

The Language Outside and Inside the Foreign Language Classroom: Speech Act Theory and Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

Speech act theory plays a significant role in linguistics since it accentuates the difference between form and meaning of a linguistic choice emphasising linguistic functions. Similarly, discourse analysis, equipped with a repertoire of approaches, detects how language is used in real situations paying attention to linguistic and paralinguistic features of a stretch of language within its context. Being concerned with language in use, the potential importance of speech act and discourse analysis in the foreign language classroom to develop learners' pragmatic and communicative competence is discussed in this article. It is argued that, particularly in communicative language teaching, speech act and discourse analysis provide learners with tools to deal with a foreign language successfully. The incorporation of speech act into the foreign language teaching might, however, be problematic when mismatches in concepts between the learner's and the foreign language's culture exist. The potential role of discourse analysis in raising the learners' awareness of the interrelatedness of language and context, in approaching language critically and as a tool to evaluate classroom language is addressed. Implications for the inclusion of speech acts and discourse analysis in the foreign language classroom are suggested indicating the potential value of L1/L2 comparison.

Key words: *Speech act, discourse analysis, foreign language teaching*

Introduction

A description of the main features of foreign language teaching reasonably requires an account of its inherent intentionality. In other words, it has to be ascertained for what reason language is taught, and this will inevitably lead to decisions on methods to be applied. Although the question about the purpose of foreign language teaching has seemingly been answered since the rise of communicative language teaching, there are contexts in which language is taught for reasons that are not related to language use in the 'real world', i.e. in situations where, for instance, mastery of language at recognition level (to be successful in multiple choice exams) is in the focus of teaching. Against the background of past language teaching methods and approaches, a focus on the communicative aspect of language teaching is no matter of course. A quick glance at the history of language teaching reveals that approaches such as the grammar translation method or the audio-lingual method, which was based on a behaviouristic learning theory, emphasised the study of decontextualized language on sentence level in order to provide learners with mastery of structure, which, indeed, is of limited use in the 'real world' outside classrooms or exams, if it is not supported by a focus on how natural language is used for communicative purposes (Richards & Rogers, 2002). Such approaches are obviously highly problematic if not unethical since they open the door to a foreign language teaching for no obvious reason, being unrelated to the society/societies or culture(s) the foreign language is used in and, thus, not providing learners with tools to 'survive' in the foreign language.

Teaching a foreign language that aims at providing learners with a means to communicate effectively in real life situations cannot be restricted to instilling linguistic competence, but also has to consider the learner's need for acquisition of pragmatic competence, and, thus, will reasonably provide contact with the culture related to the language. It is argued in this paper that speech act theory and discourse analysis have the potential to play a vital role in serving the described aim of foreign language teaching. The incorporation of speech acts and discourse analytical tools is manifold but not unproblematic. It is, therefore, tried to position speech acts and discourse analysis in foreign language teaching (mainly using the example of English Language Teaching) as an important tool to integrate the language outside the classroom and to evaluate the language inside the classroom. Thus, a rationale for

the incorporation of speech acts and discourse analysis in the foreign language classroom is developed.

Speech act theory and language study

Speech act theory can be regarded as 'revolutionary' in conceptualising and studying language and foreign language teaching methodology due to the fact that it has enhanced insights in how language works when it is *used* by participants in interaction. The Chomskyan approach assumed that a native speaker's grammatical competence allows the production of an unlimited number of utterances on the basis of acquired underlying linguistic categories and systems. This approach, however, has been regarded insufficient in that sole grammatical competence fails to explain how appropriate communication can be achieved in a given context. Thus, it has to be complemented by a course of communicative competence. To get the whole picture of language (in terms of language description and analysis as well as of acquisition), it is therefore necessary to focus on both linguistic and communicative competence; the emphasis on the quality of language as a means of communication in a specific context reveals that this approach is clearly developed from a sociolinguistic perspective (Schmidt & Richards, 1980, p. 129).

