Dublin Institute of Technology
ARROW@DIT

Articles

School of Languages

2007-01-01

Shared and Mutual Knowledge in Language Learning

Marty Meinardi
marty.meinardi@dit.ie

Follow this and additional works at: http://arrow.dit.ie/aaschlanart

Part of the Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education Commons

Recommended Citation
Meinardi, M. 2007, Shared and Mutual Knowledge in Language Learning, MET, Vol.16, no 1, January 2007

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Languages at ARROW@DIT. It has been accepted for inclusion in Articles by an authorized administrator of ARROW@DIT. For more information, please contact yvonne.desmond@dit.ie, arrow.admin@dit.ie.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 License

Abstract

This article discusses the matter of shared knowledge from the perspective of the different deictic centres of understanding. Difficulties, which may result from a possible lack of a shared knowledge between NSs and NNSs due to differences in language experiences and personal backgrounds, are identified.

Word count: 45

Shared and Mutual Knowledge in Language Learning

Word count: 2,660

'Unless a man's words excite the same ideas in the hearer which he makes them stand for in the speaking he does not speak intelligibly.' [1]

Introduction

In Communication, human beings rely on a shared understanding of an acquired vocabulary which in the course of a lifetime will presumably extend, change and vary. Throughout our education, one is given repeated experiences of the meanings of entities within certain subject areas and depending on our academic development, experiences and interests, these areas may broaden. Equally, our interpretation of language may develop, modify or change. Our knowledge of language therefore, is dependent amongst other things on our socio-cultural, educational, and geographical background, our contextual knowledge of a topic, our ability to interpret possibly unknown words from a context and our age and gender. The interpretation and understanding of language therefore is reliant on

multiple external sources. However, these multiple external sources are not readily accessible for the language learner in the L2, and Non-native (NN) learners of English have to be facilitated in acquiring these skills through exposure to authentic language learning material. In the following, the issue of shared knowledge and understanding in communication is discussed both as an innate native speaker (NS) skill and a Non-native Speaker (NNS) requirement.

Establishing a Common Ground

Human beings of course, communicate with the intention of establishing a common ground with an interlocutor. Communication is rarely solely transactional and part of the communicative act is to establish a field of shared knowledge; one wants to find out where our worlds overlap. The Greek term 'δειχισ' means 'pointing' or 'indicating' and as Fillmore (1982)[2] states: *'Deixis is the name given to uses of items and categories of lexicon and grammar that are controlled by certain details of the interactional situation in which the utterances are produced'* (p.35). One could look at interlocutors' 'worlds' as being made up of more than one deictic centre, rather like a number of concentric deictic circles that may or may not overlap with those of the interlocutor. An overlap in deictic centres would constitute a shared knowledge in that particular field. The innermost circle comprises CODE, the origin of form and, as stated by Rapaport et al (1989)[3] consists of the origin of place ('come' and 'go'), time ('now' and 'then'), and person ('I' and 'you'). The next deictic circle represents CONTEXT and the outer circle CULTURE. If, for example, one looks at the innermost deictic centre, there are linguistic forms which encode shared knowledge such as the use of the definite article 'the'. A speaker using the sentence '*let's take* ***the*** *dog out for a walk'* in

casual conversation assumes a shared knowledge with his/her interlocutor that the reference to '*the dog'* is understood and interpreted as being the family pet and not just any dog. Equally, use of 'vague language', such as: *'stuff like that'* assumes a shared understanding between interlocutors. Rapaport et al (Ibid) explain that the deictic centre should not be seen as a static, but rather a moving structure and that the three deictic centres mentioned above can be seen as: *'...a dynamic data structure that mediates between global contextual information and local sentencial information…. Thus, the DC* [*Deictic* Centre] *provides a means for constant updating and revision of the global structure in the light of local information and constraints'* (p. 6).

