Structural Accuracy and Sociolinguistic Competence in Teaching Communicative Competence

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Abstract

If a learner is to participate in the act of communication with speakers of another language, he or she must achieve structural accuracy in that language. However, structural accuracy is not the only component required for effective communication. Sociolinguistic competence is also an essential aspect of communicative competence. The learner must try to familiarize himself with social and cultural aspect of the target language; only then the objective of communication competence can be solely achieved. This paper explores the scope and significance of structural accuracy of the target language as well as the sociolinguistic competence involved in the act of communication.

1. Introduction

The basic aim of language is to communicate. The same objective has been expressed by Otto Jespersen. "The essence of Language is human activity on the part of one individual to make himself understood by another, and activity on the part of that other to understand, what was on the mind of the first" (Jespersen : 1924). Jespersen's definition emphasizes the role of language as a means by which human beings communicate with each other. While being involved in communication, individuals inform each other of their desires, their plans, their ignorance of certain acts, their feelings about certain objects or events, their ambitions etc. In short, they communicate what they have on their minds.

It is important to note that individuals involved in the act of communication must be speaking the same language; otherwise, the activity would not succeed in its objective—that is, to communicate what each individual has on his or her mind. Jespersen's definition also speaks about the role language plays in communication. This would suggest that speakers of a language must have some standard norm or grammatical structure against which they can compare utterances to determine whether or not the utterances are like those that a native speaker of English would produce. This capacity would appear to be similar to that of 'someone who knows the rules of chess and can judge whether or not a particular move made by a player conforms to the rules of the game.' This raises the question of communicative competence.

2.   Communicative Competence

Communicative competence is the ability to recognize and produce the distinctive grammatical structure of a language, and to use them effectively in communication. However, grammatical accuracy or broadly linguistic competence is not the only pre-requisite to achieve successful communication. It is quite possible to produce a series of ungrammatical utterances which are structurally not correct, yet succeeds in letting someone know what is on the mind of the speaker. The opposite of this is also true.

On the other hand, it is quite possible to produce perfectly grammatical sentences, and yet fail to communicate. One possible explanation for this is about the manner in which one speaks to other people. Speakers of all languages possess a variety of styles and registers in which they communicate what is on their minds. Clearly, the English that a father uses with his child will be different from that which he uses with his wife, and both will be different from the English he uses when he gives a formal speech to his professional associates. Part of language learning is the development of knowledge of "how and when one speaks to whom about what" (Joos : 1962).

Language learning includes both linguistic competence and an appropriate choice of language for several social situations in which people find themselves involved. Together, these two kinds of knowledge can be termed communicative competence (Savingnon: 1972). Indeed, communicative competence includes linguistic as well as the knowledge of the nuances of social aspects. The most important task, language teachers must have, is the 'presentation of instructional programs' that may enable learners to acquire a sense of linguistic as well as social appropriateness in the use of the language they strive to learn.

3.   Communicative Competence

The concept of communicative competence was first introduced by Dell Hymes, and later on, the concept was discussed and redefined by many theorists and linguists. Dell Hymes' original idea was that "speakers of a language have to have more than grammatical competence in order to be able to communicate effectively in a language. They also need to know how language is used by members of a speech community to accomplish their purpose". Hymes (1972) was among the first 'anthropologist ethnographers' to point out that "Chomsky's linguistic competence lacks consideration of the most important linguistic ability of being able to produce and comprehend utterances which are appropriate to the context in which they are made." Hence, 'the competence that all the adult native speakers of a language possess must include their ability to handle linguistic variation and the various uses of language in the context.'

Hymes introduced the broader, more elaborate and extensive concept of communicative competence which includes both linguistic competence or implicit or explicit knowledge of the rules of language to be used in the appropriate social context.

Dell Hymes raised the followings questions in communication competence:

1. What is formally possible?
2. What is feasible?
3. What is the meaning of a given utterance in its social context?
4. What actually occurs?

After, Dell Hymes, it was Canale and Swain (1980) who defined communicative competence in the context of second language teaching. Their view of communicative competence is a "synthesis of knowledge of a basic grammatical principle, knowledge of how language is used in social setting to perform communicative functions, and knowledge of how utterances and communicative functions can be combined accordingly to the principles of discourse." According to Canale and Swain, the successful acquisition of communicative competence includes, among others, the successful acquisition of grammatical, sociolinguistic and strategic competences.

