Applying Relevance-theoretic Pragmatics in Second Language Teaching

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1. Introduction

- **SLT & communicative competence:**
  - Pragmatic competence (e.g. Kasper 1997).
    - Difficult to teach, but essential component.
      - Production.
      - Interactive goals.
        - Establishment, maintenance or enhancement of rapport, etc.

- **Interlanguage pragmatics:**
  - Instruction in pragmatics is beneficial.
  - Great concern with production issues.

- **Cognitive aspects** in L2 communication.
  - Why and how some misunderstandings/pragmatic failures arise?
  - Why and how some communicative effects arise?
1. Introduction

- Applying Relevance-theoretic pragmatics to SLT.
  - Reinterpretation of extant notions, observed phenomena and tendencies (Foster-Cohen 2000, 2004).
    - RT sheds light onto “[…] the psycholinguistics and metapsychological processes underlying the production and comprehension of language” (Jodłowiec 2004: 49).
- Paiva (2003), Paiva and Foster-Cohen (2004): explanatory power and support to SLA theories.
1. Introduction

- Applications to ILP development:
  - How to avoid sociopragmatic failures (Padilla Cruz 2001a, 2001b).
  - How learners interpret indirect replies (Taguchi 2002).
  - L1 influence on L2 pragmatics of verbal forms (Liszka 2004).
  - Acquisition of English definite article (Žegarac 2004).
  - Processing syntactically ambiguous sentences (Ying 2004).
  - Interpretation of reflexive anaphora in VP-elliptical sentences (Rosales Sequeiros 2004).
  - Effects of working memory, semantic access and listening abilities on comprehension of implicatures (Taguchi 2008).
  - Overcoming pragmatic failures when interpreting phatic utterances (Padilla Cruz 2009).
  - Processing cost and scalar implicature production (Pouscoulous et al., in press).
  - Pragmatic enrichment of logical terms such as *or*, *and* or *some* (Pouscoulous and Noveck, in press).
1. Introduction

● Applications to teaching of L2 issues:
  ● Improving sociopragmatic competence (Padilla Cruz 2001c).
  ● Interjections (Padilla Cruz 2010).
  ● Role of genres in pragmatic development (Tzanne, Ifantidou and Mitsikopoulou 2009; Ifantidou 2011).
  ● Use of translation in teaching (Zheng 2011).
2. Pragmatics in communicative competence

- *Communicative competence.*
  - Canale & Swain (1980), Canale (1983):
    - *Grammatical* competence.
    - *Sociolinguistic competence:*
      - Knowledge of the sociocultural rules of use of the L2.
    - *Discourse* competence.
    - *Strategic* competence.
2. Pragmatics in communicative competence

- Bachman (1990):
  - *Pragmatic knowledge*:
    - Assign contextualised meanings to words and utterances.
    - Recognise words as vehicles of users’ intentions.
2. Pragmatics in communicative competence

- Celce-Murcia, Dörney & Thurrell (1995):
  - *Discourse competence*:
    - Select and arrange lexical items and syntactic structures to achieve well-formed spoken/written texts:
      - *Actional competence*:
        - Recognise intentions in linguistic forms.
      - *Sociocultural competence*:
        - Produce utterances appropriate to socio-cultural context.
  - *Strategic competence*:
    - Knowledge of linguistic strategies and their use.
3. Interlanguage pragmatics

- **Definition:**
  - Non-natives’ **comprehension** and production of speech acts and how their L2-related speech-act knowledge is acquired (Kasper 1989, 1997; Kasper and Dahl 1991; Kasper and Blum-Kulka 1993).

