

Interpretation of Utterances of Second Language Learners

Junko KONO

► key words

Relevance Theory
explicature
implicature
interlanguage

Summary

The utterances of second (foreign) language learners, which include both mistakes and errors can be properly understood by communicators. It is assumed that the chances of any misunderstanding is higher than when the utterances are produced without mistakes and errors. However, successful interpretations take place far more often than people realise. The purpose of this article is to explore how this type of utterance is interpreted.

Firstly, the main characteristics of interlanguage are discussed. It is observed that the second (foreign) language learner's language is systematic and common to all learners, particularly in the early stages of development. Accordingly, errors are regarded as resulting from an interlanguage that develops during the process through which learners attain the ultimate level of their target language. The utterances of EFL learners which do not comply with the grammatical rules of the target language grammar are presented as examples in order to clarify my discussion.

The article has two main aims. Firstly, it argues that interpreting an utterance is not always a matter of decoding by using linguistic rules to obtain literal linguistic meaning. Secondly, it focuses on 'explicature' and 'implicature', which are basic concepts proposed by Sperber and Wilson (1986/ 1995) in the field of Relevance Theory are focused on. This perspective will shed fresh light on the aspects of Grice's dichotomy: 'what is said' and 'what is implicated'.

1. Introduction

The goal of pragmatics is to explain how utterances are interpreted. Interpreting an utterance is not always a matter of decoding by using linguistic rules to obtain its literal linguistic meaning. The purpose of this article is to deepen our understanding of the semantic and pragmatic properties of utterances, involving interlanguage, namely an independent language system belonging to second (foreign) language learners.¹

- (1) The penguins have eaten all our cabbages. (spoken in an English garden)
(Carston, 1998: 247)
- (2)* I don't can hear.
- (3)* Today comes she not.

Unlike the first example where 'penguins' are mentioned instead of 'pigeons', the sentence is grammatically correct and the addressee understands what the communicator is trying to say. The utterances in examples (2) and (3) are examples include errors made by language learners during the process of L2 (second language)ⁱⁱ acquisition. This kind of error is explained as a result of the pattern of the learner's mother tongue being different from that of the L2 which interferes when he or she acquires an L2. However the study of Error Analysis (Dulay and Burt, 1973) reveals that only four percent of the total number of examples contain errors relating to L1 (first language) interference. According to the Error Analysis perspective, errors are the result of an interlanguage that is developed while learners will attain the ultimate level of their TL (target language). What explanation is there to account for the fact that the utterance in examples (2) and (3) mentioned above can be interpreted? I would like to investigate the principles and mechanisms available for interpreting this kind of phenomenon.

2. Interlanguage

2.1 The Early Theory of Interlanguage

Interlanguage is a term coined by Selinker (1972) that became widely accepted for L2 learners' language system. It is used to emphasise not only the internal system that a learner has constructed at a single point in time (the existence of interlanguage) but also the series of systems related to each other that describe the learner's progress over time (the interlanguage continuum). Nowadays Interlanguage theory is constantly adapting to new information that brings about changes from the early notion of interlanguage theory (Ellis, 1990).

Early interlanguage theory was formed by the study of monitored errors and the common pattern of L2 development amongst adult learners. The main points of the early versions of this theory are as follows:

- There is the fact that most L2 learners do not achieve full TL competence in their TL.

- The L2 learners' language is systematic and common to all learners, particularly in the early stages of the development.
- The language system that L2 learners construct does not emerge out of the linguistic input to associated with their mother tongue nor does it come from their TL.
- There is a psychological mechanism called 'fossilization' which a learner's NL (native language) will tend to retain in their interlanguage.

The subjects in Selinker's original research were adult L2 learners, however Selinker et al. (1975) expanded their research population to include children who study in French immersion schools in English-speaking Canada. On the basis of their analysis of the research data they identify four general features of interlanguage (stability, mutual intelligibility, backsliding, systematicity) from the analysis of the research.

2.2 The Feature of Interlanguage

The language system which L2 learners construct has been described in various ways, such as an approximative system (Nemser, 1971), an idiosyncratic dialect (Corder, 1971) and an interlanguage (Selinker, 1972). Nemser argues that all three researchers appear to subscribe to the following three assumptions.

Our assumption is three-fold: (i) Learners' speech at a given time is the patterned product of a linguistic system (La), distinct from Ls (source language) and Lt (target language) and internally structured. (ii) La's at successive stages of learning form an evolving series LaLa , the earlier occurring when a learner first attempts to use the Lt, the most advanced at the closest approach to Lt....(iii) In a given contact situation, the La's of learners at the same stage of proficiency roughly coincide with major variations ascribable to differences in learning experiences. (Nemser, 1971: 116)

Utterances as in (2) and (3) are caused by an L2 learner who tries to produce the utterance at a single point in time when his or her own language system of the TL is not adequate for processing it.

(2)* I don't can hear.

(3)* Today comes she not.

