

**THE RELEVANCE OF WHAT SEEMS IRRELEVANT: REMARKS
ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PHATIC UTTERANCES AND
SOCIOPRAGMATIC FAILURE**

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Sociopragmatic failure can be explained from a cognitive viewpoint in terms of differences in the specific knowledge internalized by interlocutors about the expected behavior in a particular situation. The aim of this paper is to show that this specific knowledge is essential for a correct understanding of conversations in which apparently no relevant information is transmitted. Each social or cultural group establishes procedures for carrying out different speech acts or for creating or modifying relationships among its members. Phatic utterances must therefore be understood as indispensable elements within the sociocultural conventions according to which a group operates. They transmit relevant information in such a way that the speaker who uses them follows a set of internalized assumptions that indicate to her the behavior considered correct in a particular situation. This has clear implications for the L2 class, where students can accumulate information about the correct behavior in certain contexts and avoid sociopragmatic failures.

1. Introduction

According to Thomas (1983:84), *pragmatic failure* is the inability to recognise the illocutionary force of a certain utterance when the speaker intended that the hearer should recognise it. This author states that there are two types of pragmatic failure. On the one hand, *pragmalinguistic failure* occurs when the illocutionary force assigned to a linguistic token by a native speaker of the language differs from the illocutionary force assigned to it by a non-native speaker of the language. On the other hand, *sociopragmatic failure* originates when different perceptions of what constitutes a correct linguistic behaviour in a particular communicative situation come into play.

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In my opinion, Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, 1995) offers a new and enriching viewpoint that can help us understand in a better way both types of pragmatic failure. This paper will focus only on some aspects of sociopragmatic failure, and its aim will be to show that the knowledge of cultural conventions regarding interlocutors' behaviour in some communicative situations is essential for a correct understanding of conversations in which, apparently, no relevant information is transmitted.

This paper is organised as follows. Firstly, some of the basic postulates of Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, 1995) are summarised. Secondly, different studies on phatic discourse, including some within the framework of Relevance Theory, are contrasted in order to characterise this linguistic behaviour and show its importance. Then, in the light of Relevance Theory, an account is given of what happens when sociopragmatic failures arise from the incorrect use of phatic utterances. Finally, some conclusions for L2 classes are drawn.

2. Relevance Theory and communication

As mentioned above, before dealing directly with sociopragmatic failure, it would be convenient to introduce briefly some of the postulates of Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, 1995). According to this theory, communication is an *ostensive-inferential* process in which the interlocutors' *mutual cognitive environment* is modified by means of an intentional stimulus produced by the speaker. That stimulus can make mutually manifest a certain set of assumptions. The task of the hearer is to discover what the speaker intended to say, what she intended to imply, and her intended attitude to what was said and implied (Wilson, 1993).

In the inferential processes occurring in communication the addressee combines the assumptions made mutually manifest with the assumptions that he has stored in his cognitive mechanism, a subset of which

constitutes what Sperber and Wilson (1986, 1995) term *context*². Each individual has a set of assumptions that forms his scientific or cultural knowledge, which is the result of his being part of a certain society (Kempson, 1988:15). He also has another set of common sense assumptions, information about the different people with whom he has a relationship, about the different ways in which verbal interaction is carried out in his culture, and so on.

Individuals engaging in ostensive-inferential communication do not only have to identify the semantic content of utterances to understand them. They have to see whether utterances achieve *contextual effects* when combining the new information they receive with the old information they have already stored in memory, as well as the type of effects achieved³. However, obtaining those effects involves *processing effort*⁴. Utterances producing a large number of contextual effects with low processing effort will be very relevant, whereas those that do not will be irrelevant or achieve a low level of relevance.

Human beings are endowed with a criterion that allows them to evaluate the interpretations of utterances. This criterion is powerful enough to eliminate all the possible interpretations of an utterance but one, which is the one that the speaker will have intended to communicate. This interpretation is inferred by means of a non-demonstrative process of inference. As Sperber and Wilson (1986, 1995) state, human cognition is relevance-oriented: individuals have expectations of relevance and they pay attention to information that seems relevant to them. The *principle of relevance* says that “Every act of ostensive communication communicates a

² One of the main contributions of Relevance Theory is the conception of context as a mental construct formed by a chosen subset of all the information stored by an individual in his brain during his life. His whole set of mental representations constitutes his representation of reality.

³ Contextual effects can be of one of three types: *strengthenings* of previously stored information, *contradictions* of previously stored information, or *contextual implications*, which result in the achievement of new information that can only be achieved by means of the interaction of both new and old information.

⁴ Processing effort depends on factors such as the effort of memory to construct or retrieve a suitable context in which to process an utterance, or the psychological complexity of utterances (Wilson, 1993).

