



LANGUAGE USE AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

Until the latter part of the 1970s, traditional approaches to second language teaching were in practice and such approaches focused on the form of the language and they almost neglected the meaning of the language. Students mastered the grammatical rules but they could not use their knowledge of grammar to function in the language. To compensate the deficiencies of the traditional methods, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has been introduced with emphasis on the meaning of the language. CLT also pays great heed to the social context in which the language is used. This paper deals with the importance of social factors that influence the choice of linguistic forms in order to express the intended meaning appropriately.

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Deficiencies of 'Situational Language Teaching'.

In the situational presentation the teacher attempts to offer meaning by relating to objects or events present or prevailing in the classroom. These objects and events represent the situation. For example, the teacher holds up a pencil, points to it and says: This is a pencil. This is a well formed English sentence, which is an instance of correct usage. The question arising here is whether it is an instance of appropriate use. The situation created by the teacher does not normally require him to make use of such a sentence. The pupils know that a pencil is an object. What they may not know is what this object is called in English. This sentence would be appropriate only if it were required to identify an object. But the learners do not require the identification of the object as a pencil, but they need to have it named as 'a pencil'. Hence the form of the sentence to demonstrate use is as follows.

The English word for this is 'pencil' or this is called 'a pencil' in English. However it should be noticed, that a structure similar to "This is a pencil." could represent a communicative function in another situation. For example, in a science laboratory a teacher may have to identify a particular instrument or a substance to students during the course of an experiment. During the course of the experiment he may hold a bottle of nitric acid and say: This is nitric acid.

Here he is not merely demonstrating a structure but using the language for a specific communicative purpose.

Here is another example which shows the shortcomings of the situational presentation. To demonstrate the present continuous tense the teacher performs some activities like writing on the blackboard or touching the wall and says :

I am writing on the blackboard.

I am touching the wall.

The situation created by the teacher makes his sentence inappropriate in terms of use. Since all pupils in the class very well know his actions of writing on the black board and touching the wall, there is no need for him to announce what he is doing.

However there are situations in which sentences similar to the above would be appropriate as an instance of use. For example a person to whom the teacher is not visible wants to know what the teacher is doing. In such situation the above sentences are appropriate as an instance of use as they represent communicative functions.

Let's consider the following sentences.

I am walking to the window.

He is walking to the window.

It can be considered as an instance of use if the speaker of such sentences performs an act of communication like explaining an action or making a commentary. With regard to explanation, the speaker makes clear what he/she is doing or what someone else is doing, on the assumption that this is not self evident. In the case of a commentary, the speaker relates to someone else who is not present at the time of the event. There are certain contextual conditions represented by explanation or commentary which determine the state of the sentences of the form in question as actual instances of use and not simply instances of usage.

But when considering the teacher saying a sentence of this kind while performing the activity, the following conclusion can be reached. It is self evident of what he is doing and no explanation is required for his actions and since everybody can watch what he is doing, no commentary is called for either. The language is being manifested but it does not represent any communicative behaviour.

Usage and Use as Aspects of Performance

One aspect of learning a language is acquiring the ability to construct correct sentences. Another involves the knowledge of which sentences or parts of sentences are appropriate in a particular context. The first kind of ability relates to the

knowledge of the grammatical rules of the language being learned. One can produce a series of sentences without regard to context.

John works hard.

The mouse hid behind the screen

Sri Lanka is an island.

Our hen laid an egg in the morning.

Ravi will score good marks.

Mala is generally calm.

The ability to produce sentences similar to the above manifests one's knowledge of the grammatical system of English. This ability can be related to the correct English usage. But in the day – to day interactions, one is not supposed to simply manifest one's knowledge of the grammatical rules of the language. One is generally required to use the knowledge of the language system in order to fulfill some kind of communication purpose. In other words, one is expected to produce instances of language use. In fact, the abstract system of language should be effected into meaningful communicative behaviour.

The above distinction between usage and use may be compared to the distinction between langue and parole of Ferdinand de Saussure and Chomsky's competence and performance. It is appropriate to discuss the distinction between competence and performance here. "Competence concerns the language user's knowledge of the abstract linguistic rules. When this knowledge is manifested through the citation of sentences, then the performance can be said to yield instances of usage. When structures and vocabulary are selected by language teachers, it can be stated that items of usage are selected for teaching the underlying rules of the language system. Usage is only one aspect of performance. Use, another aspect of performance concerns the language user's ability to use his knowledge of linguistic rules for effective communication" (Widdowson, 1978, p. 3)

The following are some examples which illustrate how language is presented in the classroom with a focus on usage and how this presentation may result in an inappropriate use of

language. Here is an oral drill in which the learner has to repeat a sentence pattern by using different 'call – words'.