Communicative competence refers to the relationship and interaction between grammatical competence, knowledge of the rules of grammar and sociolinguistic competence or knowledge of the rules of language use. Stern (1983) points out that competence is most likely to be acquired through experience in real life situation and not through the classroom practice that involves no meaningful communication.

4. Communicative Language Teaching

Communicative Language Teaching, (CLT), as Johnson (1981) says, "acknowledges the teaching of communicative competence as its aim." The main objective of CLT is to teach communicative competence to the speakers of other languages. As such, it distinguishes itself from the traditional approach which stresses heavily on the teaching of structural competence. This leads to the discontent between language teachers and applied linguists.

For example, it was Newmark (1960) who speaks about the structurally competent learners who are unable to perform a simple communicative task. It is apparent that the competence to produce grammatically correct sentence is not enough in itself, as Hymes (1972) states, "there are rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless."

Let us consider the following example:

Soniya   :   What you want, mister?
John   :   Can you please tell me where the church is?
Soniya   :   Walk strait, twenty yards, turn righta, is dere."

The first thing one can notice, here, is that this conversation between John and Soniya fits Jespersen's characterization of language. Two individuals have successfully let each other known what is on their respective minds. It appears that both John and Soniya are speaking English language. John appears to speak the correct form of English, whereas Soniya is also speaking English, but it is not correct either from structural or the pronunciation point of view. However, the message has been communicated to each other, and even the answer has been

received. However, if either of the two had spoken a language, other than English, perhaps, the attempt of communication would have ended in failure.

In observing Soniya's speech, speakers of English can notice that although the question '*What you want?*' communicates; it somehow violates what we know about the structural rules of grammar in English. That is, we know that speakers of English would typically have formed that question by asking '*what do you want?*' Even though, John apparently understood what was on Soniya's mind, her instructions, '*turn righta, is dere*' is readily recognized as approximate but clearly non-English, or let us say, clearly ungrammatical structure in English. The English speakers would probably agree that the closest English equivalent to Soniya's instructions would be either: '*You go this street, and then take a right turn.*'

5.   Significance of Grammatical Structure

A speaker of English knows that in some way Soniya was not able to follow the rules of question formation in English when she produced the question "*what you want*?" This does not mean that the native speaker of English could immediately tell Soniya that her sentences were ungrammatical. The native speaker might not be able to point out a specific rule for question formation in English, but intuitively he or she would know that the structure of the utterance was ungrammatical. This subconscious knowledge of the rules of the language allows the speaker of English to evaluate structural accuracy of a particular sentence. Precisely, there are set of rules one has to adhere to in producing correct utterances in a language.

One can easily agree with Jespersen that language is an activity that permits people to communicate with each other. Communication can be accomplished only if the speakers share at least some basic rules of a particular language. Exactly, to what extent, the knowledge of grammatical structure is required for communication, is not known. We really understand "*what you want*?" but, perhaps would not understand "*Gaur jew wan*?" which is the Spanish equivalent to "*What do you want?*" in English. Furthermore, even though we understand "*what you want*?" it is well known that it does not conform to the grammatical rules of English which require a little more efficiency, and the correct sentence should be like "*what do you want?*"

If teachers of English, who teach English language to the speakers of other languages, want to help learners acquire an ability to communicate successfully with people who speak English, then they must provide an opportunity to the learners to acquire the rules of sentence structure and sentence comprehension that native speakers of English possess. The closer the student comes to complete mastery of those rules, the greater becomes the chance that he or she can successfully enter into the communicative activity called 'language' described by Jespersen.

6.   Language is Rule Governed

The notion that language is rule governed, as suggested by the above discussion, helps us to comprehend the content involved in the language. People have a remarkable ability to produce endless number of sentences required to deal with endless number of situations in which they become involved during their day-to-day lives. It also helps us to understand that one is capable of comprehending sentences that have never been heard before in our entire lives. It is almost a certainty that the sentence, *Donald Trump occupied the office of the Presidency of the United States,* was never uttered by anyone before January 2017. Yet anyone, who shares the knowledge of the rules of English grammar, understands immediately 'the meaning of this particular utterance.'

The following few paragraphs briefly examine various kinds of rules found in languages which explain this remarkable capacity that humans produce and comprehend sentences which make it possible for them to speak and communicate something they have on their minds.