Foreign language learners at beginner level constantly strive, in their attempt to acquire a foreign or second language, to create and sustain this overlap of the innermost deictic centre with their NS or NNS interlocutor. By learning the code and form of a language they create a shared potential for understanding. In communication, both interlocutors need to make inferences about what is meant by the information received. Although NSs rely on a presumption of a similar language background for the interpretation of communication with another NS interlocutor, all NSs do not necessarily have exactly the same interpretation of every word that is uttered in a conversation, as there is variability in meaning as well as imprecise delivery and purposeful vagueness. However, the outer two concentric circles of CONTEXT and CULTURE are not easily acquired by NNSs.

The Need for Shared Understanding

The information needed for a full understanding of what is being said is often gleaned from many sources. Reciprocal understanding can only come about if the listener is actively involved in the communication. As Brown (1990)[4] states: '*The good listener is someone who constructs reasonable interpretations on the basis of an unspecified input and recognizes when more specific information is required. The active listener asks for the needed information*' (p. 172). If one is to consider Habermas' (1979)[5] conviction that the ideal speech situation is one where all interlocutors are on equal footing and have equal opportunities and abilities to share in the communication, it seems to follow that a speech event between a NS and a learner of English is therefore not an ideal situation, because they may not be able to acquire shared and mutual understanding. Looking back at the notion of concentric circles of deictic centres mentioned earlier, it seems that the shared understandings relate to an overlap between the interlocutor's deictic centres, whether they be code, context or culture. Brown (Ibid.) explains that NSs have the advantage over learners of English, in that the background knowledge NSs require throughout their life as communicating human beings has been building up since early childhood. This means that the NS's deictic centres referring to form, context and culture take a lifetime to develop through exposure, education and practice. NNSs can presumably be taught part of this knowledge, such as form and, with time, a good deal of context through extensive vocabulary acquisition. But it is difficult for the NNS to relate to the ever-changing and evolving cultural and social contexts of the target language community.

Becoming Part of the Speech Community

Researchers such as Firth (1957a)[6] and Lyons (1977)[7] have found that language is intimately connected with culture. It seems that cultural knowledge is not so much learnt but absorbed in the process of living within a certain social community. It can be argued that certain contextual information is reliant on cultural information and is, like cultural information, not easily acquired by the foreign language learner. Ideally, a NS should not presume a NNS to have similar deictic centres to him- or herself, except possibly the innermost deictic centre of Code. Furthermore, an ideal interlocutor/listener would understand that what the speaker says is uttered in the light of what s/he thinks the listener believes and what their world knowledge is. Shared knowledge is therefore important for the smooth progression of the conversation and the interpretation of the speaker's input. An assumed mutual common ground exists between NS interlocutors, but this may not necessarily be present in communication between a NS and a NNS. If there is a mutual common ground, there will very likely be less need for clarification. Between NSs, any information that was mis-heard, either through the individual's pronunciation characteristics, or because of surrounding 'white noise' may not need to be explained or repeated, as the listener will be able to make an educated guess as to what they feel must have been intended by the speaker. Brown (Ibid.) likens the NNSs' lack of mutual knowledge to the inability to recognize a hastily scribbled message on a piece of paper if we are unfamiliar with the topic of the note and the author's handwriting. In authentic spoken English there is not only socio-culturally and regionally determined embedded meaning, which might be difficult for the learner of English, to interpret and understand, but there are also the effects of the phonological 'economy' of speech spoken at speed, such as elisions, assimilations and catenations for example.

Therefore, communication between a NS and a NNS, without the usual shared knowledge that can be expected from two NSs communicating, is bound to need more elaborate explanation, clarification and repetition and is more susceptible to misinterpretation.

Achieving Communicative Competence Between Interlocutors

The assumption is that interlocutors' use of repair systems is an essential part of smooth conversation as it would be too tedious for the listener if the speaker had to qualify every single utterance with added information in order to avoid any vagueness, ambiguity and other imperfections. For communication to occur smoothly, NSs frequently make use of external cues to help them interpret what is being communicated, and to iron out any ambiguities occurring in the language used. These external cues, as explained by Lyons (1977)[8], can come from various contextual and cultural fields and can, amongst other factors, depend on socio-cultural background. Clark and Marshall (1981)[9] identified different heuristics which interlocutors might use in order to establish a mutual understanding, such as: 'physical co-presence' and 'linguistic co-presence' where the interlocutors can assume that what was said before is understood at the time the next utterance is delivered; 'shared social membership' from which interlocutors may infer that the information common to this group is mutually known.