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presumption of its own optimal relevance” (Sperber & Wilson, 1995:158), where the *presumption of optimal relevance* must be understood as follows:

The set of assumptions I which the communicator intends to make manifest to the addressee is relevant enough to make it worth the addressee’s while to process the ostensive stimulus. The ostensive stimulus is the most relevant one the communicator could have used to communicate I. (Sperber y Wilson, 1995:158)

Every utterance involves the attraction of the addressee’s attention and a certain amount of cognitive effort to process it, which must be offset by contextual effects. Sperber and Wilson (1986, 1995) also suggest a *criterion of consistency with the principle of relevance*, according to which the first interpretation of an utterance tested and found consistent with the principle of relevance is the only relevant interpretation of that utterance.

3. The relevance of phatic utterances

One of the most polemical points of Relevance Theory has been one of its basic axioms, namely, that the human mind is a mechanism whose aim is to process constantly information that can improve an individual’s representation of reality. This implies that communication is reduced to a continuous exchange and processing of factual information, whose result is the storage of more and better information about certain aspects of reality (Mey & Talbot, 1988). Sperber and Wilson’s (1986, 1995) viewpoint is clearly cognitive, but it does not leave aside the social aspect of human communication.

Individuals are social beings immersed in complex networks of social relationships that constrain their behaviour by means of norms or conventions of linguistic use established either implicit or explicitly by the greater collective of individuals with whom they interact. This social usage of language reminds us of what Malinowski (1923) defined as *phatic communion*, a type of linguistic behaviour whose aim is to keep sociability among individuals by means of “[...] language used in free, aimless, social intercourse” (Malinowski, 1923:476). This behaviour is present in the different formulae of greeting and farewell, in expressions of preference, in

narrations about trivial or irrelevant matters, in comments about things that turn out to be completely obvious, in questions about the wellbeing of interlocutors, in references to the weather; in sum, in what has been commonly called *small talk*.

Many authors have pointed out that the aim of phatic utterances is to avoid silence during conversational exchanges and, therefore, to keep talk going on (e.g. Drazdauskienė, 1995; Jakobson, 1960; Marcus, 1981; Tannen, 1984). Others have underlined their low informational content (e.g. Abercrombie, 1998; Coulmas, 1981). In these cases these utterances do not lack propositional content but, according to Leech (1983:141), violate the maxim of quantity of Grice's Cooperative Principle, since, the conversational contribution is not as informative as required by the purpose of the conversation. A wrong interpretation of Sperber and Wilson's (1986, 1995) model could lead us to assume at first sight that the information these utterances transmit is of little relevance, since they do not result in the recovery of interesting contextual effects that offset the processing effort incurred by the addressee, for the information they convey is too obvious. However, the contextual effects that can be obtained by means of phatic utterances can be either the strengthening of previously held beliefs or the derivation of contextual implications in the form of either *weak* or *strong implicatures* (Sperber & Wilson, 1986:199) about aspects of the social relationship existing between the interlocutors.

Phatic utterances fulfil an important function in the process of satisfaction of individuals' needs for social cohesion and mutual acknowledgement. As Leech put it, they are used "[...] to extend the common ground of agreement and experience shared by the participants" (1983:142). Individuals' merely instrumental or transactional exchanges are also organised around interactive aims that go beyond the transmission and reception of only factual information. These aims include the establishment, modification or destruction of interpersonal relations and the constant definition and redefinition of the identities of participants in communicative exchanges. For this reason, the central topic and the selection of content of this type of conversations, which could seem to be apparently trivial, tend to be "[...] non-controversial, and to concentrate on the attitudes of the

speakers, rather than on matters of fact” (Leech, 1983:142)⁵.

Within the framework of Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, 1995), Žegarac (1998) states that phatic communication exists as a social institution, and can also be institutionalised in two different ways, either by *standardisation* or by *conventionalisation*. On the one hand, standardised phatic expressions keep their linguistically encoded meaning, which contribute to the transmission of non-phatic information. As Laver (1975) has shown, this information tends to be *indexical* – i.e. about participants’ social attributes – and it is obtained as weak or strong implicatures, depending on the speaker’s attitude. On the other, conventionalised phatic expressions do not keep their linguistic meaning. Rather, it is suppressed, leaving only encyclopaedic information about the type of context in which the conventionalised expression is normally used.

Nevertheless, both standardised and conventionalised expressions provide hearers with encyclopaedic information about their usage and interpretation in the form of assumptions about the typical contexts in which those utterances must be processed to achieve optimal relevance. This means that they help hearers select a context in which phatic interpretations would be derived. Phatic utterances result into phatic interpretations, which are interpretations conveying implicatures that are inferred from the fact that the speaker has made mutually manifest her intention to communicate with the addressee. However, this definition of phatic interpretation involves that phatic utterances only transmit the speaker’s intention to keep the interactional contact with her addressee. This implies a backward movement to previous descriptions of phatic communication that leave aside its social meaning.

