COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE: THE NEED FOR A COMPREHENSIVE DEFINITION

Robert J. Di Pietro
Georgetown University

In the first issue of the Mextesol Journal, Christina Bratt Paulston (1) argued for the need of the second-language learner to know about "social rules" appropriate to speakers of the target language. In general, such rules cover the constraints governing when to say what to whom. Without diminishing the significance of such knowledge, I will propose that much more is needed if we are to address communicative competence in its far-reaching significance for the L_2 learner.

Basically, Paulston follows Hymes's approach to communication in which people interact according to the accepted norms of a society. To whom is it appropriate to say "Good Morning"? If two acquaintances, one male one female, both of approximately the same age, encounter each other, who speaks first? At what distance do they initiate verbalization? Do they make eye-contact? Such matters are indeed significant and I have elsewhere outlined some of the typical errors that can occur when the learner has not understood them: (2)

(1) Overstatement.

A very common communicative error is found in those L_2 learners who "overstate" their verbal strategies. Examples abound, as in the case of the international student who profusely apologized to a young lady who refused to dance with him. His "Oh, a thousand pardons" was much more than what was needed for such a minor episode at a social function in the United States. The tendency toward overstatement arises when the learner must choose among several available protocols to apply to a situation. Such can be the case with "bumping" protocols which are used as apologies for violating another person's body space. These bumping protocols are arranged according to the severity of the infraction:

(1) C. B. Paulston, "Developing Communicative Competence: Goals, Procedures and Techniques", Mextesol Journal 1:1 (April, 1976) 5-30.
(2) R. J. Di Pietro, "Contrasting Patterns of Language Use: A Conversational Approach, " Canadian Modern Language Review 33:1 (October, 1976) 49-61.

Oops :, Sorry, Oh, SORRY (with loud sentence stress on the word
"sorry"), Sorry about that, Pardon me, A thousand pardons, and Oh
my God, did I hurt you?, just to mention some of them. This last
mentioned is reserved for the most severe infractions, such as
knocking someone down. While the learner is not apt to confuse the
protocols at either end of the spectrum, problems do arise in choosing
among the intermediate ones. How would a learner know which apology
to select among those offered by Paulston (3)? Not writing a postcard
to a friend could evoke "sorry" or "I'm really sorry" but not, perhaps,
some of the others.

(2) Incorrect Presupposition.

How does one request service at a sales counter? Speakers of
American English often initiate their requests with "I would like...".
In other languages, however, a direct request is the preferred way, such
as "Please give me. . .". Sometimes a question is used as in, "Do you
have. .?". Depending on the language (or the regional variety), expres-
sions of desire or questions about the availability of the object to be
purchased carry with them the speaker's intent to make a purchase. The
learner must be able to relate the proper verbal message to the under-
lying presupposition. Transfers from the native language and its culture
can often mislead the learner. An Iranian student whom I accompanied
on a shopping tour in Washington wanted to buy a dress for his wife.
When he told the saleslady that he didn't know the size, she asked him,
intending to be helpful, "Is she about my size?". The Iranian replied,
"No, she's not quite so fat." When I tried to explain to him later why
the saleslady became offended, he told me that such remarks carried non
of the same insulting overtones in his native language. Also classifiable
under "incorrect presupposition" is Paulston's example of the Thais who
openly ask people about their methods of birth control. (4)

(3) Teleologically Invalid Remarks.

What one says to "pass the time of day" such as when waiting for a
bus, sitting in a doctor's office, or standing in a long line at some govern-
ment office is also culturally conditioned. Will the Mexican student auto-
matically know that English-speaking Americans make remarks about the
weather in such situations? Not only must L_2 learners know when to
speak and to whom to speak, but they must also be given some help as to
how to pick the subject content of socially-constrained conversations.
To take an example contrary to the American English one, Arabic
speakers would never talk about the weather in order to pass the time
of day.

(3) Paulston, p. 9-10
(4) Paulston, p. 6.

