

Role of Transfer in Discourse: From the Perspectives of Politeness and Coherence

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Abstract

There has been a lot of controversy in deciding whether language transfer takes place at the level of discourse. Most of the authors refute the concept of ‘discourse transfer’ but there are few undeniably important researchers whose observations and beliefs are contradictory. This paper intends to give a brief idea of the concept of discourse, its analysis and finally support the notion in light of some significant researches that discourse transfer does take place in second language acquisition, be it positive or negative. This paper also intends to emphasize on two areas of discourse, politeness and coherence, which affect what has been called ‘presentation of self’. Any misinterpretation during the comprehension and production due to cross-linguistic differences in discourse in these two particular areas may mistakenly convince the learner that the native speaker is being rude in situations where they are actually behaving appropriately according to their speech community norms. Also, since much of the research on contrastive discourse in the past deals with politeness or coherence, this paper aims to concentrate on these two areas.

Key words: Discourse, transfer, discourse transfer, politeness, coherence, cross-linguistic differences.

Introduction

During second language acquisition, learners bring with them the native speakers knowledge of their first language and culture. The impact of the first language (L1) and its cultural background on second language (L2) use has been referred to, technically, as discourse and pragmatic transfer. Before going to discourse transfer we will understand discourse and its analysis first.

Discourse Analysis

Seinfeld (1993) quotes, ‘There’s two types of favours, the big favour and the small favour. You can measure the size of the favour by the pause that a person takes after they ask you to “Do me a favour”. Small favour- small pause. “Can you do me a favour, hand me that pencil”. No pause at all. Big favours are, “Could you do me a favour....” Eight seconds go by. “Yeah? What?” “...well”. The longer it takes them to get to it, the bigger the pain it’s going to be.’ (Yule, 2006:124)

Beautifully illustrated in this Jerry Seinfeld’s (1993) commentary is the fact that in the study of language, some of the most interesting observations are made not in terms of components of language but by the way language is used. Communication is not just a mechanical transfer of information or a meaningless interactive tug of war. Instead it is an unpredictable yet logical flow of ideas. A very basic motive of doing conversation is to make sure that language users successfully interpret what others intend to convey. Due to implications and well developed cognitive functions and also due to reasoning and logic based on our cultural and background knowledge, all this seems very obvious to us. But on investigation, some thought provoking questions came to our mind.

- How we make sense of what we read?
- How we differentiate between well-organised text as opposed to those that are jumbled or incoherent?
- How we understand the implication of statements?
- How we successfully take part in conversation?
- How do we decide when to start a conversation and when to stop it?

(2006:124)

The investigations to the above queries looking for the answers constitute what we know as discourse analysis and discourse is usually defined as ‘language beyond the sentence’ (Yule, 2006:124). Another definition quoted from Jaroszek (2008) says, discourse can also be defined as ‘a linguistic unit that comprises more than one sentence’. (Fromkin, et al, 2003) or ‘language production built of a minimum two stretches of speech.’(Krueez, 2005:161) (Jaroszek, 2008:8).

Whenever we come across a grammatically incorrect statement, instead of rejecting it out rightly, we try to make sense of it. This effort to interpret, and how we accomplish it are

the key elements investigated in the study of discourse. We will get introduced to each element individually.

Cohesion

Cohesion can be understood as the ties and connections that exist between texts. It can be better explained by reading the following paragraph.

‘When I was a kid, I bought a pen. That pen was very valuable to me. However, I lost it one day. It was a heartbreaking experience’.

Connections are present in the use of words: I-I, Parker- That. Connections are also present between phrases: I- a kid. There is also a connector (However) that marks relationship of what follows to what went before.

Conversation Analysis

Conversation in different languages and societies have different conversation pattern, if we analyse. English for e.g. involves for most part, two or more people take turn while speaking. Persons taking part in a discussion usually speak in turn, one at a time, and normally there is avoidance of silence between the turn. Quite obviously this pattern is not characteristic of all situations, languages and societies.

