

PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE: THE SPEECH ACT OF REQUEST

Viorica CEBOTAROȘ, *Alecu Russo State University of Balti, Republic of Moldova*

Rezumat: Pentru a comunica eficient într-o limbă străină nu este de ajuns să cunoaștem sistemul lexical și gramatical al limbii date. Cu mult mai important se dovedește a fi cunoașterea și aplicarea regulilor socioculturale caracteristice societății limba căreia o studiem. Erorile pragmatice comise de studenți (chiar și de cei care posedă o înaltă competență lingvistică) demonstrează necesitatea deplasării accentului pe latura pragmatică a învățării limbii engleze. Transferul pragmatic negativ adesea cauzează eșec în comunicarea interculturală. Acest fapt subliniază că învățarea unei limbi străine vizează nu doar formarea competențelor lingvistice, ci și a celor pragmatice. Deosebirile culturale sunt reflectate foarte bine în actele de vorbire. Formularea rugămintii reprezintă un exemplu unde cultura engleză diferă considerabil de cea română prin preferința pentru strategiile indirecte. Necunoașterea, și respectiv, ne-aplicarea regulilor culturale de formulare a rugămintii în limba engleză ar putea crea neînțelegeri între un vorbitor nativ și un reprezentant al culturii române.

Cuvinte-cheie: *competență, competență pragmatică, rugăminți, predare.*

Abstract: In order to communicate efficiently in a foreign language it is not enough to know only the vocabulary and the grammar of the given language. Much more important is to know and use the sociocultural rules characteristic of the society whose language we are learning. The pragmatic errors made by students (even by those with a good linguistic competence) stress the importance of teaching the pragmatic aspects of the foreign language. The negative pragmatic transfer often causes misunderstandings in intercultural communication. This fact emphasizes that learning a foreign language does not mean just developing linguistic competence; pragmatic competence turns out to be of paramount importance. Cultural differences are well reflected in speech acts. Formulating a request is an example where the English and the Romanian cultures differ greatly as to the strategies applied. Not knowing and, consequently, not using the cultural rules of formulating a request in English might cause misunderstandings between a native speaker of English and a Romanian person.

Keywords: *competence, pragmatic competence, requests, teaching.*

In Transformational Generative Grammar, Chomsky (1965) defines competence as the system of linguistic knowledge possessed by native speakers of a language. It is, according to Chomsky, this system of knowledge that makes it possible for speakers to form and understand an infinite number of sentences in their language, including sentences they have never heard before. Competence often refers to the ideal speaker/hearer who would have complete knowledge of the whole language. Chomsky makes a distinction between competence and performance, the latter representing the use of the language by individuals in speech and writing. Thus, linguistic competence refers to the *k n o w l e d g e* of language, while linguistic performance refers to the *u s e* of language.

The sociolinguist Dell Hymes rejected Chomsky's idea, claiming that successful and effective speaking is not just a matter of using grammatically correct words and forms, but also of knowing when to use them and under what circumstances. He introduces the term *c o m m u n i c a t i v e c o m p e t e n c e*, defined as the ability not only to apply the grammatical rules of a language in order to form grammatically correct sentences, but also to know when and where to use these sentences and to whom.

The scholars Canale and Swain (1980) proposed the most influential model of communicative competence. Their model comprises 4 subcompetences:

1. Grammatical competence – the knowledge of the linguistic code features of the language that is being learnt, such as morphology, syntax, semantics, phonology.

2. Sociolinguistic competence – the knowledge of contextually appropriate language use.

3. Discourse competence – the knowledge of achieving coherence and cohesion in spoken or written communication.

4. Strategic competence – the knowledge of how to use communication strategies to handle breakdowns in communication and make communication effective.

In 1990 Bachman adds p r a g m a t i c competence to this list. Pragmatic competence is regarded as one of the main components of communicative competence. It refers to the ability to communicate appropriately in particular contexts. It contrasts with linguistic competence, which refers to the mastery of the general rules of language, without taking into account its use.

Fraser defines pragmatic competence as „the knowledge of how to use the linguistic competence in a social context”. He states that linguistic competence can be viewed as the knowledge required to construct or understand well-formed sentences of the language, whereas pragmatic competence can be viewed as the knowledge required to determine what such sentences mean when spoken in a certain way in a particular context.

The description of linguistic competence explains how the speaker knows that „Why are you making such a noise?” is a possible sentence in English and that „Why you are making such a noise?” is not. Pragmatic competence explains whether the speaker who says „Why are you making such a noise?” is requesting someone to stop talking, or is asking a genuine question out of curiosity.

Teaching pragmatic competence is widely regarded as an integral part of learning and teaching a language since it plays a central role in intercultural communication. In a foreign language class it is not enough to teach just how to use the language accurately. It is important to teach how to use the language appropriately. In other words, when teaching English we should do two things - explain how to form sentences and describe or analyse ways of speaking: when we should say what and how to react as receivers to the messages of the sender.

