TO WHAT DEGREE IS A SPEECH EVENT FEASIBLE? A STUDY OF LINGUISTIC RESOURCES AND COMMUNICATIVE STRESS

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ABSTRACT : Neste artigo, revemos o conceito de competência comunicativa proposto por Hymes, e sugerimos uma ampliação do componente viabilidade ("feasibility"). É discutida a relação entre tensão comunicativa e recursos lingüísticos que implementam o uso da linguagem. São apresentadas e ilustradas,na fala de uma informante bilíngüe.algumas condições que afetam a disponibilidade desses recursos.[1]

1.Research on both first and second language acquisition in the last two decades has drawn heavily on the concept of culture put forward by Goodenough (1964). According to this anthropologist, "a society's culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members and do so in any role that they accept for any one of themselves"(**op. cit.** p. 36).

From the educational linguistics point of view, in order to operate in an acceptable manner, a member of a speech community has to learn what to say and how to say it appropriately to any interlocutor in any given circumstances. This personal capability includes both the tacit knowledge of a common code and the ability for use and was named communicative competence by Hymes (1972).

In order to explain the production and interpretation of cultural behaviour, a communicative competence theory has to account for what is formally possible, what is feasible in virtue of the means of implementation available, what is appropriate in relation to a context and what is actually performed (Hymes, 1972:281).

Most linguistic studies have concentrated on two of these components. Formal linguistics deals with what is possible in the system, whereas sociolinguistics and the ethnography of communication are mainly concerned with what is appropriate. In this paper I want to reflect upon the concept of feasibility [2]. Hymes seems to regard it as corresponding to the Chomskian notion of acceptability, which is related to performance phenomena such as memory limitation, perceptual devices etc. He says:

" As we have seen, question 2 [Whether and to what
degree something is feasible] defines one portion
of what is lumped together in linguistic theory
under the heading of performance, and, correspond-
ingly, acceptability. Clearly a more specific
term is needed for what is in question here.
No general term has been proposed for this
property with regard to cultural behavior as a
whole, so far as I know, and 'feasible' seems suitable
and best for both." (Hymes, 1972:285)

I want to propose that the concept of feasibility should not be restricted to such constraints as memory limitations. It should be enlarged in order to include the linguistic resources that are available to the speaker. Hymes (1984:72) makes a strong claim that there is a fundamental difference between what is not said because the speaker has no occasion to say it and what is not said because the speaker has not and does not find a way to say it. If a speaker does not have access to the linguistic resources that are required for the implementation of a certain speech act, such as, for example, proper lexicon or rhetorical patterns, this speech act is not feasible.

The issue of communicative resources can be approached from different points of view. One can look at the diversity of social structures and investigate the socio-ecological factors leading to an unequal distribution of such resources. Or one can look at social processes and examine intra-individual variation in regard to the feasibility of her/his communicative behaviour. In this paper I take the second stand, but one should keep in mind that ultimately the

study of social processes cannot be dissociated from the study of social structures. Further,that communicative resources are an integral part of a person's symbolic and social capital (Bourdieu, 1973).

That some communicative tasks are more easily carried out than others is an obvious fact. One way of putting it is to say that each speech event is associated with a certain amount of communicative stress.[3] Communicative stress is certainly a multi-caused phenomenon but I believe it can be said that it is inversely proportional to the feasibility of communication, in other words, to the amount of communicative resources available to the speaker. I am thus considering communicative stress as an aggregate of conditions that favour or hamper speech usage. In the following paragraphs I will discuss some of these conditions that seem to have an influence in language feasibility, namely, contextual support, cognitive involvement and exposure to specific communicative routines.[4] I will proceed to illustrate these conditions in a sample of a bilingual 13-year-old Brazilian Indian girl.

The support of the situational context in which communication takes place is indeed one of the most powerful resources for the speaker. Context should not be understood as the physical setting only. A context is constituted by what people are doing and where and when they are doing it. Ultimately social contexts consist of mutually shared and ratified definitions of situations and of the social roles of the participants on the basis of these definitions (Erickson, & Schultz, 1977). Contextual markers, which Gumperz (1982) calls contextualization cues, provide information on how verbal and non-verbal behaviour should be produced and interpreted.