The Co-operative Principle

The co-operative principle consists of four very basic principles, commonly known as maxims, the ‘Gricean maxims’ (Grice, 1975:45).

- a) Quantity maxim- Contribute to the conversation as is required, no more or less.
- b) Quality maxim- Say only what you believe to be true, for which you have adequate evidence.
- c) Relation maxim- Be relevant.
- d) Manner maxim- Be very clear, brief and orderly. (Yule, 2006:130)

Even if in a conversation these co-operative principles do not seem to be in operation, the general description of the normal expectations we have in conversation helps to explain a lot of things. (Yule, 2006:130)

Hedges

Defined as words or phrases used to indicate that whatever we are saying, we are not sure of. They show that although we are not able to follow the maxim principles, we are concerned about it. Examples are:

- May be I am wrong, but.....
- As far as I know....
- I don't know for sure, but.....

Implicatures

These are additional conveyed meanings. It is easily explained by an example.

Harry- Come on Sunny lets go to swimming classes.

Sunny- I am having fever.

Sunny has not replied in yes or no, and his response doesn't seem coherent at all, going by the words and content of his reply. But if we apply some background knowledge and if we know that fever is rise in body temperature, we can easily understand that the reply of Sunny is a clear 'NO'. Quite evidently to have some background knowledge is very important to understand such implicatures .

Discourse Transfer

Having made the concept of discourse analysis clear, we can analyse it at the level of transfer. Transfer has been defined as a 'psycholinguistic procedure by means of which L2 learners activate their L1/Ln knowledge in developing or using their interlanguage' (Faerch and Kasper, 1987:112). Transfer has been established as one of the strategies of communication used to overcome problems of communication during second language learning.

Discourse transfer has been defined as a type of transfer from "The activation of the *utterance* as a source of influence on the target language (TL) production" (House, 1986:82).

Cross-linguistic comparisons of discourse are probably the most perplexing of all the areas of contrastive analysis. Undeniably the study of discourse transfer is not an easy task; however its significance in the area of second language research is indispensable. It is commonly found that even if L2 learners overcome the grammatical challenges, their production is far from native-like output. L2 learners do ‘not look for the perspectives peculiar to (the L2) language’ (Kellerman, 1995:141) and instead unconsciously ‘seek the linguistic tools which will permit them to maintain their L1 perspective’ (1995:141). According to Kellerman this approach leads to ‘transfer to nowhere’ (1995:141). A learner may comprehend the target language conversation according to the norms of his native language and may misinterpret the speaker. Even he will be unable to understand what the speaker/writer intends to convey. As Odlin (1989) suggests, discourse transfer can include politeness, speech acts like request, apology and conversational style. Discourse ‘fall within the realm of pragmatics’ (Odlin, 1989:48), with cross cultural phenomena overlapping. A great deal of research has been done on contrastive discourse mainly concerned with politeness and coherence.

A. Politeness

Quite obvious about the idea of politeness is that it is very much open to interpretation. One can’t deny that what the person at the receiving end of a conversation interprets, decides whether a gesture is polite or rude.

We gain mostly in this domain from the work of Brown and Levinson (1978), who have provided a very useful framework for understanding how politeness is open to interpretation by different cultures in different ways. What we derive from their hypothesis of ‘face preservation’ is that politeness can be categorised into either positive politeness or negative politeness. According to Brown and Levinson (1978), all people have a tendency of face preservation, which has two facts:

- i. Positive face- concerns self respect and self image of a person.
- ii. Negative face- concerns personal autonomy i.e. privacy, freedom of action etc.

Social interactions among individuals often lead to actions which threaten the positive or negative face of other people. Any gesture which blunts this threat is referred to as ‘politeness’. The above statement gives a very basic concept of politeness, but the usefulness

of Brown and Levinson's work lies in the fact that we can actually stratify politeness into positive or negative, i.e.,

- those gestures which blunt the threat to positive face constitutes positive politeness.
- those gestures which blunt the threat to negative face constitutes negative politeness.

