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Situation-Bound Utterances as Cultural Scripts in Spoken Discourse

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Abstract

This paper provides insight into the pervasive use of situation-bound utterances and their pragmatic functions in spoken discourse. It is corroborated that situation-bound utterances are socially and culturally charged communication routines used by the native speakers in actual speech. The paper analyzes the cultural content of situation-bound utterances and their role in non-native communication. We attempt to show that situation-bound utterances as cultural scripts pertain to cognitive mechanisms of spoken discourse and culture. The study shows that analysis of SBUs as cultural scripts might be used as a learning strategy in foreign language acquisition.

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1. Introduction

In recent years there has been increased interest in formulaic speech production and its role in foreign language acquisition. Altenberg (1998) estimates that 80% of our language production is formulaic, and a great deal of native adult and child communicative creativity consists of prepatterned speech (Ervin-Tripp, 1977; Peters, 1983; Wray, 2002). In the literature, formulaic language has been discussed in such terms as *routines*, *formulae*, *routine formulae*, *formulae sequences*, *prefabricated* or *ready-made linguistic expressions*, *chunks* and *situation-bound utterances* (De Cock, Granger, Leech, and McEnery, 1998; Foster, 2001; Kecskes, 2003). In this research we use the term situation-bound utterances (SBUs) introduced by I. Kecskes (2000) who explained how this term relates to the existing ones and specified them as ‘highly predetermined by the situation’.

The paper analyzes the cultural content of SBUs, their use in spoken discourse, and suggests that they might play

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a great role in the development of linguistic competence. SBUs are no longer considered to be stereotypical actions or any other evidence of “lazy” language behavior (Girard and Sionis, 2003). SBUs are highly colloquial and perform a social function. Performing communicative acts, speakers want to assert something, obtain more information or persuade somebody to do something else. In this respect, situation-bound utterances are regarded as spoken discourse generating patterns. The vast majority of SBUs in any language convey complex and language specific meanings. They often reflect and embody the historical and cultural experiences of some ethnic community. Sometimes it is impossible to elicit the meaning of culture-laden SBUs if you are not a native speaker. Moreover, it is also difficult to teach students a pragmatic use of formulaic language in the semi-natural immersion of the classroom.

2. Methodology

Pragmatics has become a fundamental tool to analyze spoken discourse. Most discourse analysts recognize the dialogic nature of communication that stems from the classic formulations attempted by Bakhtin (1986) and Kristeva (1986). Researchers subscribe to the dialogic nature of meaning, implying, that “meeting two minds and consciousness creates results that cannot be reduced to either one of them” (Blommaert, 2006, p.44). We can see some interesting examples of a big gap between “what is said” and “what is communicated” (Kecskes, 2003) and we would add “what is understood”. Yule (2008) supports the above mentioned idea by saying “two friends having a conversation may imply some things: I heard the speakers, I knew what they said, but I had no idea what was communicated” (Yule, 2008, p.4). Kecskes (2003) illustrated this in the conversation between two men from different cultures:

Chinese: I think Peter drank a bit too much at the party yesterday.

Turkish: Eh, *tell me about it.* He always drinks too much.

Chinese: When we arrived he drank beer. Then Mary gave him some vodka. Later he drank some wine. Oh, too much.

Turkish: Why are you telling me this? I was there.

Chinese: Yes, but you told me to tell about it.

The use of SBUs in social interaction implies dialogic nature of contextual meaning and presupposes: 1) certain scope of dialogicity within spoken discourse; 2) co-operativity or a cultural clash. Spoken discourse obtains a higher degree of dialogicity than written discourse. Carter (1998) claims that spoken discourse may be more ephemeral, it is not pre-planned and more predictable. Dialogic motivation and dialogue management are endemic in spoken discourse. Situation-bound utterances serve to manage dialogues and form dialogic cohesion. SBUs seem to be always impregnated in spoken contexts in the naturalistic environment; they do not seem strange, unrelated or difficult to comprehend. Exploring their pragmatic dimensions, we can emphasize that SBUs are more neutral and unmarked for native speakers than for non-native peers. The utterance *tell me about it* presents a certain cultural clash for a Chinese speaker. The use of this phrase in the communicative settings reveals that the relevant context and grammar of the utterance may offer mutual dialogic cooperation of the speakers within naturalistic spoken discourse. The presence of the utterance *tell me about it* in a limited imperative context for a Chinese speaker suspends any comprehension of what these words refer to and marks the utterance ineffective because what he understands is the imperative *tell me more about it*.

The main aim of pragmatics is to explain how context can affect the meaning of SBUs. This aim is also connected with a cognitive approach to SBUs which reveals that, in many cases, cognitive mechanisms (metaphor, metonymy) are responsible for the unique situational meaning of SBUs (Kecskes, 2000). Comparison of SBUs to other formulaic expressions such as idioms and formulaic implications showed that their meaning structure can also be dependent on cognitive mechanisms. Native speakers usually model spoken discourse in a metaphorical way. For example,

- Bill, I do not think I can agree with you.

- OK, *shoot* (Kecskes, 2003).

This minidiologue demonstrates how our communication is structured and analogized in terms of other concepts. In this case the metaphorical analogy ARGUMENT IS WAR, which, as Lakoff and Johnson (1980) show, produces the idea of *shooting down all arguments in flames*, but not the idea of *taking a gun and shooting*. Such modeling of

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