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Difficulties in Interpretation of Situation-Bound Utterances by Russian EFL Students

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Abstract

This case study deals with interpretation of situation-bound utterances (SBU) by Russian EFL linguistics students. The results of the research show the importance of a actual situational context and students' competence in interpretation of the utterances having high dependence on socio-cultural actual situational context. The paper also takes a general look at such a linguistic phenomenon as SBUs and ways to translate and interpret them by non-native speakers of English.

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1. Introduction

"Situation-bound utterance" is a term introduced by Istvan Kecskes and defined as "a particular type of formulaic expressions that are highly conventionalized, prefabricated pragmatic units whose occurrences are tied to standardized communicative situations" (Kesckes 2010:2891). Along with grammatical units, collocations, fixed semantic units, phrasal verbs, speech formulas, and idioms, SBU constitute so-called formulaic language that enriches student's language making him sound more like a native speaker because of closeness of these expressions to the native speaker's culture.

As practice shows, students give more precise and the only possible variant only when they hear an expression in a actual situational context. In this connection we may prove the necessity of a actual situational context both dealing

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with poly-semantic words and formulaic expressions. For example, if we look at the adjective "right", we can find out that it has a different meaning depending on the actual situational context. Thus, the word can be translated, or interpreted differently. Several examples from Merriam-Webster dictionary would be enough to illustrate that:

Right – 1) conforming to facts or truth ("a right answer"); 2) suitable, appropriate ("the right man for the job"); 3) straight ("a right line"); 4) being in good physical or mental health or order ("not in his right mind"); etc.

The same goes with expressions, where a situation or a actual situational context defines the choice of a proper equivalent in another language. For example, an expression (SBU) "*see you*" may have compositional and functional meaning (plain SBU, i.e. they have a compositional structure, semantically transparent). For example, "– I have to go to the conference now. – Oh, I'm going to go there too. See you there!" This case shows a compositional meaning of the expression, where a person is sure that he will see his interlocutor at the conference. Comparing with the following case, "– I have to go now. – Oh, see you", it could be understood that a functional meaning (saying "good-bye") comes to the fore. As concerns plain SBUs, a actual situational context helps to specify an exact meaning among several possible ones. However, if we look at charged SBUs, it can be found out that with no actual situational context these phrases are ambiguous and practically can not be understood correctly being more "idiomatic": "*here you go*", "*you bet*", "*come again*". There is also the last group, that are loaded SBUs (greetings, closings, rituals, which lost their compositionality and are no longer transparent semantically) – "*Welcome aboard*", "*How do you do*", etc. The pragmatic property of this kind of SBU is charged by the situation.

The examples above show the importance of a actual situational context in dealing with a formulaic language. This material was included into experimental part of this research to make students aware that the actual actual situational context and the situation define the meaning of an SBU in each particular case.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research objectives

The objective of the research in this case study is to show the importance of actual situational context in comprehension and interpretation of situation-bound utterances as pragmatic acts of authentic speech (Kecskes). We formulated the following research questions:

1) *To what extent a actual situational context is important when inferring the meaning of a formulaic language item, namely, an SBU?*
2) *What types of difficulties take place while interpreting SBUs by Russian EFL linguistics students?*

2.2. Research Design

The research undertaken within the research project under Dr. Kecskes' supervision (State University of New-York, USA) and the activity of Laboratory of Sociocultural Linguistics and Teaching Foreign Discourse (head prof. S. K. Gural) at National Research Tomsk State University, generally, involved 75 linguistics students majoring in translation and interpretation at the Faculty of Foreign languages. This paper is based on the data acquired from the answers given by a group of subjects consisting of 9 students, whose language level is advanced. The subjects' language proficiency level was stated by means of a placement test (Placement Test, Upstream, Enterprise), which was offered on the pre-experimental stage.

