

# Vistas of Cultural and Contextual Determination of Language Formulas: Anatomy of Speech Acts

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## **Abstract**

The aim of this treatise is to set the foundation for a large-scale Ph.D study focused on inter-cultural and ethnopragmatic analysis of (apologetic) speech acts, the notion of context from an interdisciplinary perspective, and how these fit into the Bakhtin-Vygotskian theory of dialogic verbal communication. The main focus shall, therefore, be placed on the theoretical analysis of the above mentioned aspects in general, and cultural and contextual underpinnings of language formulas - speech acts, in particular. Given that the study itself will involve a semantic and pragmatic analysis of the aforementioned particular speech acts from three distinct cultures/languages - Serbian, Austrian German and Australian English, the rationale underlying their choice shall also constitute an important part of this treatise. In addition, due to the immense importance they have for the study itself, as sources of the empirical substance, the treatise will also include an account of and the rationale behind the linguistic tools to be used. More specifically, the enhanced version of the conventional DCT [Discourse Completion Test] method and the NSM [Natural Semantic Metalanguage] & cultural scripts framework.

It is the author's belief that an amalgam of the theoretical and the empirical, such as the one fostered by the study in question, can provide us with extremely valuable insights into the innards of the social and the cultural, and the impact they have on our natural language use and inn(out)er-workings of the mind.

## **Prologue**

As emphasised by the title above, the present paper will serve as a mental overview and an ontological esquisse that constitutes the foundation of a broader, ongoing, empirical study. Its purpose, therefore, will be that of a dialogic meta-setting. A discursive plateau where all the relevant constructs - "context of culture", "context of situation" and "theory of (natural)

verbal communication”, will be given a voice, before being united into a single whole, i.e. into an epistemologically informative “heterofonic narrative” (Bakhtin 1975; Sutanovac 2014).

### **1. Ontological Dimensions**

The primary research plane of this study is concerned with the extent to which the cultural background (i.e. context of culture) and social context influence the formation, and the production, of specific language formulas, i.e. speech acts. Special emphasis is placed on the effect these two extralinguistic factors have on the proper use of linguistic formulas in question - apologetic speech acts in particular, in both the mother and non-native tongue, in this case English. The complementing plane looks into the theories and methods which can contribute not only to a much better elucidation of these two aspects of communication, but also to a much better comprehension of the particular role they play in natural speech interaction. In author’s opinion, such knowledge represents one of the cornerstones that can contribute to a significant decrease in intercultural miscommunication, to a much profounder understanding of the socio-cultural mechanisms underlying verbal communication and to an increase in the productivity of the second language instruction and acquisition process.

In terms of the general theoretical foundations, this study will be grounded in the theoretical constructs postulated by Bakhtin (1930, 1979, 1986) and Vygotsky (1956), which concern the theory of verbal communication and the phase structure of speech acts respectively. Furthermore, it will also include the seminal works of their contemporaries Leontiev (1970) and Akhutina (1984) who deconstruct and analyse these constructs in more detail, thus providing us with a broader framework for their potential practical application.

The substance of the study encompasses seminal works that belong to the niche of pragmatics per se (Malinowski 1923; Austin 1962; Kryk-Kastovsky 2002), cross-cultural pragmatics and ethnopr pragmatics (Wierzbicka 1991, 1994a, 1994b, 1996a, 1997a, 2003, 2006; Goddard 2002c, 2004, 2004a, 2006; Goddard and Wierzbicka 1997, 2004), interlanguage pragmatics (Blum-Kulka & Olshtein 1984; Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper 1989), as well as (cross-cultural) semantics (Wierzbicka 1992, 1996, 2009). The immense importance of these seminal works lies in the fact that they provide us with a unique perspective for analysing language as a dynamic entity, inherently embedded in the fabric of the socio-cultural.

## 2. Epistemological Impetus

*“No matter which of the sciences devoted to speech and language we consider — linguistics, semiotics, or developmental psycholinguistics — we find that the focus of interest has shifted from the syntax and semantics of the utterance to its pragmatics. We are concerned with the speaker as he relates to his listener — this is the new perspective from which the traditional issues of these disciplines are being reviewed nowadays.”*  
(Akhutina [1984] 2003: 96)

What the statement above aptly points out to is an entirely new ontogenetic stage, i.e. a crucial shift in the studies that make language its primary focus. It concerns a stage that pays its due respect to the traditional and the formal but places, instead, at its very centre the "pragmatic", the "in vivo", i.e. the “language in action” and its key ontological constituents - “context of situation” and “context of culture” (cf. Perovic, 2007).

