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THE INTER-RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE AND ITS RELEVANCE TO ADULT LITERACY PROGRAMMES FOR NESB[1] ADULTS

This article describes a study designed to investigate the inter-relationship between language and culture and its relevance to adult literacy programmes for NESB adults.
The study was funded in 1994 by the Adult Literacy Research Node of the National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia as a small scale research project in adult literacy. The research was a collaborative effort between two language teachers: Višnja Karlovčan, an ESL/ESP lecturer from Zagreb, Croatia, and Branka Čop, who was involved in community languages and cultural communication in Perth, Western Australia. Both researchers were concerned with investigating and comparing how the cultural knowledge of monolingual and bilingual teachers of English as a second language affected the language acquisition of adult learners of Croatian origin. Focusing on the use of speech acts of refusal/denial and gratitude/appreciation, their study gives insights into the complexities of socio-cultural factors which underlie speech.

Focus of research

Our research aim was to study the acquisition of the ability of the second language learners of Croatian origin to use the language in a social context to perform the speech acts of refusing and thanking. The following assumptions underlay the research:

1) Every language makes available to the user the same basic set of speech acts (with the exception of certain culture-specific ritualised acts);

2) Every language makes available the same set of strategies and semantic formulae for performing a given speech act;

3) Languages differ significantly with respect to what strategy a particular speech act ought to perform.

Underlying the first assumption is the claim that if one language permits an act such as refusing in its first language it will successfully be carried over to the second language.

Underlying the second assumption is the claim that if one can *thank* or *say no* in one language using specific semantic formulae and strategies, then the same semantic formulae and strategies are available to the speaker in every other language. Although some differences may exist, they appear to be minimal. Therefore, the second language learner is not faced with learning new strategies to perform speech acts he already knows. He is only faced with the task of learning how to code them in the target language.

Underlying the third assumption is the belief that although the inventory of speech acts and performing strategies may be basically the same across languages, two languages (language-culture pairing) may differ in terms of what one does and how.

For example, societies differ in how food is offered, accepted and rejected. In the USA a hostess will offer more food usually only once, and in Croatia several times. In some parts of Croatia one usually does not accept food for the first or even the second time it is offered; however, refusal the third time is definite. Also, in Croatia when offering something, the best refusal is _hvala_. The translation of this word is _thanks,_ but it means _no thanks._

We decided that our investigation should be in the area of thanking and refusing. There were several reasons for this. First, both are frequent and useful speech acts, particularly to a learner of a new language. Second, they permit a variety of strategies, and third, both have been studied by quite a number of applied linguists thus providing us with some sort of framework within which our study could be developed.

The particular research questions we asked were the following:

1) Is there any significant difference in the speech act performance in so called formulaic utterances (gratitude/appreciation and refusal/denial) of adult NESB learners of Croatian origin tutored by a bilingual and a monolingual teacher, respectively?

2) To what extent, if any, do first language norms interfere with the second language performance of adult NESB learners of Croatian origin?

3) Is deviation from native speaker norms and inadequate linguistic proficiency more pronounced in the group tutored by a monolingual teacher a result of her lack of knowledge of her students' socio-cultural background?

4) In what ways can socio-cultural competence, as one aspect of communicative competence, be translated into teaching chunks that can serve as the elements of the syllabus or the textbook in the target language?

Methodology

In the project the notion of _speech act set_ (Olshtain-Cohen, 1983) was used as a replacement for the term _small speech event_[2] (Hymes, 1974) to clarify the relationship between a discourse situation and the specific utterances that can qualify for certain speech functions. Since we had intended to focus on gratitude/appreciation and refusal/denial, we were concerned with the discourse situations which usually call for such speech acts and with the semantic formulae that would be appropriate for native speakers of English in such situations.

