

USE OF LANGUAGE IN DIFFERENT CONTEXTS

D N Aloysius*

Introduction

Generally, language is a medium of communication, which takes diversified directions. Both humans and animals communicate. For instance, man usually expresses his ideas and feelings through speech or writing. Sometimes, he also expresses his ideas and feelings through paralanguage including gesture, facial expression, body language and sign language. He also does so through drawings and cartoons. The man sometimes changes his tone when he wants to express a particular thing. That means changing his intonation and emotion. Animals also communicate with their community. They are unable to speak, write or draw. However, they communicate in various ways using their particular sounds and actions. It is apparent that both humans and animals communicate. For effective communication, according to linguists, a person is expected to communicate at the following linguistic levels; namely, phonetics and phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics. Accomplishments in these linguistic aspects are considered as communication skills.

If a person successfully undergoes the above levels of a specific language up to syntax, he is competent in both productive skills, i.e. speech and writing. However, when such a person speaks or writes, then he is capable of expressing his ideas or feelings correctly and effectively. Sometimes, one may express a certain thing, but he actually means some other thing, which is beyond the sentence level. This phenomenon is known as pragmatics, which does not examine the relationship between the word and its definition or sense, but the relationships between words and the entities, to which those words refer. The linguist working in pragmatics is trying to account for utterances in terms of the meaning intended by the speaker and understood by the hearer. This indicates the fact that there is a considerable contrast between language and language in use. In other words, different meanings are generated when language is in use.

Linguistic meaning and speaker meaning

In a word, phrase or sentence, there are two meanings, one is linguistic meaning and the other is speaker meaning. Linguistic meaning is also known as literal or conceptual meaning and the other is speaker meaning which, is known as non literal meaning or associative meaning

(Robert, 1984: p. 19). The language is thus used for both grammatical and pragmatic purposes. For example, in semantics the utterance "Father is sleeping." is analyzed for the meanings of the individual words as they occur in syntactic relation to each other (Father = noun, in subject position; is sleeping= verb phrase, indicating action). In pragmatics, the utterance is assessed in terms of its context. What does the speaker intend the hearer to understand from his utterance? Perhaps, the speaker is requesting the hearer "not to disturb father" since he is sleeping. None of the words spoken have the sense of request, but in context the utterance communicates the information in addition to what is communicated by the semantic meaning of the sentence. Another example can be given for this, "It is so hot today." (Hedge, 2000: p. 48-50) This may be a statement about physical atmosphere, a request to open the window or an attempt to elicit offer of a cool drink or perhaps a break in silence of the hearer.

The present progressive tense has a number of functions as the following examples demonstrate.

- The teacher is coming.
- I am leaving in five minutes.
- He is always calling me.

"The teacher is coming." conveys the meaning that one student asks the others to go to the classroom. "I am leaving in five minutes." means he wants the others to expedite the work for him. "He is always calling me." has the connotation that one hates his calling. All these are beyond the sentence level, which are based on pragmatic competence.

Contextual Meaning

To fully understand the meaning of a word, phrase or sentence, we must also understand the context, in which it was uttered. (Yule, 1985: p.127) For instance, the word, handsome has two separate meanings in the following contexts. They are known as homonyms.

- Many girls are interested in him as he is handsome.
- She gets a handsome salary. Hence, she is very happy.

There are many such homonyms in the English language. The following underlined words in the sets of sentences can be understood differently according to their contexts.

- Mother went to the bank to withdraw some money.
- Don't be on the river bank when it is raining.
- The bat is a nocturnal animal.
- Where is the bat? I want to play cricket.
- He catches the ball and wins the match.

- She very often attends balls and dances with men.
- Roshan is the monitor of the class.
- The monitor is a reptile, which usually lives near the rivers and streams.

Context of use can be divided into four aspects. First is the physical context; that is, where the conversation takes place, what objects are present, and what actions are taking place.

The second is the epistemic context; this is background knowledge shared by the speakers and hearers. If not for this, both parties fail to understand the contextual meaning.

The third is the linguistic context, which deals with the preceding utterances to the utterance under consideration.

The fourth is the social context, this is the social relationship and setting of the speakers and hearers.

The contextual meaning thus amplifies the textual meaning.

Sarcastic remarks

Sarcastic remarks are closely associated with pragmatics. When a person wants to tell something sarcastic, he uses indirect reference. For example, when students speak loudly in a classroom, the teacher gets angry and says, "Why don't you speak a bit louder?" On hearing this, all the students in the classroom maintain dead silence and some secretly look at the teacher in great fear. There is great tension everywhere in the class. This indicates that he does not want them to speak loudly in the classroom. The linguistic meaning suggests that the students should speak louder whereas the speaker meaning is that they should be silent when the lesson is in progress. Hence, the context here is both sarcastic and warning. Moreover, the paralanguage of the teacher, who uses the words, his anger, his tense appearance and mood, contribute to make the students silent while working in the classroom. It is apparent that all the above elements are embodied in pragmatics.

Usually, the students are not expected to make an extensive noise in the classroom while the lesson is in progress. That is why the teacher uses the above utterance to make the students silent. Here, the classroom is the physical context and the epistemic context is the students' knowledge about the background, where they are in. The epistemic context thus refers to usual silence when students are involved in an activity in the class. In other words, when you are in a library, the physical context is the library while the epistemic context is your knowledge about the atmosphere of the library, i.e. you should not disturb other readers by speaking loudly inside a library.