The role of speech act theory has been crucial in developing an approach that goes beyond the Chomskyan paradigm. By definition, speech acts perform an action, which means that an utterance has not only a locutionary meaning, i.e. the literal meaning, but also an illocutionary meaning, i.e. the intended meaning, and a perlocutionary force, i.e. the effect that is generated in the hearer of an utterance (Austin, 1962). So, the utterance, "The heat makes you really thirsty" may function as a request to get a cold drink (the illocution) and might prompt the listener to give the speaker a glass of water (the perlocution). The example shows that the descriptive form of the utterance in fact serves a specific purpose (a request) in order to be linguistically polite: The act of requesting is performed through an indirect speech act. Less favourable and actually much less common are direct speech acts when, for example, an imperative is used for a request. A special case of a speech act is a performative utterance in which the speaker both describes and performs the act as in, "I promise to visit you tomorrow." Following Austin, Searle (1969) classified speech acts into five categories:

- representatives (assertion, claim, report, conclusion)
- directives (suggestion, request, order, command)
- expressives (apology, complaint, thank)
- commissives (promise, threat, refusal)
- declaratives (decree, declaration)

Crucial for the understanding of speech acts is the notion of felicity conditions. Felicity conditions are given when a speech act is appropriate in a given situation. So, when a marriage registrar says, "I now pronounce you man and wife", there is felicity in the act due to the authority of the speaker, while "Stop talking" said by a student to his teacher lacks felicity because status is not respected. Furthermore, an utterance lacks sincerity if it is clear that the speech act, e.g. congratulating someone for failing the driving test for the third time, is not performed earnestly.

This brief summary of speech acts might have illustrated in how far the 'discovery' of speech acts indeed brought new insights in the nature of language in use. It led to the deeper understanding that language study should not only deal with linguistic form per se, but analyse how linguistic choice meets the demands of a specific context so that effective communication is realized. In other words: there are *functions* of language (such as ordering, requesting or apologizing) and each function is characterized through a specific linguistic feature. Effective communication means making an appropriate linguistic choice.

Speech act theory and ELT methodology

Functions have found its way into foreign language methodology. It has been widely accepted that "illocutionary competence consists of the ability to manipulate the functions of the language" (Brown, 2000, p. 223). Thus, functions in its specific linguistic forms have to be taught in the foreign language classroom, so that learners can both understand and produce functional language that is effective in terms of communication. Students have to learn that an utterance like "It's quite loud here. I can't concentrate" addressed to a teacher might be more suitable (in order to meet the demands of felicity conditions) than "Stop talking". "Second language learners need to understand the purpose of com-

munication, developing an awareness of what the purpose of a communication act is and how to achieve that purpose through linguistic form" (Brown, 2000, p. 223).

The consideration of functions in the ELT classroom becomes apparent in the implementation of functional syllabuses in language textbooks. A great deal of present-day language textbooks, which are based on principles of communicative language teaching, contain functional/notional syllabuses – often integrated in a structural syllabus – covering functions such as apologizing and thanking, complaining, offering and requesting to name but a few. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (which almost every language textbook now refers to) considers pragmatic competences, which refer to "the functional use of linguistic resources (production of language functions, **speech acts**)" (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, n. d., p.13; not highlighted in the original), equivalent to linguistic and sociolinguistic competences in the acquisition of communicative language competence.

Obviously, the assumption that speech acts, and, thus, language functions as well as pragmatic appropriateness are teachable underlies these concepts, and by and large speech acts *are* teachable within constraints (Cohen, 1996). That being said, speech act examples to be taught in the classroom have to be taken from speech act data collected in natural occurrences. Boxer and Pickering (1995), however, reported that, in the ELT texts they examined, examples were generated rather based on the intuition of textbook developers and therefore remarkable different from naturalistic speech patterns; they therefore claimed a "critical need for the application of sociolinguistic findings to English language teaching through authentic materials that reflect spontaneous speech behaviour" (p. 44).