The data for the research was collected in two ways:

1) Learners were given a series of written situations in the form of multiple choice questions at the very beginning of the testing so that appropriateness of form and recognition of appropriate behaviour could be assessed, and then,

2) Ten refusal/denial and ten gratitude/appreciation situations were selected and randomly ordered. The respondents read the situations to themselves and then the investigators role-played the learner performing the speech acts of refusing and thanking.

The subjects of our investigation were twenty adult learners of English as a second language of Croatian origin. They were divided into two groups:

a) a group of ten adult NESB learners in the 20—45 age group who were tutored by bilingual teachers either in Croatia or Australia, and

b) a group also consisting of ten adult NESB learners of the same age as group (a) who had no previous knowledge of English at the time of their arrival in Australia and were attending language classes offered to immigrants in Perth, Western Australia. Their tutors were teachers of English who did not speak any other language.

Two researchers, both of Croatian origin, collected data from the learners. Two native speakers of English served as judges: a retired school teacher (monolingual) and a university student (bilingual, English being his stronger language) both born in Australia. In order to arrive at a more precise method of data assessment the recorded and transcribed material was rated for difference in the speech act performance of refusal/denial and gratitude/appreciation in terms of both communicative effectiveness and social appropriateness by researchers and judges, respectively, on a *scale of one to three,* where one represented *barely different,* two *different,* and three *extremely different.*

A series of situations, such as the two situations below, were presented to the learners:

... the guests have just left. The kitchen is full of dirty dishes and glasses. Your mother asks you to help her with the dishes. You do not want to disappoint her although you do not feel like helping her at all. You will say...

... Many of my friends attended my inaugural lecture in linguistics. After the lecture some of them approached me and highly commended me on my performance. I am very pleased, and tell them...

It is obvious from the two situations that the first one was designed to elicit some form of refusing strategy while the second one was designed to elicit a complimenting/thanking strategy. What is important about these and other situations is the fact that they provide evidence of the learner's ability to formulate such messages properly.

In the first example the learner has a choice: instead of supplying a direct *no* strategy, he/she can either offer an alternative or he/she can postpone the action of performance (washing the dishes and glasses) until tomorrow. Finding the proper form to express a function in such speech situations is of great importance, but there are some other parameters that should be taken into consideration as well. Parameters such as how the performance of the speech act is related to social structure, that is, how superiors, peers, respected persons, etc. are to be addressed in such speech situations. Although in some cultures children can be more direct with their parents, in some regions of Croatia this is not the case. In other words in our society (Croatian), how one says no is more important than the answer itself.

In the second example a learner has to be careful enough to choose a strategy in which »certain values of our own society are reflected and reinforced in one particular speech act« (Wolfson 1981:118) – complimenting.

Research results

According to both sets of English ratings speech act performance of NESB learners of Croatian origin in so called formulaic utterances (refusal/denial, gratitude/appreciation) tutored by bilingual teachers (group G/B) was significantly different as compared to those learners tutored by monolingual teachers (group G/M).

Although the findings reveal considerable regularity in choice of semantic formulae by both groups in such acts, deviation from the native speaker norms, however, was more pronounced in the group tutored by a monolingual teacher – group G/M. As was expected, deviation from native speaker norms seemed to depend not only on negative transfer from the first language but also on the degree of linguistic proficiency of the non-native speaker, and interestingly enough on »preconceived notions of the target socio-cultural rules relating to the particular speech act« (Wolfson 1981:119). According to our results, language

learners in group G/B were found to be willing to recognize and adapt the perceived differences, while those from group G/M insisted that the only appropriate speech behaviour was the one they had learned while acquiring their first language. The reasons for such behaviour may be twofold:

First, the learners tutored by a bilingual teacher had more opportunity to be taught about socio-cultural norms of the target language community indirectly, i.e. in their mother tongues, thus minimizing the »culture shock«;

Second, they were found to be more enthusiastic about the idea of integrating into the Australian society due to their previous wish to live overseas (e.g. in an English speaking country).