- **Learners’ problems:**
  - **Greetings** (Jaworski 1994),
  - **Refusals** (Stevens 1993; Kwon 2004),
  - **Suggestions** (Martínez Flor and Fukuya 2005),
  - **Compliments** (Nelson et al. 1996; Nelson et al. 1996; Huth 2006; Félix-Brasdefer 2007),
  - **Offers** (Spirkoska 2012).
3. Interlanguage pragmatics

- NNS’s performance as speakers:
  - Deviations from NSS’s linguistic behavioural standards.
    - *Pragmatic failures* (Thomas 1983; Blum-Kulka 1997; Ridley 2006):
      - Funny anecdotes.
      - More serious consequences.

- Thomas (1983: 93):
  - Misunderstandings due to “[…] the inability to understand what is meant by what is said”.
4. Pragmatic failure

- **Pragmalinguistic failure** (Thomas 1983; Riley 1989, 2006; Olshtain & Cohen 1990; Tran 2006):
  - Transfer of L1 linguistic strategies to L2.
  - Overgeneralisation of L2 strategies.
  - Alteration of the order of strategies.
  - Use of wrong suprasegmental/prosodic features.
4. Pragmatic failure

● Examples:
  ● Olshtain & Cohen (1990):
    ● Absence of intensifiers (‘very’, ‘deeply’ or ‘really’) in apologies by Israeli learners of English.
  ● Han (1992):
    ● ‘Really?’ as a request for reassurance or repetition rather than as a compliment acceptance.
  ● Nelson et al. (1996), Nelson et al. (1996):
    ● Egyptian learners of English used innovative and creative comparisons or metaphors when paying compliments:
      ▪ You look like a bridegroom today!
  ● Arent (2000):
    ● Phatic questions understood by many non-Arabs as an invasive request for personal information:
      ▪ Where are you from?
  ● Kwon (2004):
    ● Koreans tend to express gratitude significantly less than their American English interlocutors.
4. Pragmatic failure

- **Sociopragmatic failure** (Takahashi & Beebe 1987, 1993; Riley 1989, 2006; Wolfson 1989; Beebe et al. 1990):
  - Abidance by L1 rules of speaking > assumed to be universal:
4. Pragmatic failure

- **Examples:**
    - Britons interpret compliments by Spaniards as embarrassing, ironic or insincere:
      - ¡Qué buena persona eres! [What a good person you are!]
      - ¡Qué puntual eres! [How punctual you are!]
  - Chen (1993):
    - Chinese tend to reject compliments < *modesty maxim*
    - Americans tend to accept compliments < *agreement maxim*.
  - Reynolds (1995):
    - Finnish tolerate silence better than British.
  - Nelson et al. (1996):
    - Egyptian offer object praised in a compliment.
5. Accounting for pragmatic failure

- Responsibility of pragmatic failure to learners-as-speakers.
- L2 learners’ role as hearers?
  - Garcés Conejos & Bou Franch (2002):
    - Misunderstandings also arise as a consequence of L2 learners’ incorrect or deficient **processing** of utterances in the L2.
    - L2 learners’ role as hearers should not be neglected.
5.1. Hearers’ role in pragmatic failure

- Misunderstandings at explicit level (Yus Ramos 1999):
  
  **Puzzled understanding**:
  
  (1) Mary does not like very short skirts.
  (2) You have bought a mini-skirt!

  **Alternative explicature different from intended explicature**:
  
  (3) A: Leave *it there!* [meaning ‘the glass upon the table’]
  (4) Aquí/acá, ahí, allí/allá.
  (5) este/-a/-o, ese/-a/-o, aquel/-la/-lo.
  (6) A: *He* is the one I love! [referring to a particular guy]
  (7) *Flying planes* can be dangerous.