McKay (2003) addresses further problematic issues in teaching pragmatic competence drawing the attention to the questionability of applying native speakers' pragmatic competence as a model for learners of English for four reasons: Firstly, pragmatic appropriateness is defined differently among English native speakers even within the same cultural context so that there is not *the* pragmatic competence of English speakers. Secondly, maturational constraints may hinder adult learners to internalize and therefore to display linguistic behaviour that is in accordance with pragmatic rules. Thirdly, in environments where English is not the dominant code, insufficient L2 input might not provide opportunities to develop native speaker like pragmatic competence. Interestingly, in such environments, when English is used on daily basis as a means of communication, e.g. between participants who do not share each other's mother tongue, rules of pragmatic appropriateness emerge which are remarkably different from those of native speakers. Finally, alleged native speakers' pragmatic appropriateness is likely to collide with the L2 learner's own identity in a way that certain speech acts are regarded inappropriate in L1: This suggests that finding pragmatic appropriateness in a foreign language cannot primarily be an act of accepting L2 pragmatics in an unreflected manner but is indeed a kind of negotiating through comparing linguistic behaviours in the learner's own language and in the foreign language. Indeed, using speech acts in the foreign language classroom should provide learners with opportunities to compare own with foreign pragmatic competence, thus contribute to the development of intercultural competence (Kramsch, 2011).

Speech act theory has had a huge influence on linguistics and ELT methodology. Its significance for communicative language teaching as a tool to generate appropriate linguistic choices cannot be disputed (Zhao & Throssell, 2011). The focus on the functional quality of language generated the idea that language could be taught more or less exclusively over a functional/notional syllabus. However, "the teaching of functions and notions cannot replace the teaching of grammar" (Swan, 1985: 79). This should remind us of the necessity to deal with both meaning and form in the foreign language classroom.

Discourse analysis and language study

Discourse analysis, "a vast subject area within linguistics" (McCarthy, 1991, p. 42) refers to the study of spoken and written communication taking both linguistic and non-linguistic features into consideration. Thus, discourse analysis has a wide scope regarding to its object since virtually every occurrence of language is potentially in the interest of discourse analysis. It is also significant that a wide range of academic disciplines is involved in discourse analysis and, consequently, a great variety of approaches and methods is applied in the study of discourse. This somehow 'messy' appearance has contributed to the difficulty in coming to an agreement what discourse and discourse analysis actually are. What is more, many of the various approaches of discourse analysis "proceed down their own paths without mentioning or even showing awareness of others" (Cook, 2011, p. 432). Yet to come if not to an agreement but to a convention as a base to work on, it seems useful to reach an understanding of what discourse means and what analytical tools discourse analysis makes use of since

such a comprehension will help evaluate the potential (and actual) contribution of discourse analysis to foreign language teaching.

In a very general term, Brown and Yule (1983) defined discourse analysis as “the analysis of language in use” (p. 1) stating that it deals not only with formal elements of language but also with language functions. They distinguished between two main functions of language, the transactional one which refers to the communication of content, and the interactional one which refers to the role of language in establishing social relationship. This terminological distinction indicates a common understanding in that discourse analysis is not only and not primarily interested in language description at a formal level but in detecting how and for what reason language is used as a social practice (Woods, 2006; Gee, 2005). Thus, discourse is reasonably defined as a stretch of language beyond sentence level i.e. written or spoken texts that are coherent and meaningful to participants who are involved in the production and/or reception of those texts (Schiffrin, Tannen & Hamilton, 2001); consequently, the *process* in which discourse occurs is in the particular focus of discourse analysis. To carry out studies on discourse it is obviously not sufficient to look at language instances without noticing the situations surrounding them, i.e. to restrict to a sole linguistic study of text and talk. On the contrary, discourse analysts follow a multidisciplinary approach that considers social and cognitive factors (cf. van Dijk, 2006). This “disciplinary diversity” (Schiffrin, Tannen & Hamilton, 2001, p.1) is the reason for the indistinctness of discourse analysis but at the same time it provides discourse analysis with a powerful repertoire of approaches and tools to work with. To illustrate this, the article ‘Discourse analysis’ in the Routledge handbook of applied linguistics lists pragmatics, schema theory, conversation analysis, ethnography, language ecology, linguistic ethnography, semiotics, paralinguistics and multimodality, genre analysis and critical discourse analysis as influential approaches to discourse analysis (Cook, 2011).