On the other hand, the majority of learners in group G/M came to Australia to start their life from scratch as they had been left homeless and stripped of all their material possessions because of the war that was going on in their homeland. These people (particularly those in their forties) had never thought of leaving their homeland before, probably never paid much attention to learning a foreign language, although the majority of Croats cherish the idea of learning foreign languages as a part of Croatian tradition and heritage (Karlovčan, 1994). To illustrate this, the following examples from our testing material are being presented:

... having returned from an overseas trip you find out that the football match between Carlton and Eagles is taking place tomorrow. You are trying hard to get a ticket but everything is in vain. All tickets for the match have already been sold out. Sad and disappointed you had put up with the idea of not going to see the match. Suddenly your boss appears holding a ticket in his hand, and asks you if you would like to go to the football match tomorrow. What are you going to tell him?...
... I have worked as a shop assistant for some time. After serving a customer I usually tell him/her...

While the respondents of group G/B were more elaborate in their answers using more or less the same semantic formulae, such as:
– oh, I'd like/love to... thanks;
– I can hardly believe it, thank you so/very much;
– thank you so much/very much indeed, without you I'd miss the match, etc...
those in group G/M used the formulae which not only reflected a direct translation of the semantic formulae usually used in their first language (Croatian), but they were also unable to conform to the socio-cultural rules of the target language community. Their typical response was:
– yes, of course ....
– yes, I'd like to go because I like football matches.
As it can be seen from these examples, the participants of the second group (G/M) failed to use proper semantic formulae to express the speech act of thanking. They not only did not use any of the formulae from the set of formulae available to the native speakers of the target language, but also failed to realize this particular speech act in the target language in terms of both communicative effectiveness and social appropriateness. If the communication is to be continued, it will probably stop because from the English native speaker's point of view, the lack of appropriate semantic formulae for thanking is judged to be socially inappropriate.

In the second example, almost all respondents in group G/B used the semantic formulae, such as:

    – thank you very much for visiting us ...

    – thank you, have a nice day ...

    – see you, thanks ...

    – see you next time, thanks ...

    – thank you for coming, see you next time ...

    – thank you very much and do come again ...

In addition, some of the respondents in group G/B even mentioned that they would smile while uttering »thank you« phrases.

However, respondents in group G/M (8 of them) used the phrase:

    – good bye,

only.

The performance of the other two was better evaluated, since their responses included a »thank you« phrase.

In another situation:

... You are invited for a dinner. You were looking forward to a nice homemade meal. Instead you were offered some take-away »fast food«. You don't like it, and you say ...

the answers elicited in group G/B were:

    – I'm not really very hungry. Just a small helping for me, thanks;

    – thank you very much, but I'm afraid that due to my high cholesterol I am not allowed to eat saturated fats;

    – thank you, you have really put lots of effort into preparing this meal, haven't you;

    – thank you very much but, to be honest with you, I must avoid fast food as I easily put on weight;

    – Oh, thanks! My son would certainly be delighted to take your food (smile), he is a fast food addict;

    – I'm on a strict diet, I mustn't eat fast food, but thanks, anyway.

In this particular case (third example) a learner has not only proven his linguistic proficiency, but also her sense of irony, within the acceptable norms of the appropriate social behaviour.

The answers in group G/M were the following:

    – thank you, I am not hungry;

    – thank you, I have already eaten at home.

As can be seen from the answers above, the answers of the G/B participants show that their performance, as far as linguistic proficiency is concerned, is considered to be within the norms of the target language speakers. Through their language performance they have proven that they also possess the appropriate knowledge of the socio-cultural rules of the target language community.

On the other hand, the answers of the second group (G/M) participants show not only the lack of linguistic proficiency but also a very limited knowledge of the socio-cultural norms of the target language community. As we mentioned before, in Croatia, when offered something the best refusal is »hvala«, the translation of which is »thanks« or »thank you«, but it means »no thanks«.