A very good example is the difference in the etiquette of telephonic conversation in France and U.S, although the norms of linguistic politeness are the same. According to Godard (1977), the etiquette of making phone calls in France more frequently requires callers to make an apology at the beginning of the conversation. This is not the case in U.S. as telephone calls in France are seen as impositions more often than they are in the U.S. This apologetic statement can be categorised as negative politeness as it blunts the danger to negative face of the receiving person i.e. his/her privacy. Brown and Levinson also analysed that negative politeness is more applicable in serious threats to face where as positive politeness is more useful in less threatening situations. (Odlin, 1989)

Also one entity which is correlated well with politeness is grammatical mood. Questions are correlated with negative politeness and statements with positive politeness. In other words, grammatical mood can be viewed in terms of a politeness scale. Interrogative mood is somewhat more polite than indicative mood. Going by the same parameters, imperative mood is the least polite, since being obligatory often seems to be face threatening act.

A very good example is when Carrel and Konneker (1981) asked ESL students who were native speakers of Spanish, Arabic, Persian and Japanese to rank sentences.

- Could you give me a cup of coffee?
- I want a cup of coffee.
- Give me a cup of coffee.

On a scale of politeness, they consistently deemed the first sentence most polite and the third least polite. Such judgemental similarities among students of divergent backgrounds indicate that learner's can sometimes successfully use their intuition about what is 'naturally polite'. Although such intuitions can be perilous, as research on requests and apologies indicates (Odlin, 1989).

Types of Politeness

i. Requests

We have mentioned earlier the significance of correlating grammatical mood with politeness. These correlations become more determining when a person intends to request. Based on the language the speaker is using, his/her preferred request strategy varies on the politeness scale.

A very good example is presented in the empirical study by Kasper (1981). He concluded that while making a request, a German speaker chooses a more straight forward uninhibited approach, suggesting a sense of obligation. For e.g. an English speaker would prefer-“can you close the window?” whereas a German speaker would use-“Du Solltest das Fenster Zumachen” (You should close the window) (Odlin, 1989:51).

It appears that a German speaker more often prefers declarative statements in stark contrast to an English speaker, who frequently uses interrogative statements to make requests. Quite obviously, the preferred request strategy in English seem ‘politer’ as we have learned earlier in the discussion of politeness that interrogative mood is somewhat ‘more polite’ than indicative mood. But such comparisons are often misleading. No matter how carefully constructed a parameter is, it would be inappropriate to apply a scale to determine how polite speakers of one language are in comparisons to other language. A universal scale of politeness must always be interpreted in language-specific terms. (House and Kasper, 1981) For example, ‘you should close the door’ and ‘can you close the door?’

These two statements don’t have such politeness value on a German politeness scale, as opposed to an English politeness scale. From this, we derive the notion of language-specific politeness scale. Above example obviously imply that English speakers are more polite and German speakers are less polite. What it signifies is that when a German requests he/she assumes that the social bond between speaker and hearer is strong.

The above observations are quite clear in the inference that English speakers more often seem to prefer negative politeness in their requests whereas German and Hebrew speakers prefer positive request strategies (Odlin, 1989).

ii. **Apologies**

It has been found that some similarities and differences exist between cultures in the usage of the speech act of apologies in second language learning situation. Research on EFL situations are carried out by Ercetin (1995) and Tuncel (1999) with EFL learners in Turkey and some differences have been observed in the culture of the learners.

Olshtain (1983:235) states, ‘the act of apologizing is called for when there is some behaviour which has violated social norms, when an action or utterance has resulted in the fact that one or more persons perceive themselves as offended, the culpable person(s) need to apologize’ (Istifci, 2009:17)

Marquez- Reiter (2000:44) says- ‘an apology is a compensatory action for an offense committed by the speaker which has affected the hearer’ (2009:17).

Searle (1979) as described in Olshtain (1983:235), ‘a person who apologizes for doing A expresses regret at having done A so the apology act can take place only if the speakers believes that some act A has been performed prior to the time of speaking and that this act A resulted in an infraction which affected another person who is now deserving an apology (2009:17).