- **Turning intended explicature into unintended implicature**:
  
  (8) Oh, it is cold in here!
  (9) a. *The window is open.*
  b. If the window was closed, the room would be warmer.
  (10) My interlocutor might want me to shut the window.
5.1. Hearers’ role in pragmatic failure

- Misunderstandings at *implicit* level (Yus Ramos 1999):
  - *Missing implicature:*
    1. A: Would you like some coffee?  
       B: Coffee would keep me awake.
    2. a. B is studying.
       b. B may be studying for an exam.
       c. It is quite late.
       d. B would only be studying late if she had an exam the next day.
       e. B might want a cup of coffee to stay awake and study.
    3. B accepts my offer for a cup of coffee.
  - *Alternative implicature:*
    4. *Listen!* (Attention-getter)
    5. (15) Give me one coffee. / I want one coffee. / Put me one coffee.
    6. (16) Beautiful/smart/nice jacket!
5.1. Hearers’ role in pragmatic failure

- **Accidental relevance** (Wilson 1999):
  - S’s selection of pragmalinguistic strategy.
  - H arrives at an interpretation that seems relevant enough, but is not the intended interpretation:
    - **Expectations of relevance**:
      - Pragmatic enrichment.
      - Access cultural information.
      - No context expansion.
5.1. Hearers’ role in pragmatic failure

- **Accidental irrelevance** (Wilson 1999):
  - H thinks that S only transmits known information.
  - S makes a slip of the tongue.

- **Non-understanding** (Yus Ramos 1999):
  - Noise, bad pronunciation, strong accent, difficult/unfamiliar vocabulary:
    
    (17) … And he is very nosy [nəʊz] ([nəʊz])

- **Turning intended implicatures into unintended explicatures**:
  
  (18) You are late again today!
  
    What time is it?

  (19) Don’t be late again!
6. Relevance, interpretation and pragmatic competence

- Success of communication:
  - Hs must reach intended interpretations.
- Naïve optimism (Sperber 1994).
  - Ss are *benevolent*.
  - Ss are *competent* (Sperber 1994; Mascaro & Sperber 2009; Sperber et al. 2010).
  - Pragmatically competent and benevolent Ss check:
    - Information will turn out optimally relevant to H.
    - Select appropriate communicative strategies.
    - Lead Hs to intended interpretations.
6. Relevance, interpretation and pragmatic competence

- Though still benevolent, S-Hs may not behave fully competently.
  - What happens when pragmatic failures occur in communication?
  - How may Hs react when facing cases of pragmatic incompetence?
  - What can the effect(s) of Ss’ pragmatic incompetence be on Hs?
7. Mindreading and pragmatic incompetence

- Lack *cultural metarepresentations* (Sperber 1996).
- Content of cultural metarepresentations may differ.
- Deficient command of L2 linguistic system.
  - Unawareness of constraints governing linguistic behaviours.
- Overlooking contextual features.
- Not foresee most easily and quickly accessible contexts.
- No selection of most adequate wording or intonation (Sperber 1996: 192; Žegarac 2009).
- Undesired pragmatic failures.
  - Linguistic behaviours may (unknowingly) be perfectly acceptable and appropriate to the contexts where they interact…
  - BUT: deviation from behavioural expectations or patterns.
    - Momentary/constant *pragmatic incompetence*. 
7. Mindreading and pragmatic incompetence

- **Accidental relevance** (Wilson 1999):
  - Interpretation may significantly differ from expected/correct interpretation.

- Hs attribute intentions that Ss may not actually have (Žegarac 2009):
  - Underlying *prefailure beliefs* and intentions (Field 2007):
    - Intention to be impolite/rude.
    - Situation does not call for formality.
    - Use of register, etc…
7. Mindreading and pragmatic incompetence

- Attribution of prefailure beliefs/intentions:
  - Hs observe a mismatch between Ss’ linguistic behaviour and their own.
  - Select inadequate contextual assumptions for processing.
    - Puzzlement, surprise, shock, frustration, disappointment, anger, etc...
      - Would those feelings have other consequences?
8. Pragmatic failure and epistemic injustice

- Wrong Ss in their capacity as *knowers* and *users* of a language.
  - Hs perceive Ss as less competent than desired:
    - *Epistemic injustice* (Fricker 2007)
    - *Linguistic-/pragmatic-epistemic injustice* (Padilla Cruz, in press).
      - Degradation *qua* competent Ss and denial of *linguistic-* or *pragmatic-epistemic trustworthiness*.