Nicolle and Clark (1998) have also considered that phatic expressions could encode *procedural* information that constrains the inferential processes by which phatic implicatures are derived. These expressions could constrain the process of interpretation in two ways. On the one hand, they could impose constraints on the selection of mental contexts

⁵ See Laver (1975, 1981) for a more detailed presentation of the different types of phatic utterances in both the initial and final phase of interaction and for a discussion about how differences in participants’ status affect the topic selection of these utterances.

in which they should be interpreted. However, contexts are selected as communicative exchanges take place. Therefore, stating that these expressions could only be interpreted in some determined contexts would exclude any possibility of their occurrence and interpretation in any other context whatever. On the other hand, and this seems more plausible, phatic utterances could constrain directly the inferential computations carried out with mental representations. Conventionalised and standardised phatic utterances could encode the information that the addressee of the utterance should begin its processing deducing first phatic implicatures.

The criterion of consistency with the principle of relevance states that the process of interpretation of an utterance ends when an interpretation is found and tested consistent with the principle of relevance. Therefore, an addressee would process firstly the phatic implicatures of an utterance and then, if he discovers that a phatic interpretation is not consistent with the principle of relevance, he would continue his inferential path until he obtains non-phatic implicatures. In the case of standardised phatic utterances, which also codify conceptual information, this means that the explicatures would be derived only if a phatic interpretation would not be consistent with the principle of relevance.

Although Nicolle and Clark's (1998) argument might be true, a more accurate picture of the interpretation process of phatic utterances can be gained from Sperber and Wilson's (1986, 1995) notion of strong and weak implicatures. Therefore, in many cases of phatic communication, it will be the hearer's sole responsibility to extend the context of interpretation and to enlarge his inferential path until he achieves more weak implicatures when processing these utterances. These weak implicatures can be about the social relationship existing between him and the speaker.

Moreover, their comments about standardised phatic utterances and the derivation of their explicatures contradict some of the basic postulates of Relevance Theory. Sperber and Wilson (1986, 1995) argue that the process of utterance interpretation consists of both a modular decoding phase in which a logical form is recovered and an inferential phase in which that logical form is contextually enriched and developed to a point in which it becomes fully propositional. Part of that second inferential phase is the

recovery of the explicatures of the utterance, without which comprehension cannot take place. Therefore, it would be more likely that whenever a standardised phatic utterance is processed its explicatures are derived in order to process it.

4. Specific knowledge and the interpretation of phatic utterances

As stated above, context plays a crucial role in communication. Individuals have in their brain a great number of assumptions that they use in communicative exchanges. These assumptions are organised so that some are more easily accessible than others. It could be said, therefore, that they have a set of mental assumptions that forms their *general knowledge*, which results from their experience and which is derived from their relation with the external reality surrounding them. This knowledge enables them to understand other people's behaviour simply because they are also human beings (Escandell Vidal, 1996:634). Within that set of representations there are smaller sets of related assumptions constituting their *specific knowledge*, which allows them to interpret and take part in actions in which they have sometimes been engaged. It diminishes their processing effort. This second type of knowledge is structured in *frames* or *schemata*, as Escandell Vidal (1996:634), Janney and Arndt (1992:32) or Schank and Abelson (1977:41) suggest.

This captures the idea that individuals' knowledge is organised in terms of sets of assumptions that show them stereotypical situations and the behaviour expected in those situations as a result of their life experience. Individuals, therefore, use these structures of assumptions to predict linguistic behaviour and to interpret it because their specific knowledge offers them models for the interpretation of the verbal stimuli they perceive. Specific knowledge provides them with data about what constitutes adequate linguistic behaviour in different situations and it also contains information about the type of language that must be used in these situations. Thus, it can be concluded that a great part of human linguistic behaviour is influenced by this specific knowledge, which varies depending on the individuals, as well as on the different social or cultural groups.

Individuals belonging to a certain group must learn the behaviour

considered correct within that group in order to become competent members of it. This means that they must internalise a set of social contexts and assign them a set of mental representations (Sperber, 1996). The way whereby the individuals belonging to a particular society are able to act within it is greatly determined by their ability to mentally represent the social context surrounding them.

The specific knowledge about the conventions regarding the behaviour expected in conversational exchanges is the key for the correct understanding of conversations in which apparently no relevant information is transmitted. Each social or cultural group establishes procedures to carry out different types of speech acts or to create relationships among its members; i.e., each social group establishes a certain sequence of actions that allows it to achieve a specific goal (Hayashi, 1994). As Ebsworth, Bodman and Carpenter (1996) have shown, in some types of phatic exchanges the occurrence of some introductory turns that are determined by a sociocultural convention can be observed. In this way, phatic utterances, which *a priori* do not transmit relevant information, should be understood as essential elements within the set of conventions according to which a community operates.