Teacher : Umbrella
 Pupils : There is an umbrella on the table.
 Teacher : Book
 Pupils : There is a book on the desk.
 Teacher : Pen
 Pupils : There is a pen on the desk.

The pupils are merely demonstrating their knowledge of usage by manipulating the sentence pattern. The language doesn't demonstrate use. If an umbrella is seen to be on the table, a book seen to be on the desk and a pen seen to be on the desk and if everyone is aware of the location of these objects, then why does the teacher expect the pupils to say where they are. Real communication can be recognized in the following classroom exchange.

Teacher : Where is the foot ruler ?
 Pupils : Under your chair.

The realization of language as use can be determined on the basis of two kinds of ability. One kind involves the ability to select the appropriate form of sentence for a particular linguistic context. The second is the ability to recognize which function is fulfilled by a sentence in a particular communicative situation.

Here, it is appropriate for the teacher to ask a question and for the pupils to answer him: the situation is that he is unaware of the location of the foot ruler and he believes that his pupils may be aware of it. Furthermore, the pupils' reply represents an appropriate form.

I am walking to the window.
 He is walking to the window.

It can be an instance of use if the speaker of such a sentence performs an act of communication like explaining something or giving a commentary. With regard to explanation, the speaker makes clear what he/she is doing or what someone else is doing,

on the assumption that this is not self evident. In the case of a commentary, the speaker relates to someone else who is not present at the scene going on. There are certain contextual conditions represented by explanation or commentary which determine the state of the sentences of the form in question as actual instances of use and not simply instances of usage.

Aspects of Meaning : Signification and Value

Widdowson (1978) argued that the drills and the 'situational presentation' represent usage rather than use. Though the procedures involved in these are not to be ignored, their limitations should be realized. The sentences like 'This is a pencil' and 'I am walking to the window' can't be called meaningless ones. They have some kind of meaning but this meaning which attaches to usage is not the same as meaning which attaches to use.

Let's consider the following little exchange.

A: What is the price of an apple?
 B: The gate is open.

One may say that B's remark has no meaning and it is thoroughly meaningless as a response to the A's question, as a communicative use of a sentence. But as a sentence, it can't be said to be meaningless. If one knows the dictionary meaning of the lexical items of this sentence and knows the syntactic relation between them then one will be able to recognize that the sentence demonstrates a proposition and thus has some meaning which the following set of words do not have.

Open is gate the

Since these words themselves do not as they stand make up a sentence they do not signal a proposition, though each of the lexical words (open, gate) has meaning as an individual semantic unit.

One can't suppose that if a group of words which does not constitute a sentence, then this group will not form a unit of meaning. Let's consider the following, to this effect.

The gate

This group of words does not make up a sentence and in isolation expresses no proposition. However it can occur as a contextually appropriate form which associates with a preceding sentence.

A: What is open?

B: The gate.

Now this group of words gains meaning in relation to the sentence produced by A and the group of words expresses the proposition 'The gate is open'.

On account of the ongoing discussion, it is possible to have a distinction between two kinds of meaning. Sentences have meaning as instances of usage: they express propositions by linking words into proper structures in compliance with grammatical rules. This kind of meaning can be called signification. The other kind of meaning is what is assumed by sentences and parts of sentences when they are put to use for purposes of communication. This second kind of meaning can be referred to as value. (Widdowson, 1979)

In view of these terms, it can be seen that the oddity of B's remark in the earlier exchange (when A asks for the price of an apple) is due to the fact although it has signification as a sentence, it doesn't possess any recognizable value as an instance of use : it doesn't serve as a reply to A's question. It can also be noted that the string of words: open is gate the has no significance taken together since it does not make up a sentence, although each of the lexical words has a signification as an isolated vocabulary item. The case is somewhat different in relation to the expression like:

The gate

Although this expression has no signification as a sentence, it attains a value when it occurs in the kind of context that was offered for it earlier.

Classroom Application

This section discusses how this distinction could be applied to certain language teaching procedures. In the early stages of English courses, the following sentences are of quite common occurrence.

This is a book.

This is my mouth etc.

By presenting sentences like this in a classroom demonstration either by pointing to a part of his own anatomy or by using a picture, the teacher might provide practice in manipulating these structures enabling his pupils to take part in question and answer series as illustrated below.

Teacher : What's this?

Pupils : It's a hand.

Teacher : What's this?

Pupils : It's an eye and so on.

This type of practice can be effective in teaching the signification of structures and a wide range of vocabulary items which can be introduced into the sentences. However it is to be noted that sentences like 'This is a hand' are rarely used in actual communication. To this effect the value of such sentences as use is low. Furthermore, the question of the teacher doesn't resemble the normal question, but it, of course is a prompt for the pupils to come out with required instance of usage. The exchange between the teacher and the pupils doesn't represent a normal instance of language use, but it only serves as a teaching device that instills the signification of a certain structure and vocabulary in the minds of pupils.