Language is always a context-sensitive phenomenon, but speech events vary a great deal in regard to context dependence. When the participants of a speech event share a large background of pragmatic presuppositions about the world, their interaction is likely to be deeply context embedded. If the interaction is carried out by speakers with different backgrounds, it tends to be marked by less contextual dependence, and consequently by more precision

in the choice of words. Gumperz (1976: 13) points out that to be
effective in these occasions "speakers must be aware of differences
in interpretation process. They cannot expect that their unspoken
communication conventions, characteristic of their own peer group,
are understood by others and must be flexible with respect to
speech styles".

A second condition that is influential in communicative stress
is the degree of cognitive involvement required for the pursuit of a
communicative task. According to Cummins (1987:63), cognitive
involvement can be conceptualized in terms of the amount of
information that must be processed by the speaker.Communicative
tasks in which the linguistic tools have become largely automatized
are less cognitively demanding than those in which the linguistic
tools are not fully mastered. In order to perform the latter a speaker
has necessarily to resort to a stock of linguistic resources which
may not be available.For example,the narration of a story that
involves several characters of both genders may be more
cognitively demanding than the narration of a story with just one
character or with two characters of different genders. In fact,in a
study of personal narratives produced by street children (Bortoni &
Morton, 1990),we observed that they had difficulty discriminating
between several characters and their use of anaphoric pronouns
was very often ambiguous.But they did not have any problems in
the use of pronouns in narratives with just one character or with two
characters of different genders. The children were also more
efficient in structuring single-episode stories as compared to more
complex narratives that comprised several successive or
simultaneous episodes. A good performance was more successfully
achieved in the former case, in which the organization of the
chronological sequence was less cognitively demanding.

In a book dedicated to the development of a curriculum for
the spoken language, Brown et al.(1984) present interesting
teaching methods for the improvement of the oral abilities of
adolescents. The authors make a basic distinction between the
"chat" _ listener-related talk _ and the information-related talk on the
basis of the communicative stress that is involved in these two types

of interaction, and recommend classroom task exercices with an ascending order of difficulty.

The structural differences between casual and goal-oriented interaction had already been pointed out by the psychologists Michael T. McGuire and Stephen Lorch (1968) who identified different modes of conversation [5]. According to their classification, casual and comfortable conversation is carried out in the associational mode. In this mode,there is no explicit goal. Topics are loosely related and determined by the immediate interests of the participants. As it happens with any conversation, casual conversation is governed by interactional rules, but these rules are usually less strict than those that prevail in more formal interactions.

Another mode of conversation is problem-solving. It differs from the associational mode "particularly by the established theme continuing for extended periods". People use it to convey factual knowledge or ideas which "may be logically or experientially related to the agreed upon goals of conversation (McGuire and Lorch, op.cit.p.242).This kind of mode predominates in speech situations in many domains of social activities, such as school, church and public institutions in general.

An important point that can be derived from the distinction between conversation modes is that casual interactions are less cognitively demanding than problem-solving interactions. As Brown et al.(op.cit.p.14) put it, "one of the least demanding genres of adult conversation is the type where the speakers exchange short turns in listener-related 'chat' ".

The third condition that may have an effect on communicative stress is familiarity with specific linguistic routines. The concept of linguistic routines. springs from the tradition of the ethnography of communication. In every society there are organized and patterned communicative units, which Hymes (1974) calls, in a broad sense, ways of speaking. For the purposes of this paper I will refer to these units as linguistic routines. "Routines range from reciting the alphabet, counting and greeting, to the sonnett form, the marriage ceremony, and the direction of a buffalo hunt".(Hymes, 1980:2). While many routines, such as narrating, apologising and

arguing, are marked by universal features,one can say that any linguistic routine is culture-specific because its performance is based on interactional conventions that vary across cultures.

The control of linguistic routines by individuals also varies greatly even in traditional societies. But "the more complex the society, the greater the number and variety of routines and greater the variation in control of routines by individuals" (Hymes, **op.cit**.p.2). This variation is particularly crucial in societies where there is limited access to schooling and consequently to the linguistic routines that are specific of the mainstream culture and couched in the standard variety of the language.

2.What follows is a dialogue between a sociolinguist who was carrying a pilot study of bilingualism in a Terena reservation and a bilingual 13-year-old Terena girl, Damilda.[6]

The Terena are the second largest Brazilian Indian ethnic group of approximatety 10,000 people. They live in the Southwest of Brazil not far from the Paraguayan border and have been in contact with the regional population since the last quarter of the 19th century. Most of them have become bilingual in Terena and Portuguese.