Apart from the social information that can be conveyed by them as weak or strong implicatures, the information these utterances transmit is relevant in the sense that the speaker communicates that she follows a series of internalised assumptions that tell her the adequate or expected behaviour within a particular social or cultural group. In the cases of cross-cultural communication in which sociopragmatic failures arise, participants can be said to be in the same situation, but they act following different behavioural rules which have been internalised in agreement with those that the social group they belong to has established as being the correct ones for that specific situation. When non-native speakers use phatic utterances or sequences that do not have an equivalent in the target culture, or when those utterances or sequences are missing, they could make manifest to their addressees an unwanted set of assumptions and, consequently, addressees could recover unintended implicatures. This happens because a different mental frame or schema has been activated. By clause (b) of the presumption

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of optimal relevance – which entitles speakers to look for the utterance that can communicate their informative intention in the most straightforward way – it can be concluded that the selection of the phatic utterance or sequence has not been adequate, since it has resulted in the addressee's recovery of unwanted implicatures.

By means of phatic utterances a speaker creates phatic implicatures, i.e., she shows her intention to socialise with her hearer, her intention to maintain, strengthen or cancel an existing social relationship. She also makes manifest that she knows the way in which verbal interaction is carried out within a society or a certain group. Therefore, when phatic utterances are not used in the expected way, hearers may recover a wide array of weak implicatures that can have negative consequences for the non-native speaker. Since the non-native speaker was expected to use those utterances in a particular way in a specific communicative situation and she did not actually use them, her addressee may recover on his own responsibility a whole array of weak implicatures. Those implicatures could lead him to have a wrong perception of the non-native speaker's personality.

5. Some implications for the learning of second languages

The differences existing in the linguistic behaviour among individuals belonging to different cultures can be explained, therefore, as differences in the type of behaviour considered correct in a particular situation. The cognitive viewpoint adopted in this work to interpret sociopragmatic failure can be useful in the field of second language acquisition and can also help to clarify some cases of sociopragmatic failure in cross-cultural conversational exchanges.

In L2 classes, according to Haidl Dietlmeier (1993), students can gradually accumulate information about the value of certain linguistic expressions by means of a progressive learning of the inferences and assumptions that reflect L2 native speakers' linguistic behaviour. In the same way, by means of that progressive learning students can also get information about the correct behaviour in a particular communicative situation and, thus, avoid sociopragmatic failure. Learners need explicit teaching to evaluate the different parameters intervening in the realisation of some

speech acts within a specific sociocultural group. They have to learn when, how and with whom they have to behave in a particular way, as well as the consequences of their behaviour. That information can only be achieved through the development of what Thomas (1983:98) has termed *metapragmatic ability*, or, following Sharwood-Smith (1981:62), through a process of *consciousness-raising*.

By means of guided discussions, the teacher can help learners create a set of mental representations that provide them with information about the terms in which interaction in the L2 is carried out. Furthermore, by doing this, the teacher can make them aware of some of the unwanted implicatures that L2 native speakers could derive from certain linguistic behaviours that do not match their own actual behaviour. Nonetheless, he must always remember that he must not enforce behavioural patterns associated with a specific sociocultural group in the students. Teachers must equip their learners with the tools that enable them to communicate in whatever way they choose.

Regarding the usage of phatic utterances, teachers will have to show learners that they are crucial for interaction because of the implicatures addressees can recover. Students, on the other hand, must understand that by means of these utterances they not only transmit their willingness to communicate or to socialise with their interlocutors, but they also show that they know how to act within the social group that speaks the language they are learning. For this reason, in L2 classes reference should be made to the value achieved by the different manifestations of *small talk* and to the fact that conversations should not be limited to the transmission of relevant factual information, as a wrong reading of Relevance Theory might lead (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, 1995) to think. L2 learners must learn to produce in their hearers the social implicatures that phatic utterances implicitly convey.

As in any other learning process, getting the learner to make deductions about language use requires much time and implies a certain degree of difficulty. Therefore, I think that Haidl Dietlmeier's (1993) suggestion that activities done and topics dealt with in L2 classes should allow linguistic interaction in familiar contexts is quite adequate. Thus,

topics and activities must be close to real situations, so that learners can interact in a natural way close to the reality they will find when they have to use the L2⁶. For this reason, in L2 classes more attention should be paid to the social acts performed in communication. Phatic discourse plays a crucial role in communication because of the implicit contents it transmits, and consequently, students should know and value its functions.

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⁶ For different proposals about activities to improve learners' sociopragmatic competence, see e.g. Bardovi-Harlig *et al.* (1991), Holmes and Brown (1987), Padilla Cruz (in press) and Wolf (1999).

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