Studies have shown that learners' grammatical competence and pragmatic competence do not necessarily increase hand in hand. Eisenstein and Bodman point out that learners may produce grammatically complex and correct but pragmatically inappropriate utterances. This happens especially when the language is learned in a foreign environment. Since Moldovan learners of English are exposed to the target language only in the classroom, where a lot of explicit grammar instruction occurs, they develop a high awareness of the grammatical properties of English and little pragmatic competence. As a result they can speak accurately, but not always appropriately. In the context of intercultural communication weak pragmatic competence may have unpleasant results: the speaker may appear abrupt, rude, uncaring. This fact highlights the importance of developing our students' pragmatic competence along with grammatical competence. As has been demonstrated by numerous researchers, pragmatic errors can be far more embarrassing than grammar mistakes and less excusable on the part of native speakers. This type of errors does not denote lack of linguistic knowledge. Bardovi-Harling, Morgan and Reynolds point out the following:

„Speakers who do not use pragmatically appropriate language run the risk of appearing uncooperative at the least, or, more seriously, rude and insulting. This is particularly true of advanced learners whose high linguistic proficiency leads other speakers to expect concomitantly high pragmatic competence”.

Studies in cross-cultural pragmatics report that the way speech acts are realized varies across languages. This variation can sometimes cause misunderstandings, or what Thomas (1983) called pragmatic failure, which occurs when learners transfer the first language pragmatic rules into the second language. This transfer of rules can lead to stereotyping about particular speech communities, as speakers may be perceived as being rude or inconsiderate. Thomas (1983) has shown that when speakers do not share the same cultural background, sociopragmatic failure results from a lack of shared resources for understanding what a particular contribution is doing at a particular place in talk. Teaching communication according to the sociocultural rules that govern speech acts in a given speech community is a valuable way to make students aware of what is valued within a culture and how this is communicated.

The realization of the speech act of request is a domain where English culture differs greatly from Romanian one. Romanian requests are often formulated using an imperative sentence accompanied by the word „te/vă rog” (please). E.g. *Deschide ușa, te rog*. In many cases „te/vă rog” is followed by such intensifiers as *frumos, mult, din tot sufletul, din toată inima*, thus turning the imperative into a polite request. E.g. *Vă rog din tot sufletul, ajutați-mă*. An imperative sentence in English does not sound as a request at all. It is like an order. The word *please* does not add much politeness to an English imperative. This fact explains why English requests are formulated indirectly, i.e. via a question. E.g. *Could/Will you open the window, please?* Other devices, added to make a request more polite are: consultative devices (e.g. *Do you think you could help me with this work?*), understaters (e.g. *Could you do the papers a bit earlier?*), syntactic downgraders, which include the use of tense and aspect (*I was wondering if you could lend me your book for a few days.*)

One of the contextual factors that influences the choice of the request structure is the kind of relationship between the speaker and the addressee. The greater the social distance of the interlocutors, the more polite they choose to be. The power relationship between interlocutors is another factor that determines the structure of the request. Politeness increases as the hierarchical distance that separates the speaker and the addressee increases. The lower the position of the speaker is, the more polite he/she tends to be. Thus, a secretary will try to make his/her request to the boss as polite as possible, using much mitigation, apologies for interfering and other mechanisms that lessen the threat of the request. On the other hand, a boss addressing the secretary might perform the request bald on record, that is via an imperative. A direct request is also acceptable when used by friends, equals, or members of a family. E.g. *Lend me a dollar till tomorrow.*

When our students make a request in English they often borrow from Romanian the structure of this speech act, thus formulating it with the help of an imperative sentence. Such a request sounds very rude to a native speaker of English. In English a polite request has the form of a question about a person's ability or wish to do something. This is due to the fact that Anglo-American culture places a high value on individual freedom of choice. Making a direct request in English means not caring about the interlocutor's negative face, about his/her desire to be free in his/her actions. In many cases the foreign speaker may remain unaware of the pragmatic mistake he/she has made.

This stresses the need to bring pragmatics into our classrooms and to teach it explicitly. Instruction into pragmatics can start at the elementary level and continue at intermediate and advanced levels.

K. Bardovi-Harlig and R. Mahan-Taylor point out that „the goal of instruction in pragmatics is not to insist on conformity to a particular target-language norm, but rather to help learners become familiar with the range of pragmatic devices and practices in the target language”. How should instruction into pragmatics be done? The same scholars emphasize that there is not a single best way to teach pragmatics. However, two things should be taken into account: 1) authentic language samples are used as examples, and 2) explanation precedes production by learners. Learners' mother tongue may also be used in the process of instruction in pragmatics, and namely in awareness raising activities, as well as in L1-L2 comparisons.

In what follows we suggest some activities for teaching requests in English.

1. Students are given two short dialogues in English and are asked to find sentences which express requests. A discussion follows on the structure of these requests, pointing out things that they have in common.

2. Students are given the task to identify requests in two short dialogues in their mother tongue. They compare the structure of the Romanian requests with that of the English requests, highlighting the differences. The teacher explains the „secret rules” of making requests in English.

3. In a listening activity students guess the relationship between the speakers and the place where the conversation goes on. The forms of the requests from these dialogues are then discussed. The students' attention is drawn to the fact that the structure of the request depends on the relationship between interlocutors.

4. Students sort out two dialogues that are mixed up. The relationship between the speakers in these two dialogues should be different, e.g. friend-friend and teacher-student. Students then compare the way requests are formulated.

The activities presented above emphasize that the way people formulate requests depends on whom they are talking to. Other activities may be chosen to point out how the request structure differs depending on the severity of the imposition.

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