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Situation-Bound Utterances as Cultural Scripts in Spoken Discourse

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Abstract

This paper provides insight into the pervasive use of situation-bound utterances and their pragmatic functions in spoken discourse. It is corroborated that situation-bound utterances are socially and culturally charged communication routines used by the native speakers in actual speech. The paper analyzes the cultural content of situation-bound utterances and their role in non-native communication. We attempt to show that situation-bound utterances as cultural scripts pertain to cognitive mechanisms of spoken discourse and culture. The study shows that analysis of SBUs as cultural scripts might be used as a learning strategy in foreign language acquisition.

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1. Introduction

In recent years there has been increased interest in formulaic speech production and its role in foreign language acquisition. Altenberg (1998) estimates that 80% of our language production is formulaic, and a great deal of native adult and child communicative creativity consists of prepatterned speech (Ervin-Tripp, 1977; Peters, 1983; Wray, 2002). In the literature, formulaic language has been discussed in such terms as *routines*, *formulae*, *routine formulae*, *formulae sequences*, *prefabricated* or *ready-made linguistic expressions*, *chunks* and *situation-bound utterances* (De Cock, Granger, Leech, and McEnery, 1998; Foster, 2001; Kecskes, 2003). In this research we use the term situation-bound utterances (SBUs) introduced by I. Kecskes (2000) who explained how this term relates to the existing ones and specified them as ‘highly predetermined by the situation’.

The paper analyzes the cultural content of SBUs, their use in spoken discourse, and suggests that they might play

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a great role in the development of linguistic competence. SBUs are no longer considered to be stereotypical actions or any other evidence of “lazy” language behavior (Girard and Sionis, 2003). SBUs are highly colloquial and perform a social function. Performing communicative acts, speakers want to assert something, obtain more information or persuade somebody to do something else. In this respect, situation-bound utterances are regarded as spoken discourse generating patterns. The vast majority of SBUs in any language convey complex and language specific meanings. They often reflect and embody the historical and cultural experiences of some ethnic community. Sometimes it is impossible to elicit the meaning of culture-laden SBUs if you are not a native speaker. Moreover, it is also difficult to teach students a pragmatic use of formulaic language in the semi-natural immersion of the classroom.

2. Methodology

Pragmatics has become a fundamental tool to analyze spoken discourse. Most discourse analysts recognize the dialogic nature of communication that stems from the classic formulations attempted by Bakhtin (1986) and Kristeva (1986). Researchers subscribe to the dialogic nature of meaning, implying, that “meeting two minds and consciousness creates results that cannot be reduced to either one of them” (Blommaert, 2006, p.44). We can see some interesting examples of a big gap between “what is said” and “what is communicated” (Kecskes, 2003) and we would add “what is understood”. Yule (2008) supports the above mentioned idea by saying “two friends having a conversation may imply some things: I heard the speakers, I knew what they said, but I had no idea what was communicated” (Yule, 2008, p.4). Kecskes (2003) illustrated this in the conversation between two men from different cultures:

Chinese: I think Peter drank a bit too much at the party yesterday.

Turkish: Eh, *tell me about it.* He always drinks too much.

Chinese: When we arrived he drank beer. Then Mary gave him some vodka. Later he drank some wine. Oh, too much.

Turkish: Why are you telling me this? I was there.

Chinese: Yes, but you told me to tell about it.

The use of SBUs in social interaction implies dialogic nature of contextual meaning and presupposes: 1) certain scope of dialogicity within spoken discourse; 2) co-operativity or a cultural clash. Spoken discourse obtains a higher degree of dialogicity than written discourse. Carter (1998) claims that spoken discourse may be more ephemeral, it is not pre-planned and more predictable. Dialogic motivation and dialogue management are endemic in spoken discourse. Situation-bound utterances serve to manage dialogues and form dialogic cohesion. SBUs seem to be always impregnated in spoken contexts in the naturalistic environment; they do not seem strange, unrelated or difficult to comprehend. Exploring their pragmatic dimensions, we can emphasize that SBUs are more neutral and unmarked for native speakers than for non-native peers. The utterance *tell me about it* presents a certain cultural clash for a Chinese speaker. The use of this phrase in the communicative settings reveals that the relevant context and grammar of the utterance may offer mutual dialogic cooperation of the speakers within naturalistic spoken discourse. The presence of the utterance *tell me about it* in a limited imperative context for a Chinese speaker suspends any comprehension of what these words refer to and marks the utterance ineffective because what he understands is the imperative *tell me more about it*.