These types of utterances are considered to be the result of overgeneralization of TL rules and are observed in the process of both L1 and L2 acquisition. We must also pay attention to the fact that this phenomenon takes place when a learner's linguistic rules of the mother tongue permeates his or her interlanguage system and the utterance produced is overgeneralised (Adjemian, 1976). An utterance such as (3) is a typical example produced by EFL learners whose

L1 is German. Viewed in this light, permeability can be positioned as a feature of interlanguage. Errors caused by permeability are seen in the process of L1 acquisition as well as L2 acquisition. However a crucial difference between these two is that an L2 learner has already constructed a language system as a part of his or her own mother tongue.

3. Gricean View of 'What is said'

Before Grice's work, the only code model that was available as a theoretical model of communication (Sperber and Wilson, 1986/ 1995),ⁱⁱⁱ while we surely accept that only the code model is available in some non-verbal communication. The utterance doesn't convey only explicit meanings. On the one hand, Grice (1975, 1989) suggests that the differences between explicit meaning and implicit meaning using the dichotomy 'what is said' and 'what is implicated', is that decoding is involved in explicit communication. On the other hand, an inferential process contributes only to the implicit aspect (i.e. implicature) of the interpretation of an utterance.

Gricean view asserts that (1) is 'false' without presenting the process of interpretation of 'what is said', and utterances like (2) and (3) are examples of infringing a maxim. A communicator like a young child or a foreign language learner would fail to observe a maxim because the communicator's linguistic performance would be imperfect. On the basis of this, how can we explain that we are able to interpret this type of utterance?

4. Relevance Theory and Explicature

4.1 Ostensive Communication and the Principle of Relevance

Communication is usually carried out in order to convey something: communicators show their intentions that they have something to convey and consequently draw addressees' attention. Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1986/ 1995) takes ostensive communication, which is aroused by an ostensive stimulus as an object of study and explains how the addressee recognises the meaning of an utterance, which the communicator tries to convey in order to show the mechanism of the utterance interpretation.

The communicator's intentions are considered to be an attempt to modify the cognitive environment of the addressee in communication. This type of intention is called an 'informative intention'^{iv} and Sperber and Wilson (1986/ 1995) think that the addressee obtains the cognitive effect as a result of the modification of the cognitive environment. According to Relevance Theory the addressee tends to process utterances, so they find the optimal relevance, hence the level of relevance depends on the addressees' processing abilities which affects the cognitive effects and processing of utterances. Others being equal, an assumption is relevant to the extent that the cognitive effects required to process the information are large, and an assumption is relevant to the extent that the processing effort required to process the information is minimal. In line with the aforementioned view, Sperber and Wilson (1995) present Principles of Relevance.

There are two main ones below:

- (4) Human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance.
- (5) Every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance. (Sperber and Wilson, 1995: 260)
- (6) *Presumption of optimal relevance (revised)*
 - (a) The ostensive stimulus is relevant enough for it to be worth the addressee's effort to process it.
 - (b) The ostensive stimulus is the most relevant one compatible with the communicator's abilities and preferences. (Sperber and Wilson, 1995: 270)

In the case that a piece of information in a specific context affects the assumption, the information has relevance. Relevance Theory introduces the term 'positive cognitive effect' and defined cognitive effect 'as a contextual effect occurring in a cognitive system (e.g. an individual), and a positive cognitive effect as a cognitive effect that contributes positively to the fulfillment of cognitive functions or goals' (Sperber and Wilson, 1995: 265)

- (7) *Relevance to an individual* (classificatory)

An assumption is relevant to an individual at a given time if and only if it has some positive cognitive effect in one or more of the contexts accessible to him at that time.

- (8) *Relevance to an individual* (comparative)

Extent condition 1: An assumption is relevant to an individual to the extent that the positive cognitive effects achieved when it is optimally processed are large.

Extent condition 2: An assumption is relevant to an individual to the extent that the effort required to achieve these positive cognitive effects is small.

(Sperber and Wilson, 1995: 265-266)

Sperber and Wilson (1986/ 1995) claim the presumption of optimal relevance in the respect that the addressee tends to pay attention to an utterance as relevant information and the communicator tends to choose the information that is most relevant to the addressee in order to achieve the communicative goal effectively. However, communicators are not always sufficiently competent (Sperber, 1994) and in effect the utterance that a communicator regards as being of optimal relevance is not always the most relevant to the addressee. Moreover, it is possible that the communicator has conveyed the wrong information as in (1).

- (1) The penguins have eaten all our cabbages. (spoken in an English garden)

If the addressee knows that it is inconceivable that penguins would eat cabbages in the garden, he can adequately interpret this utterance as a mistake made accidentally by the

communicator according to the presumption of optimal relevance.

4.2 Semantic Decoding and Inference

As we have seen in the example (1), 'conversational implicature' (implicit meaning) makes no pragmatic contribution for addressees to interpret an utterance, however according to the Principle of Relevance an inference does contribute to the process of interpretation. Grice claims that 'what is said' is firstly decoded and then 'implicature' is derived through pragmatic inferences, which cannot explain the process of interpretation related to this type of example.