The situation in which the above exchange as question and answer, between the teacher and pupils indicates the kind of meaning called signification. However it is possible to conceive of situations in which similar exchange of question and answer achieves value and thus becomes instance of use.

For example imagine the situation of someone trying to work out what a rather obscure picture is intended to represent. The interrogative sentence that is used to identify a figure in this

context and the answer has high value here and hence became an instance of use.

It is recommended that portions from other subjects on the school curriculum can be the area of use for teaching a foreign language. Language teachers usually suggest that the language they are teaching should be associated with situations outside the class. But the fact to be stressed here is that school is also a part of the child's real world where familiar experience is formalized and extended into new concepts. Subjects like history, geography, general science and so on harmonize with the child's own experience and hence a foreign language may relate to the outside world indirectly through these subjects.

When a foreign language is associated with areas of use represented by other subjects on the school curriculum, there is the possibility for a link with reality and the pupils' own experience and for providing the means of teaching the language as communication as use, rather than merely as usage. The presentation of language use in the classroom should essentially be the same as the methodological techniques used for introducing the topics in the subjects from which they are drawn. To this effect, it may be argued that the language teacher should be familiar with the subjects taught by his colleagues and it would be an additional burden upon him. It should be admitted that he is to familiarize himself with the topics drawn from other subjects. Besides he must possess knowledge of something other than the language he is teaching. It is obvious that this knowledge refers to the culture and literature associated with the language in question. Hence the suggestion is that the language teacher should possess some limited knowledge of the subjects which his colleagues teach.

It's appropriate to mention two other advantages in the above approach of language teaching. One can be aware of the practical relevance of the foreign language one learns, as a means of communication, since he can use the foreign language to deal with topics which he is concerned with in his other lessons. He need not learn the foreign language to pursue his studies but it is presented to him as a means of practical usefulness. It's also a point that some pupils may

intend to follow further studies in the medium of foreign language which they learn as academic institutions in many countries require proficiency of a foreign language for higher education. For those aiming for higher education in such countries, the proposed approach would be of particular relevance. Even in countries where foreign language proficiency is not required for higher educational purposes, the learners have had an experience of language as communication. One can find it easier to extend his knowledge of use into new situations.

"The other advantage associated with the subject – oriented approach of language teaching is about the transfer from the learner's own experience. That is, the topics dealt with in the language class are dealt with in other lessons through the medium of learner's mother tongue. This condition will induce the learners to make use of translation in learning the foreign language. Many teachers pose an argument against this. They comment that the use of mother tongue may distract the learners' attention from the ways in which foreign language expresses its meaning. It will be true only when the translation operates at the level of usage. But as the proposed approach is concerned, translation operates at the level of use: the learner will realize that the acts of communication are expressed in the foreign language in one way and in his own language in another way." (Widdowson, 1978, p. 18)

Structural and Functional Views of Language.

Littlewood (1981) observed that the structural view of language is concerned with the grammatical system and it describes how linguistic items can be combined. For example, it may explain the operations of forming the passive "A parcel has been sent' rather than the active, 'somebody has sent a parcel' or describe the word order rules to interpret the difference between the two sentences, "The man hit the woman" and "The woman hit the man".

The structural view of language and the functional view of language are separate aspects. However the mere consideration of structure alone cannot determine the communicative functions of

language. For example, let's consider the sentence "Why don't you buy that book? From a structural viewpoint, it is unambiguously an interrogative. But from a functional view point it is ambiguous. It may be a question in certain circumstances. The speaker may genuinely want to know why his companion hasn't bought that book. In other circumstances, it may function as a command. It may be the case of a teacher who addressed it to a student who hadn't bought that book. In yet other situations, it could be a plea, a suggestion or a complaint. It can be said that while the structure of the sentence is stable and straight forward, its communicative function varies and depends on specific situational and social factors.

As a single linguistic form expresses more than one function, a single communicative function can be expressed by a number of linguistic forms. For example, a speaker who expects someone to buy him a lunch parcel has many linguistic options such as "Buy me a lunch parcel, please", "Could you please buy me a lunch parcel?", "Would you mind buying me a lunch parcel?" or "Excuse me, could I trouble you to buy me a lunch parcel?" Among these forms, some might perform this directive function in the context of certain social relationships. For example "You've failed to buy me a lunch parcel." could be a directive from boss to peon but not from boss to an officer in a superior position. Other forms may depend on shared situational knowledge for their correct interpretation (e.g. "It's lunch time, isn't it?")

Understanding Functional Meaning

In understanding functional meanings, certain skills as indicated below are expected.

- 1.The ability to understand linguistic structures and vocabulary.
- 2.Knowledge of the potential communicative functions of linguistic forms.
- 3.The ability to relate the linguistic forms to appropriate nonlinguistic knowledge, in order to interpret the specific functional meaning intended by the speaker.