- How may linguistic-epistemic injustice be avoided or overcome?
9. Avoiding linguistic-epistemic injustice

- Critical attention to **believability** and **reliability** of communication:
  - *Epistemic vigilance* (Sperber & Mascaro 2009; Sperber et al. 2010).
    - Fundamental in intercultural contexts.
      - Not fully competent in L2.
      - Unaware of L2 interactive principles.
      - Reliance on L1.
        - Can epistemic vigilance be developed?
        - If so, how may epistemic vigilance be developed?
9. Avoiding linguistic-epistemic injustice

- Cognitive strategy that involves a greater degree of sophistication.
  - Reject apparently relevant interpretations.
  - Consider alternative interpretations.
  - No ill-founded attribution of intentions.
  - **Cautious optimism:**
    - “[... ] a special case of competent attribution of intentions” (Sperber 1994:192).
9. Avoiding linguistic-epistemic injustice

- Becoming cautious optimistic hearers.
  - Attribution of intention to communicate interpretations that would have achieved an optimal level of relevance.

- Cautious optimism necessary because native and non-native Ss...
  - Do not think of other formulations of utterances.
  - Do not behave in ways which would enable Hs to obtain, with minimal effort, intended cognitive effects.
  - Do not often take into account contextual elements favouring alternative interpretations.
9.1. Cautious optimism

- Overcome pragmatic failures originating from *accidental relevance* and *accidental irrelevance* (Wilson 1999; Padilla Cruz, in press b):
  - Ss’ behaviours ostensibly but inadvertently lead Hs to draw unexpected or undesired conclusions.
  - Reject apparently relevant interpretations leading Hs to conclude that Ss’ informative intention differs from actual informative intention.
  - Expand mental context: different contextual sources (Yus Ramos 2000).
    - Alternative interpretations.
  - Maintain the presumption that speakers are *benevolent* and do not have “hidden intentions”.
9.1. Cautious optimism

- **Puzzle understanding**:  
  - Is a previously entertained belief right?  
  - Discard belief.  
  - Expand mental context.  
  - Access contextual assumptions.  
  - Reach another optimally relevant interpretation.  
  - Construct a higher-level explicature that captures the Ss’ actual attitude towards the propositional content of the utterance.  
    - Intonation  
    - Paralinguistic features
9.1. Cautious optimism

- **Alternative explicatures:**
  - Reference assignment.
  - Disambiguation of syntactic elements.
  - Enlarge contexts in search for the intended reference or the right sense of a sentence.
- Contextual sources:
  - Manifest physical environment.
  - Encyclopaedic assumptions about S.
  - Preceding discourse.
9.1. Cautious optimism

- Turning intended explicatures into an unintended implicature:
  - Unwarranted context expansion.
  - S might not have intended an implicit content.
    - Discard assumptions.
    - Stop processing at the explicit level.
    - No search for unintended implicatures.
9.1. Cautious optimism

- **Missing implicatures:**
  - S might not have intended to communicate interpretation.
  - Utterance optimally relevant under some other interpretation.
  - Expand context > contextual assumptions.
  - Actual optimally relevant interpretation S might have expected hearer to reach.

- **Alternative implicatures:**
  - Ss’ behaviours deviate from behavioural patterns.
  - Conclusions drawn were the result of having wrongly resorted to (cultural) assumptions whose content significantly differed from those of the assumptions motivating and regulating Ss’ behaviours.
9.1. Cautious optimism

- Notice irrelevance of some interpretations.
  - Which (other) interpretations could S have expected me to reach so that utterance would have achieved an optimal level of relevance?

- **Non-understanding:**
  - What might S have meant by means of utterance?
  - Access a context that leads to an optimally relevant interpretation.