Taken for granted that discourse analysis deals with language in use beyond sentence level and tries to detect regularities and patterns through which discourse is generated, it is plausible to assume that different ‘environments’ have available different ‘languages’: the language used by doctors is different from that one of a judge or from that one used in advertisement. In other words, there are different discourses (e.g. the discourse of medicine, the discourse of law or the discourse of advertisement) and each of them follows its own patterns and regularities. The plural ‘discourses’ is therefore a specification considering that use of language is interwoven with context, thus changeable to generate a specific discourse. The ability to recognize patterns or regularities in order to identify discourse as well as to choose the adequate patterns and regularities to a discourse situation given, then, means to possess communicative competence (Woods, 2006, p. ix). For the issue of language learning, the consequence is that discourse analysis can and actually should be utilized when we assume that communicative competence is a meaningful goal: “successful language learning involves much more than acquiring a static formal knowledge of the new language, but must also entail an ability to achieve meaning in communication” (Cook, 2011, p. 433). In that way, discourse analysis is regarded as a tool in language teaching. Apart from that it can also be used as a powerful tool in analysing the language used in educational settings, particularly the language of teachers in the classroom. In that case discourse analysis serves as a tool in professional development.

Discourse Analysis as a Teaching Tool

Like speech act theory, the application of discourse analysis in communicative language teaching is justified on the grounds that it deals with language in the real world, for real communication. The idea that teaching a foreign language should enable learners to communicate effectively is the rationale behind the decision to implement discourse analysis into foreign language teaching.

Following this rationale, methodologists have offered a variety of possible implementations of discourse analysis into foreign language teaching. An important contribution was made by McCarthy (1991). He discusses the application of discourse analysis in the following fields (for the following summary cf. also Wiśniewski, 2006):

- teaching grammar: grammatical items (e.g. pronouns, articles, tenses) are taught as functional devices in discourse, particularly to generate coherence and textuality (reference, ellipsis and substitution, conjunction), to indicate theme and rheme (the ‘given’ and the ‘new’ piece of information in a unit of discourse) or as a signal for a specific type of discourse (tense and aspect);
- teaching vocabulary: accepting the idea that vocabulary is best learned in a meaningful setting, discourse analysis in language teaching observes how vocabulary is selected in relation to context (the non-linguistic elements surrounding text) and co-text (language preceding or following

the text being analyzed) (cf. Cook, 2011, pp. 433-434) in order to provide lexical cohesion through reiteration, use of hyponyms, synonyms and antonyms, to generate a particular register (degree of formality or informality) and to express modality. Collocations and chunks are significant elements in teaching vocabulary when discourse analytical tools are considered;

- teaching phonology: phonology, including pronunciation, intonation, rhythm, word stress and prominence is probably one of the most unaddressed features in non-communicative language teaching. Since discourse analysis deals with naturally occurring language and communicative teaching aims to teach naturally occurring language, the significance of discourse analysis in teaching phonology for communicative language teaching is self-evident.

I should like to make mention of two other applications of discourse analysis in language teaching, which I believe are particularly suitable to be adopted in language teaching: genre analysis and critical discourse analysis.

It has been stated that language in use is characterised by regularities and patterns (such as collocations or text structures), and discourse analysis is interested in detecting such regularities and patterns. The choice of regularities and patterns in a particular communicative event is driven by its purpose; in order to classify communicative events according to their purposes the term 'genre' has been adopted, and teaching genres through genre analysis has been established in foreign language teaching, especially in the field of ESP (Cook, 2011, p. 439; Bhatia, 1997). For instance, teaching the genre 'academic writing' will emphasise frequently used underlying structures in academic texts (e.g. *from general to specific*) or language foci (e.g. *passive voice*) (Swales & Feak, 2004).