The main aim of pragmatics is to explain how context can affect the meaning of SBUs. This aim is also connected with a cognitive approach to SBUs which reveals that, in many cases, cognitive mechanisms (metaphor, metonymy) are responsible for the unique situational meaning of SBUs (Kecskes, 2000). Comparison of SBUs to other formulaic expressions such as idioms and formulaic implications showed that their meaning structure can also be dependent on cognitive mechanisms. Native speakers usually model spoken discourse in a metaphorical way. For example,

- Bill, I do not think I can agree with you.

- OK, *shoot* (Kecskes, 2003).

This minidiologue demonstrates how our communication is structured and analogized in terms of other concepts. In this case the metaphorical analogy ARGUMENT IS WAR, which, as Lakoff and Johnson (1980) show, produces the idea of *shooting down all arguments in flames*, but not the idea of *taking a gun and shooting*. Such modeling of

spoken discourse determines how speakers of different cultures perceive the world and how our perceptions of interaction are socially and culturally conditioned. Culture specific SBUs are frequent in any language because these expressions serve as automatized and conventionalized interactional patterns. They are conventional routines shared by all the speakers of a particular social community. But our argument here is based on similar considerations to those motivated by Kecskes (2006) that salience is culture-specific and non-native speakers cannot be expected to approach figurative speech the way native speakers do because of their different linguistic and cultural background. Further distinction between meaning of SBUs and interpretation of culture specific utterances goes beyond Wierzbicka's identification of culture scripts typical of different cultures. Cultural scripts are formulated in a tightly constrained, expressively flexible metalanguage consisting of simple words and grammatical patterns which have equivalents in all languages. Anna Wierzbicka (1985) in her article "Different cultures, different languages and different speech acts: English vs. Polish" showed the techniques of cross-cultural semantics. It involves understanding speech practices in terms which make sense to the people concerned, and understanding the meanings of the relevant culturally important words. These words often qualify for the status of cultural key words (Wierzbicka, 1997).

This study is a primarily language and culture - internal, lexical procedure. It exposes the need for examination of three main factors that help non-native learners recognize and interpret SBUs in the semi-natural immersion: closeness to native culture (CLO), compositionality of expression (COM) and situational context (SIT). The research questions of our study are how Russian learners use their perception of interaction, which is socially and culturally conditioned, in understanding the real meaning of conversation when idioms, fixed expressions and SBUs are used. The study also considers learning strategies for better penetration in the sense of communication based on the cultural background of the worldview.

3. Results

The inventory of cultural scripts varies from culture to culture and differs greatly in a number of words speakers use for describing a particular conceptual domain. It is clear that *happy* is a common word used in every-day communication in both the languages, and belongs, according to LDCE to the class of the 1,000 most frequently used words in modern Russian and English.

An illustration of the role of the cultural content of situation-bound utterances in the construction of spoken discourse can be also provided by the bland Russian greeting *Zdravstvuite* (*Hello*). The meaning of the greeting is neither plain, nor neutral, though the situation-bound utterance *Zdravstvuite* is ubiquitous in Russian culture. This most frequently used word representing the imperative form is referred to the 17th century tradition of wishing people good health. The national greeting *Zdravstvuite* differs greatly from many European ones which are used to wish happiness, joy and doing good. A more detailed analysis of the situation-bound utterance *Zdravstvuite* reveals much that is understood to be characteristically culture specific for Russian spoken discourse development, for example, use of ironic and funny phrases *Zdraa...st'e* or *Zdraa...st'e, ya vasha tetya* (*Hello, I am your aunt after B. Thomas's play "Charley's Aunt"*). The cultural script *Zdraa...st'e* is used to express irony, surprise, disagreement and banter in Russian and is semantically assigned to the situation-bound utterance *Zdravstvuite* literally meaning *hello*, yet, "wishing health", but figuratively rendering the meaning of disagreement and in English metaphorically displacing "wishing health", and transforming it into some infernal sense, for example, *What the heck/hell, there you go*.