7.   Producing a Variety of Sounds

The human vocal apparatus, which includes lungs, vocal cords, tongue, teeth, uvula and the oral and nasal cavities, is physically capable of producing a huge variety of sounds. However, it is characteristic of the huge potential that only a small subset of sound is systematically used in speaking of any one language. Furthermore, the subset of all possible sounds used in one language may not coincide completely with the subset of sounds used in any other language. Even when certain sounds are used in two or more languages there may be differences in the possible distribution of those sounds in the two languages.

8.   Number of Words in a Sentence

It appears that speakers of all languages are capable of subdividing their language into linguistic units which they label with terms equivalent to word. In spite of this seemingly universal capability, it remains extremely difficult for linguists or grammarians or lexicographers to give a precise, succinct, scientific definition of word (Falk: 1973). Most speakers of English would agree that if they are asked to specify the number of words in a given utterance, they would be able to do so. Thus, the speakers of English would agree that the sentence *"Mohan quickly picked four juicy oranges,"* contains six words.

However, same is not the case with all the utterances. There might be less agreement on the number of words in an utterance like "*I'm sorry, he's not here.*" The cause of this disagreement is the use of contractions in these sentences, and while counting the number of words, the contractions, "*I'm* and *he's*" have *to* be counted. And what about words like *nevertheless, matchbox, himself, strawberry, ice cream etc*? There would surely be those speakers who would want to count some of these examples as two words. In spite of possible disagreement on examples such as these, the concept of word is sufficiently clear that we can consider some aspects of the grammar of words without too much concern for a concrete definition of the term itself.

Consider again the sentences, "*Mohan quickly picked four juicy oranges*". Probably, no one would have considered oranges in this sentence as two words, yet it is obvious that it contains two bits of information: one is that segment that carries the meaning "*a kind of fruit*" and the other that means "*more than one*" thus orange is plural. Similarly "*picked*" would not be considered as two words even though it contains two concepts ; one, the "*act of collecting from plants*" and the other, the act that took place in the past; thus, '*pick+ past'*. The word '*quickly'*, in the same sentence, is easily analyzed as containing the concept "*rapid*" and "*manner,*" or "*way.*" From these three English examples one can see that words often have 'an internal structure'. Rules of English demand that the two concepts found in '*apples'* occur in the order *noun + plural* rather *plural +noun*. This is a general rule for English that applies to thousands of occurrences of countable nouns plus plural. However, even though many other languages of Western Europe have a similar rule, it is not universal by any means.

It is not surprising that Soniya produces near English utterances such as '*One go'* or '*He goes'* with a suffix. We might expect her to produce '*He eat, She like'* etc. Such ungrammatical structure would further demonstrate the point being considered here; namely, any natural language can be characterized as set of rules. The rules, in this instance of word formation for one language, will not necessarily correspond to those of another. Soniya's ungrammatical use of English, calls our attention to a rule of English that has been violated, and suggests rules that might be characteristic of her native language.

Speakers of English adhere to rules of English in their employability of one or the other of these pronunciations of plural depending on the last sound of the noun to which it is suffixed. Similar rules govern the pronunciation of other affixes in English, and similar rules are found in all languages. Again, pronunciation and word grammar are interdependent. It would be virtually impossible to say anything significant about one without considering the other. Teachers of English as a second language in their efforts to provide students with ability to speak and communicate in English must consider how they can help those students acquire these inter-related rules of a particular utterance.

9.   Conclusion

To comprehend the real essence of communication, the social aspect in which a particular sentence is uttered, must not be overlooked. According to Donald Davidson (2005), "communication is successful if the speaker is taken to mean what he wants to be taken to mean. What is needed is not a set of shared rules but that speaker and listener are able to correlate the speaker's responses with the occurrence of a shared stimulus in their common world." Even Celce-Murcia (2007) states that "if the goal of language instruction is communicative competence, language instruction must be integrated with cultural and cross-cultural instruction …. with special focus on areas of cultural and intercultural differences".

In a nutshell, one can say that communicative competence consists of two aspects which are closely related to each other; namely the structural and sociolinguistic competence. Both are crucial in the whole area of language teaching. The linguistic competence concerns with the language forms, where as the sociolinguistic competence concerns with the appropriateness, that

is, how to use the language appropriately according to the topic, situation and the people involved in the interaction.

These two critical aspects of communicative competence are related and integrated to each other. They should be given utmost priority while teaching a language, and they should be taught using a communicative approach to emphasize the importance of considering the learners and their needs.

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