As far as the phrase »I have already eaten at home« is concerned, in some distant rural parts of Croatia, it is a custom (especially among elderly people) to eat before going to visit someone, even if invited for lunch or dinner. In other words they think it is polite to refuse the food offered the first and second time, so in case food is not offered the third time, they won't be left hungry, since they have already eaten at home.

The major findings revealed by our research are the following:

1. There is a significant difference in the speech act performance in so called formulaic utterances of gratitude/appreciation and refusal/denial of adult NESB learners of Croatian background tutored by bilingual teachers, and those tutored by monolingual teachers. The results suggest that the majority of learners in group G/B – 7 out of 10 – perceive speech acts of thanking and refusing almost in the same way the native speakers do (Table 1), while the speakers in group G/M seem to have developed an interlanguage (Selinker, 1972) of speech act performance. (Table 2)

2. The interlanguage of speech act performance observed in group G/M differs from both the first and second language usage. It is manifested in the following ways:

a) usages similar to those of native speakers in all ways were found in 2 adult NESB learners out of 10;

b) usages which differ from those of native speakers in linguistic procedure were found in 8 NESB learners out of 10;

c) usages which differ extremely from those of native speakers on a scale of socio-cultural appropriateness were found in 8 NESB learners out of 10.

The obtained research data also confirm the fact that the deviation from native speakers norms does not depend only on the learner's interlanguage, but also, on the preconceived notions of the target language socio-cultural rules relating to a particular speech act.

The learner's perception of how distant the target language is from his/her native language usually has an effect on their learning strategies. If the learner perceives the particular speech act to be universal in nature, then his/her tendency will be to transfer such behaviour directly from his/her first language. In order to avoid this from happening a learner should be provided with the established archetypal sets within the two languages (source and target) so that a cross-cultural comparison of the speech acts in question can be conducted. Such a comparison would then render a list of components having universal and specific features with respect to the languages in question.

Discussion of the results

The analysis of our research data also confirm that the overall performance of learners in group G/B tutored by a bilingual tutor (as far as their linguistic proficiency and socio-cultural appropriateness is concerned) was much better than the performance of learners in group G/M tutored by a monolingual teacher. We presume the reasons that led to a significantly better performance may be the following:

First, the learners in group G/B experienced the new culture (as part of the target language) indirectly, i.e. through the medium of their source language, thus the possibility of their suffering from »culture shock« was minimized.

Second, the bilingual teacher shared the same cultural background (of the source language) as her students did. Moreover, she was also very well acquainted with the culture of the learners' target language community. Therefore, she was able to explain all those subtle nuances that make the two cultures different in both the target and the source language, respectively. Thus, by having reduced the unknown elements of the socio-cultural rules of the target language, she made sure that they had a common frame of reference. That was precisely what she was expected to achieve. She was expected to contrast the source and target cultures and show how they matched or failed to match.

Third, when the bilingual tutor found correspondent patterns of behaviour, artifacts, etc., she relied on these to ensure successful communication. When she found none, then other procedures or their suitable combination needed to be restarted to reduce the source culture elements to the target culture potential. The suggested procedure is:

a) borrowing
b) definition/description/paraphrasing;
c) substitution;
d) lexical creation;
e) omission. (Ivir 1994:68)

The contrastive relationship between the two languages involved plays a major role in the teacher's choice of procedure.

Fourth, socio-cultural competence, being a part of comunicative competence, refers to the speaker's ability to determine the pragmatic appropriateness of a particular speech act in a given context. At the production level, it involves the selection of one of several grammatically acceptable forms according to the perceived degree of formality of the situation and of available forms. Therefore, communicative competence needs to be translated into the choices and preferences which the learner will need to be able to make, in order to perform speech acts in the new language.

Conclusion

In order to evaluate the knowledge of a non-native speaker or to plan the content of a teaching programme, we must have a description of the speech act sets in the target language as well as in the source language. By contrasting them, we can make didactic decisions related to teaching and creating literacy programmes. As an example of such decision making, let us consider the cases of »thanking«and »refusing« speech act sets.

