinson, the concept of “face” includes two aspects:

- **Negative face** (or territory) is the personal space of each individual that they have the right to protect (bodily, material, spatial, emotional, cognitive space, etc.)
- **Positive face** (or face) is the self-image one presents in the eyes of others.

During interactions, we pay attention to our own face but also to that of the other person. Brown and Levinson emphasize the concept of face-threatening acts, which can also be reassuring.

For example, advice:

- From the recipient's side, it is threatening—against the territory by encroaching on personal freedom, and against the face by devaluing the recipient as incompetent. However, it can also be reassuring for the face by showing interest.
- From the speaker's side, it is threatening—against the territory if their advice is frequently solicited for decisions, and against the face if it is a refusal. But it can also be reassuring for the face by showing recognition.

In contrast to threatening acts, Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni highlights flattering acts that have a positive effect on the face or territory. Acts thus have a priori functions, but their meaning is context-dependent:

- Criticism is threatening for the face.
- Requests are threatening for the territory.
- Compliments are flattering for the face.
- Offers are flattering for the territory.

From this, we observe two types of politeness:

- **Negative politeness**, which consists of avoiding the implementation of threatening acts (forms of mitigation in requests).
- **Positive politeness**, which consists of performing flattering acts.

6. Conversational Rituals

These are dictated by the necessity of accommodating others. Rituals of opening and closing, thanking, minimizing, well-wishing or friendly advice, referral, and greetings can be cited. Conversational routines refer to fixed formulas adapted to situations (receiving a gift, requesting a service, wishing a birthday) according to a predefined ritual. In interactions, routine acts receive a predefined response both

interactionally and linguistically (e.g., "Thank you very much," "It wasn't necessary," "It's nothing," "Please give my regards to your parents," "I will").

The more formal the exchange, the more fixed the expressions. A familiar exchange allows for some flexibility.

6. Sequence Analysis

Opening and greetings, which vary and are often associated with non-verbal communication, are essential to any interaction. Negotiation requires agreement on actions to be taken and their modalities in the future. It is a form of coordination built through exchange. It can be diplomatic, social, professional, commercial, or informal.

Particular Interactions

- **Informal conversation** is based on the principle of equality between participants.
- **Commercial exchanges** are more functional than personal.
- **Classroom interactions** are a unique type of communication with specific positions and linguistic functions.
- **Classroom interactions** are often a source of cultural misunderstandings, such as "I brought you a cake, were you afraid of missing out?" Differences in social codes rather than the conversation itself.
- The difference is often linked to rituals like greetings, with variations across cultures (France, Algeria, Northern Europe, Japan).

Authentic conversations and fictional dialogues (theatrical, narrative, language-learning methods, from mimicry to plausibility).

Ordinary Conversation

It is one of the most dynamic and thus complex forms of language. Under apparent disorder and anarchy, it hides a precise organization guaranteed by rules that form a real system in which interlocutors embed their exchanges. Research on conversation spans various linguistic fields: spoken syntax, lexical semantics, gender issues, forms of narration and argumentation.

Finally, this approach may open up applications in language teaching through the descriptive and analytical tools it offers.

Conclusion: Toward a Science of Speech in Action?

The study of speech in action allows us to revive the utopia of communication by neither seeking the perfect exchange nor permanent opposition. Argumentation, as it unfolds in exchanges and interactions, enables individuals to engage with others while respecting and preserving their identity and viewpoint. The interest lies in reciprocal communication with a focus on pacification and enrichment. However, the statements gathered are merely a factor in the integration of the participants, with each person seeking to identify themselves relative to others in the group by trying to impose and assert their opinion.

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