Bearing speech acts in mind, the former, i.e. the “social milieu” (cf. Ellis 1997) - the natural, every day setting in which the speech interaction takes place, is one of the factors that plays a highly prominent role not only in their conceptualisation, but also in the proper understanding of how they are to be used most adequately, and productively, with respect to the requirements of the given context. In the words of one of Bakhtin’s and Vygotsky’s contemporaries

Speech act as a whole, including the speech act as an act of expression, as well as the intention of the speaker and his effect on the listener, entail consideration of the speech act as an event of verbal communication, that is, as an active social interaction.  
(Akhutina 1984 [2003]: 96)

It is this concise conceptualisation of the notion of speech act that manages to capture, perhaps best of all, the crux of their communicative philosophy and the nature of the notion of “dialogism”, i.e. the internally social and dialogic nature of the utterance as revealed by Bakhtin (1930, 1986). In this context, Bakhtin’s and Vygotsky’s holistic conceptualisation of the (natural) verbal communication process holds great significance both for the successful carrying out of the specific language formulas (i.e. speech acts), as well as for the successful, daily, speech interaction in general. By internalising its tenets, an interlocutor (lingo-cultural outsider included) is furnished with a subconscious mechanism, i.e. a cognitive strategy that will enable him/her to minimise the misunderstanding while, at the same time, maximising the mutual understanding simply by taking the Other into account. This Other represents both the

other interlocutor and the other, preceding, utterances in a definite sphere of communication on a particular issue...”for it is not possible to define one’s own position without relating it to other positions” (Bakhtin 1953/1979: 271). Furthermore, the utterance is also characterised by a specific type of “completeness” (Akhutina, 1984: 5) in that it is “a complete semantic entity” (Ibid.: 5) susceptible to evaluation and, thus, answerable in nature (a position can be adopted in response to it). The utterance achieves this completeness “not only through its direct relationship to alien utterances, but also by its direct contact with reality (i.e. the extraverbal situation)” (Bakhtin, 1953/1979: 253). Given the fact that, in terms of completeness, the latter plays an important role, the “evaluation itself will encompass both the linguistic (word per se) and extralinguistic context (situational context)” (Akhutina, 1984: 5), and treat them as a single whole. In this respect, the utterance itself and the context also form a single whole. What this further implies is that context is a crucial constituent of the utterance, responsible for conveying implicit sense. It is also important to point out that this implicit sense is by no means arbitrary, but is “based on the speaker’s understanding of what the listener already knows” (Ibid.: 5). Understood in such a manner, the “contextual nature of the utterance (= the presence of an implicit sense) is a primary characteristic of the utterance, of the same sort as the fact that it is dialogic” (Ibid.: 5).

Another essential external factor, often neglected in typically linguistic studies, is the cultural factor. One of the reasons for this might be its falsely assumed incommensurability. The other, equally prominent, is the emphasis of and insistence on the formal aspects of language (i.e. grammar, phonetics, vocabulary etc.). However, a number of studies, especially in the last decade, originating from such epistemologically informative fields as cross- and intercultural pragmatics, ethnography of communication and interlanguage pragmatics, have provided us with strong evidence and reliable means for investigating the cultural determination of language. Such means as the NSM and cultural scripts allow us to account not only for the commensurability of the influence which culture has on language in general, but equally importantly, to account for this very same influence it has on the proper usage of language formulas both in one’s native, as well as non-native tongue.

Furthermore, the analysis of a culture from such a perspective as the one offered by cultural scripts, enables us to determine its main exponents - specific speech entities (speech acts) being one of them, which have come to encode its values and a view of its most relevant “forms of talk” (cf. Goffman 1981). The significance of such specific units of speech – apologetic speech acts in this case, does not only reside in their ability to encode the relevant cultural values, but also in their ability to encode the attitude and the “frame of mind” of the

person who utters them in a specific socio-cultural setting. In this respect, the role of such an analytical tool as the Natural Semantic Metalanguage is but crucial, for it provides us with a sound lingo-semantic foundation for conceptualising culture-specific speech act expressions by means of simple and universal<sup>1</sup> semantic primitives, comprehensible both to the cultural insider and, in the context of cross-cultural education and language acquisition, the lingo-cultural outsider. “Because cultural scripts ‘interface’ more or less directly with simple ordinary language – in any language – they can be practically useful for the purposes of cross-cultural education<sup>2</sup>” (cf. Goddard 2004a).

### 3. Kernels Deconstructed

As pointed out by the title above, the purpose of this chapter shall be to systematically anatomise the linguistic, socio-cultural and methodological entities regarded as kernels of the study in question. Making the rationale underlying their choice, its main impetus and substance.