The experimental part was preceded by an Introductory Lesson, which aimed at explaining to the students theoretical bases of working with SBU. At the experimental stage the subjects were to listen to the recording of an authentic speech, elicit SBUs and interpret\translate them into Russian and interpret the meaning of the situation. For this purpose, the list of 10 SBUs was compiled based on corpus research of contemporary of American English (COCA), NTC's American Idioms Dictionary (Spears 1991), and SBUs from professor Kecskes's works (Kecskes 2010). Moreover, during the preparatory part of the research, correct meanings of these SBUs both in and out of actual situational context were discussed and defined by the research group.

During the Introductory lesson, students were introduced to the basics of a formulaic language, a difference between compositional and situational meaning of formulaic expressions, basic information about SBUs and three

groups of SBUs (plain, charged and loaded). Students also tried to elicit SBUs in brief dialogues in the exercise part of the Introductory lesson, where students had to guess the exact meaning of the expression relying on the given situation depicted in a picture.

The Experimental lesson/task was devoted to testing student's ability to define and translate SBUs and interpret the meaning of the situation in which SBUs are used. Among written tasks where students had to find SBUs and point out how they recognized them (referring to closeness to native culture, compositionality of meaning, situational actual situational context), there were two listening and comprehension tasks. In the first task students listened to the recording of 10 SBUs without an actual situational context pronounced by native speakers. In the second task, students listened to the same SBUs given in authentic actual situational context of contemporary American English used in everyday life, pronounced by the same native speakers.

2.3. Findings

Students were asked to interpret\translate SBUs they heard and put their variants down into their working sheets. The acquired data were thoroughly analyzed in terms of correctness of translation and interpretation. Though there were repetitions of the same variants, the results were generalized and presented as brief samples. The typical variants of translation can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Variants of SBU translation in the Experimental task

		Translation and meaning			
	SBU	**Out of actual situational context**		**In actual situational context**	
		Right	**Wrong**	**Right**	**Wrong**
1	**You bet**	Aga! Esche kak! Esche by! Konechno.		Esche by! Ty esche sprashivaesh!	
2	**Here you go**	Vot, derzhi! Vot, pozhaluista.		Nu, davai! Davai poprobuem.	
3	**Give me a break**	Da ladno. Otstan.	Dai mne otdohnut.	Oi, hvatit! Ne veryu! Hvatit!	Da neuzheli?
4	**Get out of here**	Ubiraisya otsyuda! Da nu tebya! Ne mozhet byt!		Da neuzheli? Da nu tebya!	
5	**Come again**	Esche raz? Povtori	Vot opyat. Snova.	Povtori?	
6	**Take a seat**	Prisazhivaytes.		Prisazhivaytes.	Raspolagaytes.
7	**How are you doing**	Kak dela?		Kak dela?	
8	**No problem**	Net problem. Bez problem.		Bez problem. Ne za chto!	
9	**Be my guest**	Byd kak doma. Pozhaluista.		Pozhaluista.	Prohodi, bud kak doma.
10	**What's up?**	Kak dela?		V chyom delo?	

3. Discussion of Results

Based on the subjects' responses, we can see that though there were a bit more possible variants for translation of the SBUs presented without any actual situational context, students gave a few relevant answers for each SBU. When dealing with dialogues, where students had to guess the meaning of an SBU being confined to a particular situation, some difficulties took place. Namely, students could not identify an exact meaning of an utterance and interpret it correctly. That is why, pragmatic mistakes happen more frequently (3 cases, where "*Give me a break*" was mistakenly interpreted as "Da neuzheli?", "*Take a seat*" – as "raspolagaytes", "*Be my guest*" – "prohodi, bud kak doma") when interpreting SBU in a actual situational context. This may happen because students tried to imagine what they would say in these situations in their own language, when talking about "Give me a break" and "Be my guest", because they did not know exact meanings of these SBUs. As concerns "Take a seat", subjects just choose the variant that did not fir the situation stylistically in their own language.