According to our research data, we know what major semantic formulae make up the target language thanking and refusing speech act sets. For the purpose of syllabus design, we will assume that the learner needs to know how to say *thank you* and *no* in a variety of interactive discourse situations in the target language.

Once a list of thanking and refusing situations relevant to a particular group of learners has been developed, it has to be decided which of those are suitable for the early part of the course study, and which should be left for a later stage.

For the early part of the course study, a bilingual approach would enable teachers to set the context for a lesson and provide detailed explanations where needed. Thus the free flow of communication among teachers and learners would permit the learners to bring the full benefit of their world knowledge and experience to bear on their use of English, and more precisely, in a particular speech act set.

The next step in the syllabus design process will be to decide which and how many semantic formulae should be introduced at each point in the syllabus or textbook, in accordance with the situations which have been selected. Such decisions can be made only when good descriptions of speech act sets are available for both the source and the target language. In order to guide the learners to an ultimate level where they can make their own choices, we need to expose them to the patterns which are used most commonly by native speakers of the target language.

In the initial part of language study, it seems logical to incorporate the major semantic formulae of a speech act set, while the various subformulae can be introduced gradually as part of the spiraling organisation of the syllabus.

Although many modern and recently published language textbooks have attempted to incorporate socio-cultural information as an integral part of language functions, they have often suffered from the lack of theoretical descriptions and research evidence on which to base their selections. Therefore, it is necessary for textbooks and teaching syllabi to reflect the constantly widening scope of socio-cultural research related to speech acts.

NOTES

1. Non-English speaking background

2. The distinction proposed by Hymes (1972) among a speech situation, speech event, and speech act provides the socio-linguistic researcher with a framework for studying communicative competence. This framework provides a hierarchy which places the speech situation at the top, speech events come second and speech acts at the bottom of the ladder. Speech acts are the minimal terms on the scale and refer to the acts we perform when we speak: giving reports, giving advice, agreeing, complaining, apologizing, thanking, congratulating, etc. As a result of their ongoing work on apologies, Olshtain and Cohen (1983) suggest that speech acts be studied as sets of formulae which perform the same function. Noting that the speech act of apologizing may be performed by the use of any one of several possible formulae, they offer the term *speech act set* to refer to the entire category.

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MEĐUODNOS JEZIKA I KULTURE I NJEGOVA VAŽNOST ZA OPISMENJAVANJE ODRASLIH

Sažetak

U članku se analiziraju rezultati istraživanja međuodnosa jezika i kulture i njegovoj primjerenosti na programe pismenosti za odralse učenike engleskog jezika koji dolaze s ne-engleskog govornog područja. Istraživanje je provedeno u okviru šireg projekta o pismenosti odraslih osoba na inicijativu Australskog nacionalnog instituta za jezike i pismenost, točnije njegovog istraživačkog ogranka u Zapadnoj Australiji.

Predmetom našeg istraživanja bili su odrasli učenici (dobna grupa: 20–45 godina) hrvatskog podrijetla koji su usvajali engleski jezik u formalnom i neformalnom okolišu u Australiji.

U procesu komunikacijske interakcije ispituje se komunikacijski potencijal učenika u malom govornom događaju (small speech event, Hymes, 1972) ili prema terminu kojeg rabe Olshtain i Cohen (1983) »speech act set« kojim učenici žele ostvariti određene komunikacijske namjere; u našem slučaju dvije inter-aktivno komunikacijske funkcije: *zahvaljivanje i odbijanje*.

Učenici su bili podijeljeni u dvije grupe: grupu G/B koju su podučavali dvojezični učitelji i grupu G/M koju su podučavali jednojezični učitelji koji su nastavu izvodili isključivo na engleskom jeziku.

Rezultati istraživanja ukazuju da su učenici u grupi G/B bili uspješniji u svojoj jezičnoj produkciji u odnosu na grupu G/M. Analiziraju se razlozi koji ograničavaju jezično ponašanje (prihvaćanje formalnih normi) učenika i njihov odnos prema društveno-kulturološkim i civilizacijskim mjerilima jezika cilja.

