

# **The Pragmatics of Discourse: Implications for Interpreters**

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## **Abstract**

This paper has three objectives: first, it examines the pragmatic variables in an intercultural and interpersonal context. Second, it argues that the use of a common language across cultures does not always guarantee mutual understanding. Third, it highlights areas where miscommunication is likely to occur as a result of intercultural and interpersonal differences. Finally, this paper provides implications for interpreters as how to eliminate factors giving rise to intercultural/interpersonal misunderstanding.

## **Introduction**

In the last two decades, approaches have been gaining grounds in intercultural and interpersonal communication (Gumperz 1982, Antaki 1994). These approaches don't only seek to examine the differences in the verbal behaviors of any linguistic communication, but rather the intercultural and interpersonal communication as well. Intercultural and/or interpersonal communication is understood here as strategy used to create meaning in cross-cultural communication. Such an interactional view is also known as the theory of pragmatic, as it solely depends on a specific situation at hand.

Furthermore, theories developed within what has become known as pragmatics in recent years are directly relatable to the oral mode of interpreting speakers do all the time; in order to help the theory and the practice to meet as well as possible, one has to look at it from the end of the oral mode of spoken language, which we call interpreting. I have chosen the oral mode of spoken language because it is easier to perceive the pragmatic variables at work in the oral mode than it is in the written mode. This does not mean that such variables are not all equally present in the

written mode of translation, but they tend to be easily manifested in the oral mode of language, i.e. interpreting.

Although we view spoken and written languages in cross cultural communications if they were two separable entities, one has to take into account the fact that in both activities, there is a transference of meaning from one language system and from one community to another community; however, this particular transference can be done in speech and in writing; it can also be done through subtitling below a television screen or a film screen. In all of this, speaking and writing involves meaning transference. There is no need to go into the controversy of what constitutes meaning; however, one needs to point out that meaning is understood here as the totality of the information conveyed in a particular message, whether stated or implied (Shiyab 1990). To this effect, what is called 'meaning' in the oral mode of language, i.e. interpreting is what this paper is going to investigate.

To relate theories of pragmatics to writing in an intercultural/ cross cultural context, one has to understand the relationship between the addressor and the addressee. What was the message and for whom it was destined? Unless these issues are taken into account, understanding will be obscure. One can imagine, of instance, that when speakers have words on a printed page, they (words) are, in a sense, disassociated from the people who produce those words and from the people for whom those words are destined. It is an obvious point. For example, look at a particular message written on a page; one sees the words on the page; however, no one sees who wrote those words in the first place. It might have been the speaker, or somebody also. Who knows? In a sense, since we have seen the message, then we are the people whom it is destined for, but we should be aware that it is a message that was not originally destined for us; it was destined for somebody else.

It is axiomatic that in a large number of, but not all, situations of speaking, the text-producer and text-receiver are both present in one situation, in one moment in time, and in one place; therefore, it is easy to observe communication happening.

One can reflect on the fact that during meetings, whether political or social, one might think of the position of chairs and tables in the meeting room before the meeting even starts. The point here is that this particular preparation might have taken minutes or even hours. The question: why is that? I think that when people put a great deal of thought into exactly where they place the tables and chairs, it hardly matters, although there might be a particular configuration of tables and chairs there which may perhaps be not an entirely symmetrical one and might have its significance, but nevertheless, for such meeting, it took minutes and hours. Why should they take all this time? This is a question for pondering.

My second example is a stylized form of an exchange that took place between two people coming from two different cultures. These people were speaking English to each other and it was the opening exchange, the opening conversation exchange of these two businessmen who had a task to negotiate a business deal, which they failed to negotiate. The meeting was unsuccessful and the difficulty can be traced back to the very first words they spoke to each other and these are the first words in a largely stylized form. I doubt very much that these are the exact words that were used in the exchange but I think it is a kind of a stylization of what they said to each other. Here is the conversation that took place between these two people:

A: 'Hello!'

B: 'Hello,' he replied as he turned around to see who was talking to him.

A: 'It has been a long time since we have seen each other,'

B: 'Yes. Too long, I am afraid,' he replied.

A: 'Well, that depends on what you mean by a long time,' he remarked.