- **Turning intended implicatures into unintended explicatures:**
  - Expand interpretive context > ‘new’ assumptions.
  - Relate assumptions to assumptions manifest by the utterance and other contextual assumptions.
  - Obtain cognitive effects that indeed turn the utterance optimally relevant.
9.2. Developing epistemic vigilance

- How teachers can actually help L2 students?
  - *Explicit* teaching:
    - Explanations about how specific pragmatic aspects of the L2 work.
    - Pragmalinguistic devices to perform some speech acts.
    - Modification of some verbal strategies.
    - How specific socio-cultural factors condition L2 use.
9.2. Developing epistemic vigilance

- Awareness-raising activities (Tomlison 1994; Mir 2000):
  - Make explicit learners’ implicit linguistic knowledge.
  - Insights about how the L2 works.
  - Challenge preconceived ideas and previous attitudes.
  - Awareness of universal principles.
  - Development of cognitive skills:
    - Connecting, hypothesising, generalising and evaluating.
9.2. Developing epistemic vigilance

  - Authentic materials:
    - Films.
    - Recordings of TV or radio programmes.
  - ‘Cultural capsules’.
  - Data collection.
  - Bringing NS to class.
  - Pragmatic discussions.
  - Retrospective activities.
9.2. Developing epistemic vigilance

  - Diagnostic assessment of awareness of speech acts (SAs).
  - Model dialogues.
  - Evaluation of the situation.
  - Role plays.
  - Feedback and discussions.
9.2. Developing epistemic vigilance

- Cohen (2005):
  - **Learning strategies:**
    - Gaining knowledge of how SAs work:
      - Identifying SAs.
      - Frequency of SAs.
      - SAs role in community of practice
    - Cross-cultural analysis of how SAs is performed in L1:
      - Underlying principles.
      - Semantico-syntactic structures.
      - Similarities and differences with SAs in L2.
    - Observing what natives do in different contexts:
      - Interactive factors: age, status or degree of familiarity.
  - **Use strategies:**
    - Practice in imaginary situations.
    - Role plays.
    - Real plays.
    - Interaction with NSs.
    - Asking NSs for feedback.
9.2. Developing epistemic vigilance

- Martínez Flor & Usó Juan (2006): The 6 Rs Approach:
  - **Researching phase:**
    - Nature of pragmatic competence and SAs > L1 data collection.
  - **Reflecting phase:**
    - Reflection on SA examined, awareness-raising questions, L1 & L2 data comparison, sociopragmatic factors affect SA.
  - **Receiving phase:**
    - Similarities and differences between L1 & L2, distribution along a scale of indirectness or potential for transferability from their L1.
  - **Reasoning phase:**
    - Sociopragmatic factors, Ss’ intentions and setting.
  - **Rehearsing phase:**
    - Practice through production activities:
  - **Revising phase:**
    - Assessment of outcomes of production activities.
    - Feedback about performance in the L2.
9.2. Developing epistemic vigilance

- Excessive focus on the production side of L2 pragmatics.
- Teaching L2 pragmatics should necessarily include the cognitive side of linguistic action (Padilla Cruz 2001a, 2001b, 2002, 2009, 2010; Ifantidou 2011).
10. Conclusion

- Epistemic vigilance is essential to avoid wrong attributions of beliefs and/or intentions when Hs face pragmatic failures.
  - Cautious optimism seems to empower Hs to overcome misunderstandings and may contribute to epistemic vigilance.
  - Many NNSs’ level of sophistication in understanding may not be the same as that of NSs.
10. Conclusion

- Explicit & implicit teaching of pragmatics.
- Awareness raising syllabi/activities.
  - Development of metapragmatic awareness.
- Focus on processing utterances and reflection on reaching interpretations.
  - Metapsychological awareness.
  - From metapragmatically aware language users to epistemically vigilant language users.
Thank you for your attention!!

Questions?
Comments?

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