The filedworker (FW) is talking to Damilda (D) in the village school. The teacher (T) watches. It is a holiday and they are getting ready for the fathers'day celebration.

1. FW   E lá [na igreja] cês aprendem os hinos e
             aprendem em idioma?
             *And there [in the church] you learn the hymns
             and learn them in idiom?*
2. D   E.
             Yes.
3. FW   E a reza também é em idioma?
             And the prayer, is also in idiom?
4. D   Não.
             No.
5. FW   A reza é em português?

The prayer is in Portuguese?

6. D   É em português (lenis pronunciation).
          It is in Portuguese.

7. T   A oração que você fala.
          The oration that you say.

8. D   É em idioma.
          It is in idiom.

9. FW   Ah, a oração é em idioma. Cês sabem rezar em
          idioma?
          Uhm, the oration is in idiom. You know how to
          pray in idiom?

10. T   Orar, orar.
          Pray, pray.

11. FW   Orar?
          Pray?

12. D   Orá no idioma nóis sabe.
          Pray in the idiom we knows.

13. FW   Então ora pra gente aqui um pouquinho.
          Then pray for us here a little.

(The child says a prayer in Terena.)

14. FW   Ah, bonito. Você sabe essa, essa oração também
          em Português?
          Ah, beautiful. Do you know this oration also in
          Portuguese ?

15. D   Português?
          Portuguese?

16. FW   Essa mesma. Essa é qual?
          This one, which one is this?

17. D   Sei. Essa mesma também eu sei.
          I know. This one also I know.

18. FW   Como é que é em Português?
          What is it like in Portuguese?

19. D   É assim. (pause of 10 seconds)
          It's like this.

20. D   Meu Pai, eu peço pro senhor ajudari nós e todos
          cada   dias.

My Father, I ask you to help us and everyone each days..

21.D   Como que nós tamo comemoranu o dia dos pai nessa hora.

How that we are celebrating the day of the (plural) father at this hour.

22.D   Se os pai cada um de nós o Senhor possa dirigi cada um das pessoa.

If the (plural) father each one of us you can lead each one of the (plural)person..

23.D   Isso que estou pedino, em nome do seu filho Jesus. Amém.

This that I am asking in the name of your son, Jesus. Amen.

In this episode two speech events can be identified, namely, the dialogue between the Terena girl and the visitor [from 1 to 19], and the prayer [from 20 to 23].

In the first event, the child shows a perfect command of both the linguistic structures of Portuguese Vernacular and the interactional rules of a dialogue, such as elliptical answers [6], topicalization [17] and interpretive strategies. Let us examine the latter. At two points in the passage, the participants had to negotiate interpretation. In the first two adjacency pairs, the FW is trying to elicit information about the use of Terena in the domain of the church. She had just listened to the girl singing a religious hymn in Terena and wanted to find out whether they said their prayers in their mother tongue, which they call *idioma* or *indioma*. The FW refers to the prayers as *rezas* and receives a negative answer.[4]. But she wants to confirm that information and rephrases the question [5], once again using the word *rezas*. The girl then produces an answer in a very low tone of voice, which can be interpreted either as a strategy to ask for clarification or, what is more likely, to discourage the interlocutor from pursuing with the topic. The teacher, at this point, interferes and 'translates' the question, providing the culture-specific word for prayer _ *oração*_. In that Terena village there are two missionary organizations: a

Catholic and a Protestant. The girl is a member of the latter and as such her background knowledge of religious lexicon does not comprise the words *rezar* and *reza* that are used by the Catholics. However, getting the clue from the teacher, she is able to offer the appropriate answer, which is spoken in an assertive tone [8]. In [9], the FW. who is Catholic, misuses the word again, but quickly rephrases the question when the teacher interferes.

Another round of interpretive efforts starts in [14]. The FW is assuming that the prayer is a formulaic one and asks for the correspondent form in Portuguese. This sociocultural assumption underlies her question in [16] and garantees its coherence. She had in mind an inventory of prayers learnt by heart. Actually, the girl had just made up the prayer for the occasion as it is usually done in her congregation. She does not share the FW's assumption and does not seem to have assessed her interlocutor's intention. That is why she asked for clarification, repeating the word *Português?* [15]. Still, she is able to accommodate and furnish a coherent answer [17].