As an influential approach within discourse analysis, critical discourse analysis has found its way into (foreign) language teaching. By analyzing texts holistically and in depth using concepts such as framing, fore-/backgrounding or connotations, critical discourse analysis seeks to detect how language is deliberately employed to transport ideologies and establish social relations, mostly to the benefit of the powerful. Thus, critical discourse analysis offers an opportunity to expose learners to texts that are related to their daily lives and therefore of their interest, and it enables them to read critically, to reveal hidden messages by considering the whole of a text as well as its details. Obviously, critical discourse analysis can make an important contribution to the realization of the goals of education in the democratic society (Huckin, 1997).

Discourse analysis as a tool in professional development

Discourse analysts have shown particular interest in analysing classroom discourse (McCarthy, 1991). Obviously, analysing classroom discourse should not remain a sole documentation of what is happening in the classroom, but it should be evaluated in how far it is beneficial or detrimental for learning processes. Recent research has emphasised that teacher language used in interaction with learners is likely to elicit learning when it provides an opportunity for negotiating meaning (Harfitt, 2008; Walsh, 2003, Walsh, 2002); negotiating meaning is regarded crucial in the social constructivist theory of learning, a widely accepted approach in foreign language methodology (Walsh, 2002; Bruner, 1990). Particularly conversation analysis can give strong hints if classroom interaction is likely to generate learning opportunities (see, for example, the study by Üstünel & Seedhouse, 2005). Thus, classroom discourse analysis provides language teachers with a powerful tool to investigate their own teaching, since it reveals how actively learners are engaged in classroom discourse, which is an indicator for the presence (or absence) of learning opportunities (Walsh, 2002, p. 6). In that sense discourse analysis makes a contribution to professional development in the educational context.

Conclusion

Not differently from the implementation of other approaches, methods, techniques or contents, also the incorporation of speech act theory and discourse analysis must be legitimated by teaching aims. The aims of communicative language teaching *do* justify the use of speech act theory and discourse analysis in the foreign language classroom because they help 'transport' the language outside the classroom into the classroom and provide meaningful contexts.

As a conclusion drawn from the points made in this paper, meaningful inclusion of speech acts into the foreign language classroom should not be limited to the presentation and practice of speech acts in role plays simulating real world situations as it is the case in many textbooks, but can additionally contain activities revealing further aspects:

- learners are asked to identify a speech act and to analyze its linguistic form. E.g. in analyzing "Why don't you go to the doctor?" learners can understand that the interrogative "Why don't

you..?" is a formulaic expression for suggesting and preferable to an imperative. Such an activity can raise the learner's awareness of significance of form to generate linguistic politeness;

- learners are asked to compare through what linguistic form(s) (e.g. interrogative, affirmative) a speech act (given in L2) is/can be expressed in their L1; such an activity will lead to the perception that in many cases speech acts cannot be translated literally, the concept of 'softening' language through indirect expression, however, is a universal linguistic feature;
- this leads to a third point worth dealing with in the foreign language classroom: Since speech acts transport values of the culture, a didactic focus could lie on the question in how far the value is shared in the learners' culture. In this way the concerns expressed by McKay (2003) are not only addressed but also transformed into beneficial learning activities.

To some extent the conclusions for the implementation for speech acts in foreign language teaching can be transferred to discourse analysis: It has the potential to raise the learner's awareness of the interrelatedness of form and meaning dependent on context. A comparison to the learner's first language will possibly reveal that, for instance, the discourse of advertisement is realized through different linguistic concepts in different cultures because of a diversity of values.

Speech act and discourse analysis can be powerful teaching tools. A further significance of discourse analysis lies in its potential as a tool for evaluating classroom language. Either application is essential for improving language teaching.

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