Bataineh and Bataineh (2006:1903) further define it as expressive speech act which reflects the speaker’s true feelings and attitude. (2009: 17)

Cross-cultural investigation of apology speech acts take place in situations where learners learn their target language as their second language. The above studies prove that some learners use language transfer from their first language, some remain close to their native language or some apply different methods from what they use in their L1 or L2 (2009:15-17).

Research shows that significant cross-linguistic variations found in apologies may cause two kinds of difficulty for second language learners:

- Differences in the frequency of use of apologetic formulas and
- Differences in the relation between apologies and other speech acts.

Cohen and Olshtain (1981) gave a very good example, citing the differences in the frequency of apologies evident in speakers of Hebrew, Russian and English. Among these three, English speakers are supposed to use apologetic formulas most frequently where as Hebrew speakers use them the least.

Columas (1981b) concluded that differences in the relations between other speech acts and apology can lead to inappropriate responses. Also, Borkin and Reinhart (1978) concluded that because of imperfect matches between ‘Excuse me and I’m sorry’ in their native languages, Thai and Japanese ESL students often use these terms inappropriately (Odlin, 1989:53).

iii. **Other speech acts with relation to politeness**

Apart from requests and apologies there are other speech acts which can cause difficulty in learning to be polite in a foreign language. These are:

- a) **Greetings.** Rules governing their usage vary greatly in accordance with the social context in which it is used. E.g. in U.S. greetings are used infrequently (Reisman 1974), where as in Middle East, they are expected in almost in every social encounter. Also, in English the pattern of greet is variable where as in Arab they are invariably fixed.
- b) **Proverbs.** Their role in polite speech also varies according to the culture. E.g. in Middle East, proverbs are frequently used as aids in arguing, complimenting, etc. (Tannen and Oztek 1981, Wolfson 1981). In English, there are stylistic constraints on their use both in speech and in writing. (Hornby 1974) as cited in (Odlin,1989)
- c) **Language specific speech acts.** An example taken from Odlin (1989:55) is- ‘bon appetit’ said by French speakers at the beginning of a meal. In the same way Urdu speakers say ‘Bismillah’. Unlike request and apology, language specific speech acts necessitate learners to become familiar with culture alien to them, thus posing additional challenges for second language learners.

d) **Turn-taking-** In any natural conversation, to shift a turn, participants deploy specific linguistic devices which ‘vary greatly in level of formality and appropriacy to different situations’ (McCarthy 1991:127). Turn taking is often used interchangeably for taking the floor but these two should be demarcated where as taking a turn is a single, interactional act, taking a floor could be defined as ‘the acknowledged what’s going on within a psychological time/space’ (Edelsky, 1981:405) as cited in (Jaroszek, 2008).

Just by sticking to slightly different conventions of turn taking, participants in a conversation exhibit different expectations of conversational style, characterizing as rude or shy. Rudeness is described as ‘if one speaker cuts in on another speaker’ and shyness as ‘if one speaker keeps waiting for an opportunity to take a turn and none seems to occur’. (Yule, 2006:128). Along with greetings , proverbs and language specific acts, rules governing procedural aspects of conversation, can also be though vaguely, included under ‘other speech acts’, because they also show considerable cross-linguistic variation.

iv. **Conversational style.** The domain of style in conversation can be broadly categorised in two dimensions- purely linguistic elements and paralinguistic elements. Style may not be related to politeness however, as we will subsequently see, formality, a purely linguistic element of conversational style, is very much related to politeness. One conversational style frequently used by those speakers who are used to ‘holding the floor’, is to avoid having normal completion points. We commonly use this strategy in situations where we have to emphasize what we are trying to say while actually saying it.

Consider the following example:

That’s my favourite movie because I.....love watching that actor especially when.....the film has a melodramatic setting.

What we are doing here is we are not taking pause at the end of the sentences. We are making our sentences run on by using connectors like- and, then, when, but; placing our pauses at times where the message is clearly incomplete.