The experimental study was conducted at National Research Tomsk State University. The participants in our research were the third year students of the Faculty of Foreign Languages. We attempted to consider how 42 EFL students recognize and interpret SBUs in spoken discourse. For this purpose the students had to deal with a special pre-experimental training task, including 20 formulaic items (idioms (IDs), fixed expressions (FEs) and situation-bound utterances (SBUs)), and was presented in the written form in micro situations. In this task the learners tried to apply three strategies (CLO, COM and SIT) to understand the actual meaning of the utterances. In the experimental part of our study, the students were given 11 SBUs in order to understand what strategies they would use for their interpretation. Table 1 shows that interpretation of SBUs is not rigidly determined by the cultural scripts.

Table 1. Factors of SBUs interpretation used by the students in the study: closeness to native culture (CLO), compositionality of expression (COM) and situational context (SIT)

		Students of group 1			Students of group 2			Total		
		CLO	COM	SIT	CLO	COM	SIT	CLO	COM	SIT
1	In the store: - Can I help you?	15	4	9	4	4	1	19	8	10
2	- Thanks, I am just looking.	13	0	16	2	3	3	15	3	19
3	- Mom, I got into Harvard. - What!?! Get out of here!	2	10	15	2	3	3	4	13	18
4	Can I help you to more vegetables?	7	2	18	4	2	7	11	4	25
5	Thanks, mister! Bye! - Don't mention it!	9	10	7	4	2	2	13	12	9
6	You want to sod off to America, Cook, be my guest.	6	13	8	3	4	4	9	17	12
7	Hi, I'd like to officially welcome you aboard and give you our Glee Club fall rehearsal schedule.	8	11	8	2	1	2	10	12	10
8	What can I do for you , madam?	14	9	6	0	2	4	14	11	10
9	How do you do? This is my mother.	4	12	12	1	1	4	5	13	16
10	Come on , let me show you around.	3	6	15	0	1	3	3	7	18
11	Mom: Mop the floor, please, son. Son: Mop the floor, eh? Piece of cake!	1	6	15	0	1	0	1	7	15
Total		82	83	129	22	24	33	104	107	162

4. Discussion

As seen from Table 1, all the students participating in the experiment demonstrate that they were guided by their personal considerations concerning SBU distribution. In the majority of cases, however, EFL students' intentions to interpret SBUs this or that way pertain to two cognitive operations: their knowledge of some cultural scripts and their volition to interpret SBUs in a certain way.

According to the data of the experiment the total number of interpretations of SBUs that are close to native culture is 104, SBUs that are interpreted on the basis of expression compositionality constitute 107 units, and situational context plays the main role in 162 interpretations of SBUs. It is interesting to notice that SBU the 1st, 5th and 8th dialogues were mostly interpreted on the basis of closeness to native culture. This fact can be explained by the presence of these widespread utterances in the active vocabulary of the Russian learners. On the contrast, SBUs in dialogues № 2, 3, 4, 9, 10 and 11 were understood mostly from the actual situational context. It clearly shows that the situational context plays a very important role in comprehension of authentic conversation because the real meaning of SBUs can be caught by non-native speakers while using namely this strategy. Nevertheless, some phrases were interpreted by the students using the strategy of compositionality of expression rather than the strategies of CLO or SIT (in dialogues 6 and 7). The last fact can be explained by some peculiarities of the Russian culture where hospitality is an essential feature of a polite person.

Besides, the received data clearly demonstrate that the higher sociocultural difficulty arises from SBU as more students rely first on actual situational context and then on CLO and COM. The most vivid example is given in the the situation with the utterance ‘*Piece of cake*’. In fact, the meaning of this phrase became clear for the majority of students only from the context of the situation, as in the Russian culture we have no similar lexical units.