Successful communication seems complex for NSs, but spare a thought for the NNS who is faced with a minefield of cues which can be misconstrued or misinterpreted. As Krauss and Fussell (1991)[10] note, it may not be that straightforward for interlocutors to identify what is mutually known through the

above mentioned heuristics, because: *'In some cases such cues as dress, accent, and the setting of the interaction may be informative, but even the most patent social cues do not map perfectly onto social categories, and the path from cue to categorization is hardly straightforward'* (p. 12). Imagine then the problems a foreign language learner might encounter in communication with a NS. Milroy's (1994)[11] advice for foreign language learners is: *'…for learners to cue themselves in to the sociocultural context which is encoded by these patterns of variation, to be aware of them, and try to interpret them'* (p. 166). The NNS may not necessarily be able to avail of the required socio-culturally specific information or, depending on the language learner's level of proficiency, may not yet have the skills to interpret contextual cues and clear up ambiguous meaning in vocabulary. Equally, the NS may not be able to correctly interpret the social group membership of the NNS. It is in fact equally likely that the NS interprets stereotypical information when confronted with NNSs, through visual cues and accent, which in turn may lead to bias and misinterpretation of precisely what knowledge is shared.

Once an interlocutor is not able to make the correct interpretations of what is being communicated and their deictic centres do not overlap, misunderstanding occurs and the need for clarification arises. It is therefore clear that in a conversation with a NS, a NN listener has to modify, adapt and update their deictic centres in order to create a situation where there is an overlap, resulting in a shared understanding. An added difficulty for the NNS is that language is not used to mean unambiguously what it expresses, that there is not one uniform way of saying things and having the same meaning and consequently not one way of

interpreting a message; there is, in short, no one-to-one correspondence between form and meaning. If there were, it would render impossible, for example, the use of rhetorical devices such as irony and sarcasm and discount the influence of the prosodic features of spoken language such as intonation, which all have the power to confer added meaning to an utterance. Thus, learners of English not only need to be able to process the functionality and meaning of the lexical items used in speech (or writing), but also need to be aware of the socio-cultural context in which words occur. The issue of the difficulties at arriving at a shared understanding in a foreign language is discussed further in the next section.

Facilitating Communicative Fluency in NNSs

Brown (1990)[12] has observed that when two people communicate with each other it is possible, and quite usual, that the listener is able to finish the sentence in his/her mind before the speaker has actually finished it. This seems to be more prevalent when the interlocutors are well known to each other and both are NSs. She feels that learners of English should be made aware of the fact that in their own mother tongue learners would frequently use inferencing and make assumptions about what has been heard or read, and she believes that NNS should be facilitated to try and adopt these inferencing skills in foreign language processing. The unconscious and seemingly automatic skills that NS have do not simply transfer from L1 to L2. Researchers such as Mulder and Swaak (2002)[13] and Kecskes and Papp (2000)[14] go so far as to state that the existence of shared understanding is imperative to learning. Kecskes and Papp (Ibid.) note a distinct difference in the way a foreign language is processed, depending on whether the language was acquired as part of scholarly development (i.e. in a classroom

setting) or whether the language acquisition was part of adapting to a different country and culture, as a second language.