What the above 3rd aspect implies is that the foreign language learner needs more than a

fixed repertoire of linguistic forms that correspond to communicative functions. Since the relationship between forms and functions is variable and can not be predicted definitely outside specific situations the learner must also be given opportunities to develop strategies for interpreting language in actual use.

Expressing Functional Meanings

Communication is a two – sided process. Thus the hearer's failure to understand the speaker's utterances could be attributed to the speaker's failure to verbalize his message adequately. The speaker may fail to judge the linguistic and nonlinguistic knowledge of the hearer and therefore not select the linguistic forms that would be interpreted as he intends.

While speaking, we tend to estimate the hearer's knowledge and assumptions in order to select language to be interpreted according to our intended meaning. For example, let us assume that some visitors in a hall know that they have been invited for a meal. In this situation, the single word 'Ready?' would be enough to call them to the table and eat. On the other hand, if the visitors do not know that a meal is being prepared, we must verbalize our meaning in greater detail. For example, 'Would you like to have something to eat?' In each case we take into consideration the knowledge shared between ourselves and others and are able to express sufficiently to fulfill our communicative purpose.

The most efficient communication in a foreign language can't always be achieved by manipulating its structures. But successful communication often depends on the skillful processing of the complete situation with the involvement of the speaker and the hearer, taking account of the knowledge already shared between them and selecting items that may communicate the message effectively. Foreign language learners should be provided with sufficient opportunities to develop these skills by being exposed to situations where the emphasis on using their available resources to communicate meaning efficiently and economically.

Similarly for better comprehension, both a repertoire of linguistic items and a repertoire of strategies for using them in a concrete situation are necessary for the learner.

Importance of Understanding and Expressing Social Meanings

It is noted that the speaker's choice of language is determined by the knowledge which the speaker assumes the hearer to possess. Speaker's choice of language depends also on his interpretation of the social situation in which communication takes place. Language conveys not only functional meaning but social meaning also. The choice of language varies according to the kind of situation such as formal or informal. For example, the word 'Ready?' to call the guests for the meal suggests not only making assumption about shared knowledge but the speaker signals the view that the situation is not formal. If the situation were not formal, it would probably cause the speaker to choose some other form of expression such as 'would you like to eat now?' On an even more formal occasion, the socially appropriate form might be 'Ladies and Gentlemen, dinner is served'.

Abeysooriya(2005) commented that being proficient in a language is also the ability to understand the speaker's purpose. This ability may be to refute, to advise, to inquire, to invite, to permit, to promise, to order, to deny, to direct, to express anger, surprise, pleasure, contempt, gratitude etc. The two questions, "Have you got a pencil?" and "Have you got a house?" have two different communicative functions though they have the same linguistic structure. The probable response to the former would be "Yes here you are." while this response would be inappropriate to the latter. Thus, for a successful communication, the ability to understand the intended meaning of an utterance and the ability to respond properly are essential.

As the nature of the language is determined by the social situation, the language can also determine the social atmosphere of the situation. For example, the degree of formality of

the relationship between a teacher and a pupil could be considerably affected by the degree of formality of the teacher's language. In fact, a personal relationship can be well developed by the use of informal speech. Thus a foreigner may have difficulties in forming such intimate relationships if he is unable to adapt his or her speech to the informality of a friendship. The foreigner who is not familiar with the informal speech patterns, but thoroughly knowledgeable of bookish grammar, complete sentences which are not required in casual contexts and careful pronunciation sends out signals of formality and social distance unintentionally. Receptively too, he may be unable to understand and interpret the native speaker's inclination toward relationship based on informality. Therefore learners are expected to have a better understanding and mastery of the social significance of alternative language forms.

"Learners are sometimes misled by apparent structural or dictionary equivalents in their own language which results in their producing socially offensive forms in the foreign language. For example, Russian learners of English sometimes respond with 'of course' to a yes/no question, in a way that seems to suggest that the question is absurd and the answer rather obvious. In fact they merely transfer a Russian lexical equivalent having no such overtones; they are not aware of the unfavorable effect they create on English speaking listeners. These types of errors are more serious than any other since most of the native hearers realize that the true source of such errors is inadequate learning rather than offensive attitudes" (Littlewood, 1981, p. 5).

CONCLUSION

It is obvious that the use of language cannot be considered in isolation of the social context. Language is strongly influenced by social elements such as the personal relationship between the interlocutors, the social occasion in which language is used (whether formal or informal) etc. and it's the responsibility of the speaker to choose appropriate speech form to adapt to the situation. The failure of one person in choosing the right form of discourse may mislead the other persons involved

in the speech act and even create conflicts among them. Hence language teachers should adequately focus on the use of language in context entailing the socio cultural aspects of the learner.

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