In semi-natural immersion situation-bound utterances need to be taught for comprehension and for production. Teaching situation-bound utterances can be valuable at all levels and allows learners to maintain spoken discourse relations through language use. Teaching SBUs through communication fosters the development of negotiation skills. Native learners interpret situation-bound utterances in the same way that they are intended by the speaker. This means that SBUs have a strong common ground building power in the first language. Non-native speakers or students process the expression literally because they may not know the figurative meaning of the expression. The figurative meaning may be remote from the literal meaning, such as in the following example:

- Jim, do you think you can repair this coffee machine?

- *Piece of cake*.

In LDCE the meaning of the word *cake* is explained in the following way “*soft sweet food made by baking a mixture of flour, fat, sugar and eggs*” (*birthday cake, Would you like a slice of chocolate cake?*). The situation-bound utterance *a piece of cake* is more often used in spoken discourse in the meaning of “*to be very easy*”. For instance, “*How do you do that? It’s a piece of cake! Watch!*” (LDCE, p. 178). So, in order to use the situation-bound utterance *Piece of cake* productively one should be aware of the fact that it has nothing to do with any *sweet cakes*, but of the whole phrase used as a coherent semantic unit, where the leading meaning is produced by the component *cake*.

There is always room for some structural analysis and situational context. Theoretically, any highlighted SBU in the table is culture specific and can be made accessible to EFL learners by being decomposed into a similar cultural script, a universal situation, or a certain structure. All these help to understand the basic conceptual mechanism of English and Russian culture.

We consider that SBUs are cultural scripts and try to demonstrate that this idea might be used as a promising learning strategy for semi-naturalistic immersion. The most interesting information about the use of SBUs, their frequency and cultural specificity in spoken discourse can be obtained from a multi-million-word corpus (American and British). It is obvious that learners of English should know the most frequent SBUs and understand the cases of pragmatic use of different cultural scripts. A huge amount of words registered in the corpora are not stylistically restricted and may be taken from the naturally occurring texts or speech utterances. A corpus-based analysis of cultural SBUs allows access to frequency ratio of the phrases, their range of distribution, typical contexts, syntactic and semantic variety. SBUs need to be examined carefully for the meaning of the constituent words as cultural scripts. EFL teachers have seen that a major question which is investigated by vocabulary researchers is the optimal size of the learner lexicon for different communicative purposes. SBUs proficiency as a learning purpose can be of special significance due to learners’ vocabulary enlargement opportunities. Progress in SBUs vocabulary development of a learner is based on several learning strategies:

1. SBUs are culture-laden, pragmatic units whose occurrences are bound to standardized communicative situations. They serve as discourse motivating, dialogic patterns and cultural scripts that usually mean the same to all speakers of a particular speech community.
2. Knowing SBUs means encountering and understanding them in spoken discourse and in written contexts.
3. Knowing SBUs means understanding the meanings of words used as cultural scripts and their other elaborations in more pragmatic discourses and styles.
4. Knowing SBUs means using them productively like words and recalling them automatically for active use.

5. Conclusion

Situation-bound utterances are culture specific lexical units used for pragmatic purposes in spoken discourse. The nature of SBUs is to function for different situational contexts. Our investigation clearly demonstrated that mostly through the analysis of the actual situational context the students overcame the obstacles in understanding the

meanings of SBUs. According to the data of the experimental study, the students used the situation-based strategy in most cases. The strategies of closeness to native culture and compositionality of expression were also applied for inferring the meaning of SBUs. It means that in foreign language acquisition we should rely not only on the situational context but on some cultural peculiarities which help students to recognize and interpret the utterances using their perception of interaction based on their worldview.

Locating a target SBU in specific linguistic contexts can influence speakers' responses to the situation. Native and non-native speakers may respond differently to the same SBUs due to the fact that SBUs are cultural scripts and for the non-native environment they may seem equivocal and vague. Thus it is crucial to elicit and investigate the cultural component SBUs possess and use it in semi-natural immersion as a learning strategy.

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