#### 3.1 Kernel One: Linguistic Entity

The linguistic entity, i.e. the language formula in question, has been chosen for an in-depth cross-cultural analysis due to the following reasons:

1. As the sections above clearly show, speech acts are highly culture- and context-specific linguistic entities. In this sense, they represent a potent source for investigating the cultural determinacy of language in general, and language formulas in particular;
2. Speech acts are in Austin’s terms, entities that perform (1968). As such, they strive not only for cultural felicity but also, actively, for social felicity as well. That is to say, they strive to adequately respond to the requirements of the context in question. In this respect, context as the carrier of implicit sense, together with the word as a purely linguistic phenomenon (a compressed utterance) and carrier of the explicit sense, comprise a whole – a complete semantic entity. The importance of context, with respect to speech acts as the form of more complex utterances, lies in the fact that, in case of its absence, a speech act can neither achieve its semantic completeness, nor its socio-cultural felicity.
3. Given the fact that speech acts are exponents of speech interaction, it could be argued that, on a micro level, they also exhibit all, or most, of the features of the verbal theory of

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<sup>1</sup>Within the corpus of the languages encoded in NSM up to this point.

<sup>2</sup>In the context of this study, the term “cross-cultural education” subsumes linguistic education, i.e. SLA and treats it as, essentially, an amalgam of linguistic and cross-cultural education.

communication (cf. Akhutina [1984] 2003). This, in turn, makes them a prime example of the aforementioned theory.

### **3.2 Kernel Two: Languages**

The rationale underlying the choice of languages/cultures shall be presented through a set of dichotomies and a trichotomy, each characterised by a specific value, i.e. [a] lingo-cultural distance, [b] lingo-cultural proximity and [c] lingo-cultural uniqueness.

#### **[a] Serbian and Austrian German**

There has not yet been an extensive analysis, by means of NSM, either of the linguistically expressed cultural specificities (in the form of cultural scripts), or of the culture's particular forms of talk (i.e. apologetic speech acts) and related prominent expressions (i.e. explicit IFIDs) characterising the languages in question. In this respect, the study would not only significantly contribute to the growing corpus of languages/cultures already encoded in NSM but also to the dissemination of vital cross-cultural knowledge. Furthermore, none of the currently available NSM studies include Serbian or Austrian German, which would make this addition to the NSM corpus even more valuable and unique in nature.

In this sense, the acquired knowledge will not only be vital for the scholarly community in general but, equally importantly, for all the lingo-cultural outsiders who seek to immerse into the target language and, by internalising its proper ways of verbal behaviour, learn how to do things with words effortlessly.

#### **[b] Australian English and Austrian German**

The importance of the in-depth analysis of the above said lingo-cultural microcosms, through a comparison with those considered to be their *Fons et Origo*, i.e. a) Anglo English (cf. Wierzbicka 2006) and b) High German respectively, lies in the fact that valuable evidence could be provided in support of the of a unique cultural Ethos (its forms of talk included) developed in the course of time despite its primary ontological source and origin;

#### **[c] Serbian, Australian English and Austrian German**

A straightforward account of the differences in cultural norms, i.e. cultural scripts (mirrored in language), rooted in the critical comparison with both the originative norms and the culturally-distant ones, can give us valuable insights into attitudes and frames of mind of the peoples in question. While, at the same time, providing evidence in favor of the epistemic

significance of the NSM & cultural scripts as essential facilitators of cross-cultural understanding and communication, as well as of effective cross-cultural linguistic education.

### **3.3 Kernel Three: Tools of Investigation**

This section follows a description-objective trajectory where each of the tools represents but one of the dots which, when connected, will provide us with a unified *modus operandi* that is to lie at the very foundation of the study's empirical substance.

#### **[a] Enhanced Discourse completion test (DCT)**

Description: DCT represents an empirical method used for eliciting and analysing speech acts in terms of their context-specific realisational diversity. However, although extensively tested and effective pragmatic method, its objectivity has somewhat been questioned due to the number of supra-dimensions it takes into account. That is to say, only the following ones: [i] socio-hierarchical relations, [ii] explicit context and, in hints, the [iii] cognitive dimension, i.e. a person's mental representation of the situation based on [ii]. Therefore, in the case of more complex studies, such as the one in question, there is a need for additional dimensions. This was, consequently, the main rationale behind the author's enhanced version which aims at complementing the rudimentary DCT with novel dimensions, for the purpose of increasing its overall objectivity and insightfulness, as well as empirical validity:

- [-] Introspective dimension - provides a straightforward systematic account of the mental phases a person goes through before producing an (contextually-appropriate) utterance, as well as empirical evidence for the validity of the "Theory of Verbal Communication".
- [-] Multilingual dimension - including explicit-context situations, and the pertinent follow-up introspective sections, formulated both in the informant's mother- and non-mother tongue, allows for a more straightforward and objective socio-cultural & cogno-linguistic analysis of the produced speech acts.
- [-] Implicit dimension - mirrored in the section that includes situations "stripped down" of explicit context and presented in the form of a single sentence (declarative, interrogative and exclamatory/imperative). On the one hand, the role of such situations is to point out to the impact the absence of context has on language comprehension and production. On the other hand, they can provide us with valuable insights into the extent to which specific morpho-syntactic structures can elicit adequate linguistic responses in acontextualised socio-cultural settings.