Being more precise, students confused the meaning of the expression "*Give me a break*" with "*leave me alone*",

instead of idiomatic "Oh, stop! I don't believe you". Students also tend to choose the meaning "Oh, really?", thinking that an interlocutor is surprised. But this variant should not be treated as a correct one, because an interlocutor does not want to hear something untruthful anymore, and this should be shown in a chosen variant of translation/interpretation.

Being not a native speaker, it is difficult for EFL students to differentiate between the meanings of phrases "*Give me a break*" and "*Get out of here*", as this case study proved. In most cases, students give practically the same translations for both phrases, but it should be noticed, that "*Get out of here*" has an emotional element of irritation in comparison with "*Give me a break*", which is voiced when an interlocutor does not want to continue a discussion.

Talking about interpretation of the word "*Take a seat*", in Russian it is commonly interpreted as "*Prisazhivaytes*" and not like "*Raspolagaytes*", especially when we talk about receiving visitors in an office, where the situation from the recording took place.

"*Be my guest*" is also a phrase causing some difficulties. According to the situation, an interlocutor wanted his partner to show him something, and received an answer "*Be my guest*", that had to be interpreted as "*Pozhaluista*" (in the meaning "you are welcome"), and not like "*Bud kak doma*" ("feel at home" in English). This happened because of wrong interpretation of segments of the phrase, where students understood it in a literal meaning treating as a model "I am a host, you are my guest, I'm so kind to you, so feel yourself at home".

Summarizing results of the undertaken study, we may suggest, that students faced a number of difficulties. One of the difficulties occurred when dealing with a categorizing formulaic language items. But using Kecskes' Formulaic Continuum helped differentiate between various types depending on the compositionality, idiomacity, and actual situational contextual aspects of their authentic use. The data proves that sometimes collocations, fixed semantic units, speech formulas and SBU are confused. Nevertheless, there were not any difficulties in interpreting their meanings.

As the Experimental part shows, charged SBUs caused particular difficulties for the subjects. The problem, in our opinion, is not just that a non-native speaker does not know the meaning of the expression. Students found it difficult to treat these SBUs as entire expressions without eliciting just single words interpreting a situation-bound utterance word-by-word. When the actual situational context was given, students understood that an expression should be treated as an "idiomatic" one.

4. Conclusion

As it was observed and proved in this case study, a actual situational context defines the meaning of formulaic expressions, and namely, of SBUs. A actual situational context makes it clear, what particular meaning does an SBU acquire in a particular situation.

Generalizing the results of the case study, it should be said, that situation-bound utterances being highly dependent of the socio-cultural actual situational context and speech situation are very important lexical items to be acquired by Russian linguistics students for they:

1) make a speaker sound like a native speaker;
2) enhance vocabulary abilities of students;
3) save time and effort while using ready-made speech constructions;
4) comprise a stock of memorized formulae instead of using just grammar as a tool to express thoughts and ideas;
5) one of the ways to fluent language production.

The data shows that the following problems of interpreting of SBUs by Russian EFL linguistics students occur:

1) difficulties in audio comprehension of the phrase, when it is pronounced in a native-like way (tempo, intonation, pronunciation, voices, etc.)
2) the problem of eliciting the meaning of a whole phrase rather than separate words;
3) choosing the strategy of interpretation (word-by-word interpretation, or treating a whole phrase as a single segment for interpretation);
4) not knowing a particular SBU as a segment of a language, that results in the two problems mentioned above.

These identified problems show the importance of exposure to and acquisition of SBUs by Russian EFL linguistics students, as well as by the rest of EFL students in order to be able to communicate with native speakers and sound more like a native speaker, to understand an authentic English speech, and learn preferred ways of native speakers of expressing thoughts.

This case study was conducted in a rather small group of Russian EFL linguistics students developing translation-interpretation skills, and is able to point out only some difficulties in interpretation of SBUs typical of contemporary American use. A large-scale study could help looking at the difficulties to a much greater extent.

Acknowledgements

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