Here one can realize that at this stage of the conversation, something has already gone wrong. There is already something not working properly in terms of communications, and the questions are whether one can identify what is going wrong here and where does it start? The point is, that by the end of this short exchange, a very competitive atmosphere is being created because (A) is saying "it is been a long time" and (B) is saying "well, that is your fault, not mine, etc..." and for people who are trying to work out a successful business deal, they got off on the wrong foot. Things have already started to go wrong, and instead of being cooperative, they are finding themselves competing with each other.

## **Cross Cultural Communication**

Based on the above observations, one can relate this to two important things that have been observed when people negotiate with each other and the two things are this: first of all, there is a constant need to foster good relations between the people speaking to each other. All of us know that this is not specific to any particular culture in the sense that it is experienced in all cultures; however, it finds its way out linguistically in different forms. When people try to negotiate or even converse with someone, they are aware that there is a constant need to ensure that the relations between the two people speaking to each other are taking place on the right terms; they do things linguistically with language to ensure that happens. That is the first important point. The second point which is relatable to this and other exchanges is that in different cultures, there are unwritten rules for when it is someone's turn to speak (Wells 1981; Gumperz et al 1981; 1985). One might have observe this in some cultures and/or in some linguistic cultures. In some languages, Arabic for example, it is more acceptable to interrupt the person one is speaking with than it is in other cultures. English is a case in point. But if one is going to interrupt, there are ways of doing it linguistically; there are ways when one shouldn't do it linguistically. These, incidentally, are among the most difficult problems facing language learners at all times. In a sense, we always think that grammar is a difficult thing to learn but at least grammar is a finite task. It might be an almost insurmountable mountain, but we know it is there; we can see it and measure it; we can get over it, but these unwritten rules about the way in which communication is supposed to take place are difficult ones to master. We are all familiar with the kind of difficulty we face when we learn a foreign language; we actually commit, in one way or another, a number of verbal and non-verbal offences, which were either very aggressive towards the person we were speaking to or not aggressive enough.

### *Grice's Maxims*

At this point, one has to introduce Grice's (1975) maxims. Until the 1970's, more or less, not a great deal of attention had been paid to the way in which people use language to achieve their own ends and to the rules which people implicitly obey when conversing with other people. It was this that led Grice to talk of what he calls "the cooperative principle". Grice states the principles as follows:

"Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage of which it occurs. By the accepted purpose and direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged."

Grice (1975:45)

What Grice is saying here is that when you talk to someone and someone is talking to you, it is a natural assumption in the first instance, unless you have evidence to the contrary, that the person talking to you is trying to be cooperative. He is not deliberately trying to mislead you; he is not deliberately going to try and bore you; he is not going to talk to you about a lot of things that are not relevant to you, and so on. This is the basic assumption that people make. Here, Grice formulated these assumptions into a number of what he called "maxims": quality, relation and manner. The first one is quantity, which has to do with the notion that when people speak to each other, they go on long enough to make their point. When they feel they have made their point, they stop talking. The point is that when you are having an ordinary conversation with someone, you know that time is limited, because when you are talking, the other person cannot really talk; you know that there is joint cooperation whereby the conversation time is shared to a certain extent. Therefore, you will not go on longer than you feel necessary. If someone asks you a question like, *Can you show me the way to the White House?*, you will try to give him/her instructions on how to reach the White House, which will be as short and explicit as possible. You wouldn't say, "Well, in America, as a whole, there are many white houses. There are small white houses and large white houses. I assume the one you want to go to is the one where the President resides. On the other hand, if you got a taxi, you could take X street, but if you don't have one, you could take Y street. No one would do that because they know time is limited. Grice states that the maxim 'quantity' is to "make your contribution as informative as is required for the current purposes of the exchange. Do not make your contribution more informative than required than required." That is the first maxim.

The second maxim is 'quantity'. Grice states:

"Do not say what you believe to be false. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence."

In other words, don't lie, but then why should that be a normal maxim of talk exchanges. Again, it relates back to this cooperative principle that when someone is talking to you, your first

assumption is that they are not telling you a pack of lies. You may have other evidence, which would lead you to the conclusion that perhaps they are telling you a pack of lies; however, the first natural assumption is that when you go up to somebody and ask *Can you show me the way to the White House?*, they are not going to show you the way to a white house instead. This is the first assumption that you make and that is the maxim of 'quality'.