These strategies or style, by themselves, should not be considered domineering. These are normally present in conversational speech and they also contribute to make a conversation work (Odlin, 1989).

B. Coherence

Logic and relevance, these two notions are intrinsically impregnated with the concept of coherence. If either is tampered with, coherence of a discourse is seriously jeopardized. For a conversation to be coherent the emphasis should be on the focus of information, i.e., the topic, which signifies the relevance of the conversation and there has to be sufficient logical relation between ideas.

A conversation can be really incoherent or it may only appear to be so, i.e., pseudo incoherent. Former is better explained by an example of psychiatric patients is verbal insufficiencies. Thus speech can be illogical or full of irrelevancies, thus making it, for example, incoherent in schizophrenics. On the other hand, audience may find a conversation incoherent, even though actually it is not.

Such a situation arises when the audience is unfamiliar with the technicality of the subject matter of the concerned discourse. For example, a lecture about 'how a nuclear reactor works' may sound irrelevant to a botany graduate. Similarly, discourse that presumes that the readers or listeners are familiar with another culture may seem incoherent to those who are not.

Literally, *coherence* means 'everything fitting together well'. It is not something that exists in words or structures, but something that exists in people. Consider the following example:

Boy- Can you come to party tonight?

Girl- I have exams tomorrow.

Clearly we can see that although the response to the question seem misfit and incoherent if we focus on words and structures only, but anyone who knows about college and exams can make complete sense out of the conversation. Boy is requesting girl to come

to the party tonight. Girl says she has exams tomorrow, which implies ‘study tonight’, which further implies ‘no party tonight’.

Thus quite clearly, coherence seems to be involved in our interpretation of all discourse. It is certainly present in the interpretation of casual conversation (Odlin, 1989).

Previous Research

In order to adhere with the context of the paper we will review the research done on discourse transfer in ‘requesting’. Significant research has been done regarding the transfer of ‘direct’ and ‘indirect’ strategies. ‘Direct’ and ‘indirect’ refers to the ‘explicitness’ and ‘implicitness’ of the expression respectively. Some interesting as well as contradicting observations have been made.

A study done by Kasanga (1998) in South Africa on English learners with Zulu as their L1 concluded that learners made more frequent direct requests compared to those by native speakers (NSs). Such divergence from NSs was attributed to L1 discourse and pragmatic transfer (Tran, 2002). Similar conclusions were drawn by Ramos (1991) in their study on Puerto Rican teenagers speaking English, DeCapua (1989) on German speakers of English and Dogancay-Aktuna and Kamisli (1997) on Turkish learners of English.

There are researchers supporting the non-transfer notion as well. A study done on Japanese learners of English in America “did not confirm to prevalent stereotypes about their indirectness and their inexplicitness” (Beebe and Takahashi 1989: 20 as cited in Tran, 2002:3). Japanese learners are less explicit when compared to Americans regarding ‘requests’ and they apparently did not transfer their implicitness/indirectness into their L2 performance. Similar findings have been made by Murphy and Neu (1996) on Korean speakers of English and Tokano (1997) on Japanese learners of English.

To explain the above contradicting and perplexing findings regarding the existence of discourse and pragmatic transfer in context of ‘request’, which is a subcategory of ‘politeness’, some interesting conclusions have been drawn. It was argued that although discourse transfer was spontaneous and inevitable in case of Japanese and Korean speakers of English also, the negative result came because of the individual preferences. Japanese and

Koreans don't seem to transfer their native languages' indirectness by choice whereas; in other favouring research learners don't have any problem in transferring direct strategies. So it can be concluded that "direct strategies are more likely to be transferred than indirect ones" (Tran, 2002:3).

Conclusion

From the above discussion of previous research and the in-depth analysis of discourse transfer in context of 'politeness' and 'coherence', this paper supports the notion that transfer involving discourse can often occur in second language acquisition, be it positive or negative. Two areas of discourse, namely, politeness and coherence, are highlighted mainly in this paper because misinterpretations related to these two are especially dangerous. Thus discourse transfer dealing with these two areas should be dealt with caution by teachers.

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