U izradi programa težište je na situacijskom i kontekstualiziranom učenju: učenici se uvode u stvarne govorne situacije koje bi se mogle dogoditi u određenoj govornoj zajednici engleskog govornog područja, a odnose se na uporabu komunikacijskih fraza za izražavanje zahvalnosti, odnosno odbijanja. Ovdje valja posebnu pažnju pokloniti kontrastivnoj analizi na planu socio-lingvističkih odnosa, te onim problemima koji nastaju kad dva jezika i dvije kulture dođu u kontakt putem nastavnog procesa.

TABLE 1 GROUP G/B – Tutored by bilingual teacher

	Speech acts of gratitude – refusal perceived almost in the way of native speakers	Barely different
Gratitude/ appreciation	Number of learners	Number of learners
Situation 1	10	
~ 2	10	
~ 3	9	
~ 4	10	1
~ 5	10	
~ 6	10	
~ 7	9	
~ 8	10	1
~ 9	10	
~ 10	9	
		1

Refusal/ denial		
Situation 1	10	
~ 2	10	
~ 3	10	
~ 4	9	
~ 5	10	1
~ 6	10	
~ 7	9	
~ 8	10	1
~ 9	9	
~ 10	10	1

Majority of learners in group G/B – *7 of them* – are perceiving speech acts of thanking and refusing almost in the way that native speakers do. The speech act performance of the *other 3* learners was found barely different only.

TABLE 2a GROUP G/M – Tutored by monolingual teacher

THE INTERLANGUAGE OF SPEECH ACTS PERFORMANCE

a) Usages similar to those of native speakers in all ways

gratitude/ appreciation	barely different No. of students	different No. of students	extremely different No. of students
Situation 1	1		
~ 2			
~ 3			
~ 4			
~ 5			
~ 6			
~ 7			
~ 8	1		
~ 9			
~ 10			

b) Usages which differ from those of native speakers in linguistic procedure

Situation 1	9
~ 2	10
~ 3	10
~ 4	10
~ 5	10
~ 6	10
~ 7	10
~ 8	9
~ 9	10
~ 10	10

c) Usages which differ extremely from those of native speakers on a scale of socio-cultural appropriateness

Situation 1	9
~ 2	10
~ 3	10
~ 4	10
~ 5	10
~ 6	10
~ 7	10
~ 8	9
~ 9	10
~ 10	10

TABLE 2b GROUP G/M – Tutored by monolingual teacher

THE INTERLANGUAGE OF SPEECH ACTS PERFORMANCE

a) Usages similar to those of native speakers in all ways

refusal/ denial	barely different No. of students	different No. of students	extremely different No. of students
Situation 1	1		
~ 2			
~ 3			
~ 4			
~ 5	1		
~ 6			
~ 7			
~ 8			
~ 9			
~ 10			

b) Usages which differ from those of native speakers in linguistic procedure

Situation 1	9
~ 2	10
~ 3	10
~ 4	10
~ 5	9
~ 6	10
~ 7	10
~ 8	10
~ 9	10
~ 10	10

c) Usages which differ extremely from those of native speakers on a scale of socio-cultural appropriateness

Situation 1	9
~ 2	10
~ 3	10
~ 4	10
~ 5	9
~ 6	10
~ 7	10
~ 8	10
~ 9	10
~ 10	10

TABLE 2 (cont.)

The *interlanguage* of speech act performance in *group G/M* is manifested in the following ways:

a) usages similar (barely different) to those of native speakers in all ways were found in *2 adult NESB learners* only.

b) usages which differ from those of native speakers in linguistic procedure were found in *8 adult NESB learners*.

c) usages which differ extremely from those of native speakers on a scale of socio--cultural appropriateness were found in *8 adult NESB learners of* Croatian origin.