The third maxim is the maxim of 'relation'; it is very simply stated "be relevant". Let us consider the previous *example Can you show me the way to the White House?* You would not normally expect a response such as "I saw a nice woman walking down the street." It would not be a relevant reply. Therefore, the maxim indicates that if we assume that the person speaking to us is being cooperative, which is the underlying assumption if he/she is being cooperative, then he/she will give us a reply which is in some sense relevant to what we have said in the first place.

The last maxim is 'manner' and is stated as:

"Be perspicuous. Avoid obscurity of expression. Avoid ambiguity. Be brief. Be orderly."

Perhaps "be orderly" is important because what we normally expect, when one asks somebody a question, is that the answer that comes back to us will be in a sequence and the elements which are used will be in a certain order; this will make it easy for us to understand what has been said. This is the normal assumption. Grice (1975:51), in trying to show how these maxims work, gives this as a little exchange:

A: I am out of petrol.  
B: There is a garage round the corner.

Now Grice says on the face of it if we just look at this as a sequence of linguistic elements, people could say, if they knew nothing about the way the world works, in general, that (B) is not being relevant. (A) says "I am out of petrol" and (B) starts talking about something that is around the corner. The point here, however, as Grice says is that "the normal assumption is the person that we say this to "I am out of petrol" is, in fact, being cooperative. Therefore, rather

than assuming that (B) is being uncooperative, we start looking at the words that (B) says to see if there is some meaning, which we call implicature (Grice 1975: 45-51). That particular maxim is one that has had a lot written about since it is certainly something essential for interpreters and translators.

Grice's maxims are very useful in the semantic analysis of texts; however, such usefulness is reduced by the generality, not to say vagueness with which they are formulated (Lyons 1977). According to Lyons, evaluating utterances is far more difficult than quantifying the amount of semantic information in an utterance.

Taking this into account, i.e. conversation between people, one can say that what is interesting about a breakdown in communication is that the people who are experiencing the breakdown do not even notice that communication has broken down until much later when things start to get aggressive.

The whole point about Grice is that what we need to do from the point of view of our topic of inter-cultural communication is that we need to add a bi-cultural dimension to Grice because Grice is talking about it in relation to all people everywhere. A lot of work has been done on this since and, of course, empirical work has been implying these maxims in addition to implying things which come later to particular people talking in particular languages within a particular background. What should the interpreter do in cases where the interpreter noticed that something went wrong in the interpreting act or felt that the speaker has lost his way in the conversation? The dilemma is whether the interpreter can intervene and say, "you have got this wrong; you are not understanding each other. This is not intended as a criticism; it is intended to be cooperative, etc." Or conversely, do the interpreters have this right?

## **Pragmatic Variables and Interpreting**

One can make the proposal that conference interpreters should be given the right and the duty to actually stop the proceeding in an international conference if they know that some talk exchange is based on a misunderstanding, however slight. They should not be criticized for actually

intervening. There is a linguistic problem, although it is likely to be cultural as much as linguistic. Here one can see two objections: first, this problem places an intolerable burden on the interpreter himself/herself. If Interpreters intervene in an international conference halfway through a speech from a delegate from Jordan or Canada or wherever, they are not going to be appreciated at all for it. What they say had better be right and had better be demonstrably right as well.

The second objection is that in negotiations, people very often will deliberately misunderstand the person they are talking to as a negotiating policy. As a strategy in argument, one deliberately fails to hear something or one deliberately takes the wrong sense of something; it happens all the time and consequently, how is the interpreter going to deal with this? This is a very controversial area and it is certainly true, not so much for conference interpreters, but for liaison interpreters. There is a real need for a systematically arranged and comprehensive collection of rules for professional liaison interpreters, stating what interpreters should do and what they should not do in these situations. At the moment there is no code of practice and consequently interpreters get criticized for whatever happens. If interpreters allow the miscommunication to continue, they are criticized. People may not like the idea that interpreters did not clear it up and stop it, then they may find themselves more subject of criticism than if they had said nothing. So, it is an unsolved problem. Consider the following extract between two people coming from two different cultures. Speaker (A) is a Jordanian whereas speaker (B) is an American.