Objective:

- 1) Account for the likely sources of the realisational diversity, i.e. intracultural variability; (b) cross-cultural variability; (c) situational variability and (d) individual variability (cf. Blum-Kulka & Olshtein 1984, Trosborg 1987);
- 2) Through comparison, determine the exact points of realisational divergence between the non-native and native speakers' patterns of language use;
- 3) Determine the importance of situational context (both explicit and implicit) for the recognition of a situation that asks for a specific speech act, as well as its significance for the completeness of this very speech act;
- 4) Pinpoint which sentence type elicits the adequate linguistic response, i.e. speech act, when explicit context is absent.

### **[b] Blum-Kulka & Olshtein's "framework for speech-act analysis" and Vygotsky's "phase-structure approach"**

Description: By comparing the two, former residing on the concept of IFIDs [Illocutionary Force Indicating Device[s]], latter on the concept of the motive-guided thought, as the main impetus behind our utterances, i.e. speech acts, against one another and against the answers acquired, determine which of the approaches allows for a more insightful scrutiny of the language formula in question.

Objective: Analyse the internal structure of the elicited sequence of utterances, i.e. of the (apologetic) speech acts for the purpose of pinpointing the specific phases it goes through, before being realised into a meaningful linguistic entity responding to the requirements of the situation in question;

### **[c] Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM)**

Description: Represents the core of cultural scripts, i.e. the means to articulate them in universally intelligible terms;

Objective: To capture the essence of the cultures of interest (Serbian and Austrian in particular) and devise cultural scripts within a universally comprehensible framework, and in a universally comprehensible (auxiliary) language. As well as analyse the most prominent speech act expressions, i.e. the explicit IFIDs characteristic of the given cultures, by breaking them down via NSM into their key illocutionary constituents. This will, in turn, allow us to not only decipher the context-specific attitudes and frames of mind of Serbians, Austrians and



Australians, but also arrive at a set of cultural values that, to a great extent, characterise these societies in general.

### **[d] Cultural scripts**

Description: As the way of thinking shared by and familiar to everyone, and identifiable in the terms of the same empirically determined universal human primitives (Wierzbicka, 2006: 23), the immense importance of cultural scripts lies in the fact that they can “account and provide strong evidence for cultural determination of [...] speech acts, as well as for the mental matrix which underlies their verbal realization” (Perovic 2009).

Objective: To provide evidence for the study hypotheses and facilitate the encoding of the cultural specificity of the relevant speech act, as well as the particular frame of mind of the person uttering it in a given context; In the word of its architects, “the NSM framework and the cultural scripts model make it possible to describe cultural norms and (linguistic) practices in a way which combines an insider perspective with intelligibility to outsiders, is free from Anglocentrism, and lends itself to direct practical applications in intercultural communication and education” (Goddard 2004a).

### **Epilogue**

As indicated in the abstract and the sections that followed, the primary goal of this treatise was to provide a more comprehensive (theoretical) onto-epistemological overview of the impact culture and context may have on the comprehension and production of speech acts, both in the speaker’s mother and foreign tongue. And how the presence and absence of context may affect the person’s mental architecture and, consequently, linguistic perception, i.e. the ability to recognise the utterance genre and adequately respond to its requirements when explicit contextual signposts are absent. Finally, an additional pertinent objective was to introduce a novel perspective for understanding how an interdisciplinary (re)conceptualisation of these extralinguistic entities can:

- a) Help raise cross-cultural awareness;
- b) Further knowledge about the socio-cultural underpinnings of speech acts in particular and verbal communication in general;
- c) Foster effortless immersion of lingo-cultural outsiders into the target culture, as well as effortless acquisition of this culture’s most essential forms of talk.

All of the above said shall, in turn, serve as a foundation for a large-scale Ph.D. study which sets out with the following premises:

- a) Such knowledge, coupled with the awareness of the metalinguistic aspects of verbal communication, can prove essential not only for deconstructing the socio-cultural dynamics and the underlying mechanisms but, equally importantly, for avoiding cross-cultural miscommunication at large.
- b) The very same knowledge can also prove crucial for language learners in avoiding the negative pragmatic transfer that occurs all too often in the process of second language acquisition.

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