If we consider the three parameters of communicative stress discussed above we will notice firstly that the cognitive skills required for the performance of the dialogue are not complex..It is an exchange of short turns with factual questions and answers. Whenever a more difficult interpretive strategy is required, contextual clues are provided. In fact, the whole text of the dialogue is deeply context-embedded by means of deictic elements, such as locative expressions, personal pronouns, discourse markers, the constant use of the present tense and the use of the imperative in the directive[13].

In the second part of the interaction, the girl is required to perform a linguistic routine which is not part of her ordinary use of the language, considering that she is more used to saying her prayers in Terena. The difficulties are evident. It is usually harder for a non-native speaker to use the language in monologues than in dialogues. The former are more cognitively demanding than the latter. In dialogic situations one can always paraphrase part of the other party's contribution. Furthermore, in a dialogue the

participants are constantly monitoring each other through both verbal and non-verbal back channels, whereas in a monologue the speaker has to count on non- verbal monitoring. only.

In addition to that there is the fact that a prayer is a routine marked by specific rhetorical features and falls into the category of planned discourse (Ochs,1979). In the case at hand, the speaker had only a few seconds to rehearse her talk.

In the light of the three conditions that we have been discussing, the prayer was clearly a situation of more communicative stress than the dialogue. The girl starts with an adequate utterance-initial preface (Stubbs,1983) in [19], followed by an equally adequate summons [20] and uses properly formulaic speech. But unlike her previous utterances, her discourse lacks syntactic well-formedness and is marked by a few incongruencies.

In line [20] the epenthesis of an [i] to the infinitive form of the verb is a strategy used by Vernacular speakers to mark formal discourses. It is not a felicitous strategy though because the feature is absent from Standard Portuguese. In the same line, there occurs a hypercorrection (*cada días).* Line [21] starts with a marker that again is typical of the incongruent discourse of a Portuguese Vernacular speaker engaged in an effort of upward convergence (Giles, 1980), i. e. a Vernacular speaker trying to behave adequately in a formal event with which s/he is not familiar. Speakers of Standard Portuguese will interpret it as a question marker but it is just an expletive. Finally, the odd syntax of the utterance in line [23] makes it almost incomprehensible. It is instructive to compare the lack of cohesion at this point with the girl's well-formed previous discourse. Actually for the production of the prayer she lacks part of the conditions that provide language feasibility. She makes an effort in order to fulfill a communicative task a) with which she is not familiar; b) which is very cognitively demanding and c) for which she did not have much contextual support. Somehow this effort interferes with her command of the grammar

3.It was my contention in this paper that there are some conditions that can influence language feasibility insofar as they provide the speaker with different amounts of linguistic resources. We have suggested that the availability of such resources can decrease communicative stress and improve linguistic fluency.

The evidence presented in the paper was limited to the analysis of a sample produced by a non-native speaker of a language, and further evidence, collected under different circumstances, will be necessary before we can generalize the conclusions. It seems reasonable to suggest, however, that the conditions that were discussed will hold for the assessment of both a native and a non-native speaker's access to linguistic resources.

Linguistic feasibility was treated here not as an abstract construct, but as the result of some conditions that obtain under real and definable circumstances. This treatment makes the concept operational for language instruction. The assessment of the linguistic resources available to an apprentice or to a fluent speaker, as these resources were described here, can thus become a useful tool in both first and second language curriculum design as well as in the construction of material with graded levels of difficulty.

NOTES

1. This paper was originally prepared for an oral presentation, during my post-doctoral program at the University of Pennsylvania. The program was supported by a grant from CNPq.

2.The revision of the notion of feasibility in the concept of communicative competence was briefly introduced in Bortoni (1988a)

3.Givón (1979) uses communicative stress as a parameter for assessing formality in speech. According to him, stress is absent in relaxed conditions when there is no time pressure and discourse planning is not necessary.

4. For a discussion of the first two of these parameters, see Cummins'(1987) assessment of language proficiency and metalinguistic development in bilingual speakers.

5. These modes are: the associational mode, the problem-solving mode, the interrogation mode and the clarification-of-misunderstanding mode. I consider the first two of McGuire and Lorch's categories broader in range.and will comment on those two only.

6.This and other cross-cultural communication episodes were analysed in Bortoni (1988b).

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