- A: 'Excuse me. What is your name?'
- B: 'My name is Adam, he replied, with the sound of curiosity in his voice.'
- A: 'How long have been in this city?'
- B: 'Well, I've been here for only two years,' he answered.
- A: 'Two years,' huh. 'What do you do for living, he asked?'
- B: 'I work in a supermarket,' replied the American after some hesitation.
- A: 'How much money do you make monthly?' he asked boldly.
- B: 'I don't know exactly,' he replied with a frowned face.
- A: 'You don't have to say exactly how much,' he recommended.
- B: 'If you will excuse me, please. I've got to go,' he replied with astonishment as he turned and walked suddenly away.



In this conversation, there is a problem that is traceable back to the fact that (A) kept on asking (B) very personal questions, and (A) finally interpreted this as an attempt to undermine his respect, his position, etc. As a result, both speakers did not get on very well with each other. However, it should be pointed out that this is a finding which comes in via social-psychology that we all have what is known as 'inside groups' and 'outside groups'. Your 'inside group' is those people in your immediate surrounding with whom you identify, with whom you have close relations (i.e. your family, your close friends, etc.). In different cultures, these are defined in different ways and there are different norms. There are such things as 'inside groups', although we never meditate or think of who is or is not in the 'inside group' or 'outside group'. Nevertheless, we instinctively feel this. Of course, there is the 'outside group' which is everyone else.

Another complexity in cross-cultural communications is that which results from differences in the perception of one's cultural and linguistic elements (Noss 1986). For example, in the Jordanian culture, it is considered polite to welcome strangers from a foreign country by treating them immediately as part of your 'inside group'. Therefore, you ask them personal questions. It is a way of welcoming people, or getting close to them, trying to make him/her feel home. However, this is not so for the Americans and consequently one gets these misinterpreted intentions which are a source of difficulties. Now, in going on about that, one may talk about the different kinds of difficulties which people are observed to have, and the sources of intercultural communication difficulties. There are four kinds: first, people's language behavior; secondly, people's non-verbal behavior; thirdly, the basis on which we make attribution about other people; and fourthly, the inside/outside group bias. When it comes to language behavior, people may fail to understand each other because they do not understand the language (i.e. cultural aspects) that each other speak. The point here is that people are behaving linguistically in a proper manner within their own language community, but misinterpreted within another language community due to cultural differences.

A similar point to be made here, which concerns different races and cultures, is that it so happens that the socio-economics of a particular country, Britain for example, are such that the people who serve food in many establishments are largely of Pakistani origin. The people receiving the

food, in this case, are mostly British. The language of exchange between these two groups is English. When we all speak a foreign language very often, one of the last things to change is our intonation patterns; we might get the grammar right, but we do not always perceive that intonations patterns carry meaning. In certain languages (i.e. Indian, Pakistani, etc.), people ask questions with falling intonation might be interpreted as an insult, uncooperative, impolite, and rude to other languages. English is an example. This may give rise to breakdown in communication and may result in unpleasant encounters due to cultural barriers. (For more information on this subject, see Gumperz 1981; 1985).

To relate it back to the business of interpreting, court interpreting is one of the situations where this is most difficult. It is a well observed fact that in a courtroom where there is one interpreter representing what the judge is saying to the witness and what the witness is saying to the judge, the pressures on that interpreter are very great. Sometimes interpreters feel unease about what they do because, for the witness or the accused person, they are agents of the court, employed by the court for the court's purposes and therefore potentially an enemy or hostile. The accused person tends to treat interpreters as distant people, very much 'out group' people. Conversely, the judge and the magistrates in the court will tend to think people may ask for interpreters because they want to erect a smoke screen; they want to make everything very indirect and "to stop us getting them". They, therefore, distrust interpreters because they regard them as an ally of the accused person. So, interpreters are halfway in between and have this problem of loyalties.

Under those circumstances, the interpreter, for whom the accused person is, by definition, part of the 'inside-group' (may have the same nationality, same age, same cultural background, etc.), has to assume a neutrality which is very difficult to maintain.

## **Conclusion**

I would like to conclude at this point that here is a need for interpreters to have very explicit training in the pragmatics of discourse and the way in which they operate particularly in an intercultural context. This unfortunately is not explicitly part of the interpreter's training.

Moreover, what I have stated about interpreting, the oral mode of using language is equally applicable to the written mode of using language. However, the pragmatics of discourse in a written languages (translating) are more difficult to perceive than in spoken languages (interpreting).

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