It seems that the contextual and cultural information present in the deictic centres of Context and Culture is not easily accessible to foreign language learners through classroom practice alone. It is furthermore pointed out by Kecskes and Papp (Ibid.) that the amount of language learning in a 'Foreign Language' setting is controlled by the teacher, whereas in an L2 situation it is the learner's environment and the learner's own need for 'survival' in the language community that will determine the language input. It seems that the further the culture of the foreign language learner is removed from the culture of the target language, i.e. the more the deictic centers of Context and Culture are removed from that of the NNS' interlocutors, the more difficult it will be for the learner to acquire conceptual fluency. Bremer et al (1993)[15] found that conceptual fluency – 'close-to-native use and comprehension of concepts of the target language'- is often not taught or known to learners of English and they are subsequently unaware of the interpretative differences between their own L1 and the L2. Much contextual information is further carried by prosody in the English language and, as stated by Bremer et al (Ibid.), prosodic skills are seen to be a difficult skill to master for, for example, Asian speakers of English, whose L1 is a tonal language. Difficulties with prosody combined with the issue of 'face' may mean that it will be very difficult for the Chinese learner of English to ask for clarification thus jeopardizing successful communication.

Conclusion

Clearly, the acquisition of shared knowledge and understanding for NNSs are vital to successful communication. In order to facilitate language learners in becoming part of the L2 speech community, we need to exposed them to as much authentic NS language as possible and provide them with cultural and contextual background knowledge which has resonance their field of interest, their professional expertise and their current or prospective surroundings. This exposure will increase the learner's chances of acquiring shared deictic fields with NSs which in turn will raise the level of understanding and will make communication with both NSs and NNSs more successful. Once NNSs are facilitated in re-acquiring communicative skills which they naturally possess in their L1 (such as inferencing, repairing misunderstood cues from context etc.) in the L2, the journey to becoming accepted as an equal, or at least effective interlocutor in NS to NNS communication may be less long and acceptance into the L2 language community may be attainable.

References

---

[1] **Locke, J.** ([1689] 1971) *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*. London and Glasgow: Fontana (p.262).

[2] **Fillmore, C.J.** 1982. Towards a Descriptive Framework for Spatial Deixis. In: *Speech, Place and Action. Studies in Deixis and Related Topics, R.* Jarvella, and W. Klein (Eds.). Chichester: John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

[3] **Rapaport, W.J. et al.** 1989. *Deictic Centres and the Cognitive Structure of Narrative Comprehension*. Centre for Cognitive Science State University of Buffalo, Buffalo, New York.

[4] **Brown, G.** 1990. *Listening to Spoken English*. 2nd ed. London: Longman.

[5] **Habermas, J.** 1979. *Communication and the Evolution of Society*. Toronto: Beacon Press.

[6] **Firth, J.R.** 1957a. *Papers in Linguistics, 1934 – 1951.* London: Oxford University Press.

[7] **Lyons, J.** 1977. *Semantics Volume 2*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (p. 609).

[8] **Lyons, J.** 1977. *Semantics,* Volume 2. London: Cambridge University Press (p.636).

[9] **Clark, H.H. and C.E. Marshall.** 1981. Definite Reference and Mututal Knowledge. In: *Elements of Discourse and Understanding*. A.K. Joshi, I. Sag, and B. Webber. (Eds.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[10] **Krauss, R.M. and S.R. Fussell.** 1991. Perspective-taking in Communication: Representation of Others' Knowledge in Reference. *Social Cognition,* 9, 2-24. New York: Guilford Publications.

[11] **Milroy, L.** 1994. Sociolinguistics and Second Language Learning. In: *Language and Understanding*. G. Brown, K. Malmkjær, A. Politt and J. Williams. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[12] **Brown, G.** 1990. *Listening to Spoken English*. 2nd ed. London: Longman.

[13] **Mulder, I. And Swaak, J**. 2002. Assessing group Learning and Shared Understanding in technology-mediated Interaction. *Educational Technology & Society* 5 (I).

[14] **Kecskes, I. and T. Papp** 2000. *Foreign Language and Mother Tongue*. State University of New York, Albany Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers. Mahwah, New Jersey London. (pp. 13-14).

[15] **Bremer, K. P. Broeder, C. Roberts, M. Simonot and M-T Vasseur.** 1993. Ways of achieving understanding. In: *Adult Language Acquisition: cross-linguistic perspectives. Volume II. The results. C.* Perdue, (ed.). European Science Foundation. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (pp.153-195).