Unspoken Message

A speaker not conveying a message directly is referred to as an unspoken message. The speaker conveys the message indirectly. For instance, a motorist stops in a no parking zone with

his car. When a policeman approaches, the motorist, at once says, "I have a flat tyre." Through this utterance, he wants to convey to the policeman that he is aware of the traffic law and accordingly he is not allowed to park the car there. The speaker really wants to apologize to the policeman for the violation of the traffic law. The policeman being aware of the situation does not take any legal action against him. If this sentence is understood only within the linguistic context, the meaning is different. The policeman does not want to know whether he has a flat tyre or not. His job is to fine the motorists, who park their vehicles in a no parking zone. The same speaker goes to the garage and repeats the same sentence, "I have a flat tyre." The mechanic understands the speaker's need to replace the tyre and he does his job for the speaker. In both contexts, the meaning of the sentence is interpreted differently. This is only one example of unspoken messages. In this case, the speaker's intended meaning is also known as invisible meaning (Yule, 1985: p.127). In other words, invisible meaning differs from linguistic meaning.

Reference

Reference is an act, by which a speaker or writer uses language to enable a listener or reader to identify something or someone (Yule, 1985: p. 130). We often assume that the words we use to identify people or things have some direct relationship with their peculiar behaviour. We may not actually know someone's name, but that does not prevent us from referring to the person (Yule, 1985: p.131). For example, let's assume that there is a person, whose behaviour is similar to a monkey. The way he scratches himself, the way he eats and drinks and the way he goes and sees are all similar to the activities of a monkey. People, therefore, call him a 'monkey'. This is an appropriate example of reference. Therefore, when a person refers to "the monkey", one is aware that he is speaking about that particular person. This is how some nick-names are formed in a particular community.

Inference

Inference is another aspect of pragmatics. In other words, it is indirect reference to a thing (Yule, 1985: p.131). For example, a person may be reading a book written by Krashan. Another person who knows the book and the writer well may ask "Where is Krashan?" This means not Krashan, but the book written by him. "I read Shakespeare last week and presently I am reading Dickens and next week I am going to read Thomas Hardy." This would provide ample evidence for inference. Some more examples are given below.

Did you refer to 'Hornby'? (His Dictionary)

Where is 'Wren and Martin'? (Their Grammar book)

I returned 'Blake' and borrowed 'Eliot'. (Their Poetry)

It is difficult to understand 'Sigmund Freud'. (His book)

Presupposition

The listener or reader assumes some information about a person when you speak or write to him. One may ask the following question from his friend. Based on that, the listeners make

some assumptions about the person concerned. This is known as presupposition (Leech, 1974: p. 277). "Hello! Dinusha, did you come with your youngest son?" This question embodies the thought that the listeners can assume the following information about Dinusha. She is a married woman. She has a husband. She has more than one child. Three presuppositions can be found in this context (Yule, 1985: p.132). "Roshan, when did you give up drinking?" When you hear the speaker speaking to his friend, you presuppose that the speaker knows that Roshan used to drink in the past. Presumptions are always associated with the mutual understanding of persons or parties concerned.

Literary context

Poets, playwrights and writers very often use language in their literary works in order to convey the oblique meaning of the context. For example, in the play, *Macbeth* written by William Shakespeare we encounter Lady Macbeth, who persuades her husband, Macbeth to kill their king Duncan. She uses the following utterances to motivate him to commit the evil act.

"Look like the innocent flower, but be the serpent under't." Accordingly, Macbeth should pretend that he is innocent and good, but the opposite occurs. These words reflect that Lady Macbeth is evil and vicious. In other words, you listen to the speaker and assume that Lady Macbeth secretly plans to kill the king. Both innocent flower and the serpent are metaphors used by poets and writers.

William Wordsworth in his poem, "I wandered lonely as a cloud..." uses exaggeration through the following line:

"Ten thousand saw I at a glance." The poet really does not count the number of flowers. He just wants to tell the readers that there are thousands of flowers in that place.

Actions

The basic pragmatic observation about language use is that it is always composed of action (Cobley, 2001: p. 85). The speaker, sometimes, expresses his wishes through actions. If the speaker wants to reject something, he does so through actions. This is closely related with gesture and mood of a person. Through silence too, a speaker can express his displeasure or reluctance to do something. A person should not always speak to express his views or feelings. His look, facial expression and behavioural patterns imply what he means. A person's mood, walk, and the activities he does with some parts of his body, too, show what he wants to convey. Hence, actions of a particular person are very significant as far as language is concerned.

Conclusion

Communication is the primary function of language (Muma, 1978: p.118). As discussed earlier, a person can communicate in different ways. For this purpose, the person, who communicates applies various methods. It is not always necessary for a person to speak only to convey the

messages. There are many other ways for communication, which have already been discussed. Language is thus used in various ways to convey the intended meaning. Sometimes, it is sarcastic and satirical; sometimes, it is informative. Sometimes, it suggests and rejects. Language is thus wonderfully used flexibly to express several levels of meaning.

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