Relevance Theory introduces the terms 'explicature' and 'implicature' to define 'explicit communication' which have a different meaning in comparison to Grice's 'what is said' and 'implicature'. This theory objects to the idea on the basis that only 'disambiguation' and 'reference assignment' are involved in explicit communications (Grice 1989: 25).

According to Sperber and Wilson (1995), explicitness means that 'an assumption communicated by an utterance *U* is *explicit* if and only if it is an inferential development of a logical form encoded by *U*'. (Sperber and Wilson, 1995: 182) An assumption conveyed by the utterance is divided into 'explicature' and 'implicature', and an explicitly communicated assumption is called explicature in Relevance Theory. While explicature is an explicit meaning which is developed from a logical form by encoding an utterance, implicature is an implicit meaning that is not developed from a logical form. Explicature includes 'enrichment', which is regarded as one of the pragmatic processes of enriching an incomplete logical form into a complete logical form.

In Relevance Theory, 'enrichment', 'disambiguation' and 'reference assignment' are considered as pragmatic processes (Sperber and Wilson, 1995), and Carston (2000, 2002) has modified these three into the following four: disambiguation, saturation, free enrichment and ad hoc concept construction. Through influential research, it has been made clear that the proposition expressed is not fully determined by semantic decoding.^v

4.3 Utterances of EFL Learners and Explicature

Consider the following situation; you are talking on the phone and a noise disturbs your conversation, and you hear this utterance 'I don't can hear'. This is a typical example of an utterance that a second language learner produces particularly in the early stages of learning English. If the communicator were a native English speaker, she would say something like 'I can't hear you'.

(2) *I don't can hear.

(9) I can't hear you.

According to the context, the slot is made up by the process of 'saturation', and the proposition expressed is recovered. The addressee accesses conceptual information in his

memory, these are called encyclopaedic entries.^{vi} He induces the necessary assumption in order to obtain the relevant interpretation, and if necessary, a specific context is calculated. The context is not given from the outset but the addressee searches for the context to maximise the relevance. As the result of this process, both (2) and (9) form the same explicature; therefore, we can communicate with people who produce an utterance like (2).

We live in an age when internationally communication is essential, and in fact we often come across utterances such as (2) and (3). However, successful interpretations take place far more often than people realise. The philosophy of Relevance Theory offers the key to an understanding how people interpret of the utterances of second language learners.

Notes

- i This is a revised and extended version of an article that is under the name of "Communicated meaning in utterances of second language learners" in 2004, in *Eigogaku Eibei Bungaku Ronshu 30* (Paper in Linguistics and English and American Literature), Nara Women's University.
- ii Strictly speaking second language should be distinguished from foreign language. However I would like to use the word second language in this paper as indicating to both a second language and a foreign language. This also applies to the case that the term first language is used to refer to the first language and mother tongue.
- iii On this discussion, see Sperber and Wilson (1986: Chapter 1).
- iv Informative intention: to make manifest or more manifest to the audience a set of assumptions I. (Sperber and Wilson, 1995: 58)
- v On this discussion, see Carston (2000), cf. linguistic underdeterminacy
- vi On this discussion, see Sperber and Wilson (1995: Chapter 2)

References

- Adjemian, C. (1976) 'On the nature of interlanguage system', *Language Learning* 26: 297-320.
- Carston, R. (1998) *Pragmatic and Explicit-Implicit Distinction*. PhD thesis.
- Carston, R. (2000) 'Explicature and Semantics'. *UCL Working Paper in Linguistics* 12: 1-44.
- Carston, R. (2002) *Thought and Utterances: The Pragmatics of Verbal Communication*. Blackwell, Oxford.
- Corder, S. P. (1967) The significance of learner's errors. *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching* 5: 161-170.
- Dulay, H. C. & M. K. Burt. (1973) 'Should we teach children syntax?' *Language Learning* 23: 245-258.
- Ellis, R. (1990) *Instructed Second Language Acquisition*. Basil Blackwell, Oxford.
- Grice, H. P. (1975) 'Logic and conversation', in Cole and Morgan (eds). *Syntax and Semantics 3: Speech Acts*: 41-58. Reprinted in Grice 1989: 22-40.
- Grice, H. P. (1989) *Studies in the Way of Words*. Harvard University Press.
- Nemser, W. (1971) 'Approximative systems of foreign language learners'. *International Review of Applied Linguistics* 9: 115-23.
- Selinker, L. (1972) 'Interlanguage'. *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching* 10: 209-231.
- Selinker, L., M. Swain & G. Dumas. (1975) 'The interlanguage hypothesis extended to children'. *Language Learning* 23: 139-152.
- Sperber, D. (1994) 'Understanding Verbal Understanding'. in Jean Khalfa (ed). *What is Intelligence?* 179-198. CUP,

Cambridge.

Sperber, D. & D. Wilson (1986/1995) *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*. Blackwell. Oxford.