The three categories of communication errors given above are intended only as a start toward the formal work that needs to be done if we are to bring our treatment of communicative competence beyond that of the anecdote. There are many other matters which have yet to be analyzed and applied to the language classroom. I am referring specially to those verbal strategies which go beyond the culturally constrained protocols of introduction, leave-taking, apologizing, and such similar acts. All speakers, regardless of the language they are using, have a need to manipulate a conversation so that it comes out to a desired goal. Unfortunately, two or more people do not always enter into a speech act with the same intent. A disgruntled buyer may want a refund on a defective article purchased at a store. The employee in the complaint department who answers the buyer's call may be required to uphold a store policy of not refunding the price of defective articles unless it is absolutely unavoidable. The conversation which ensues between the buyer and the seller is far from a cooperative act. The strategies employed by both parties are not covered by the kind of approach to communicative competence which focuses on social constraints rather than on the speakers' potential for linguistic creativity. Even socially-constrained protocols can be manipulated for strategic purposes. For example, if a person elbows his way into a crowded room, without using the appropriate verbal request (such as "excuse me" or "pardon me"), one of the abused occupiers of the room may say aloud, "Well, excuse ME (loud stress on "me")", as if to remind the rude individual of what should have been said. The mother who becomes upset by her small son's improper behavior may up-braid him by addressing him with a formal title (Mr. Smith, behave yourself!). Spanish-speaking mothers achieve a similar effect by using the Usted form of address with their children.

To encourage ESL students to acquire the strategies suited to their own personalities, my suggestion is to construct for them various situations to which they would have to respond. Such situations should be more evocative than a proposed camping trip or a visit to the bank. They should be as close to real-life situations as possible. Only in this way will students come to realize that they themselves may some day have to solve a problem in communication via English.

The following is an illustration of how to make a facsimile of a real-life event. First of all, the teacher describes the situation:

> During your stay in the U.S., you have been
> invited to the home of a Texan friend. You are
> especially happy about this invitation because it
> is the first time that you have been offered the
> opportunity to get close to the family of your
> friend. You want to make an especially good

impression.　You are asked to join them for
dinner.
The meal is served and you discover that the
main dish is rattlesnake meat.　Just the thought
of eating the meat of this reptile is revolting to
you.　What do you do?　What do you say?

Such a situation is not only provoking but also reflects a likely circum-
stance for the learner.　While it may not be snake meat, dietary customs
of the target culture may differ widely from those of the learner.　How can
the learner be prepared for such an eventuality as described above?　To
start, a number of verbal strategies can be provided by the teacher.
Several options come to mind:

Sorry, I've already eaten.
It's against my religion to eat (rattlesnake) meat.
I'm a vegetarian.
My doctor has advised me to stay away from snake meat.
I'm allergic to reptiles.

Of course, each response leads to a particular set of counter-responses by
the host or hostess.　The first ("Sorry, I've already eaten") might be ruled
out immediately if the invitation specified dinner from the start.　The next
three choices make appeals, respectively, to religious conviction, philos-
ophy of life, and medical authority.　The student-invitee must decide
which counter-response he or she would be most comfortable in handling.
A person who is less than serious about religion in general, might not
want to use such a strategy as No. 2 for fear of not being able to follow
it up.　The vegetarian argument may also rule out an alternative meat
dish (if there is one at this particular dinner).　The doctor's advice
might be countered by some disclaimer that this particular recipe for
snake meat does away with all the potentially harmful effects to one's
health.　The same counter-argument could be raised against the claim of
allergy.

Several students may take part in building the conversation that ulti-
mately takes place in the classroom.　Each should be made aware of the
strategies and counter-strategies at each step.　The conversation itself
could go in several different directions.　The students could later discuss
their satisfaction with the particular decisions made by their classmates
in bringing the speech event to a close.　Was embarassment caused?　Who
was the "victor"?　Did the guest succeed in avoiding the rattlesnake meat
without offending the host/hostess?　Was the host/hostess sufficiently
persuasive to lead the guest to abandoning the attempt to avoid the rat-
tlesnake meat?　Of course there is also the possibility that the guest would
decide at the outset to try the meat without offering any dodges.　In that

case, this event is not stress-provoking but serves as a lesson in self-discovery for the student.

My preferences for this kind of exercise in communicative competence stem from my belief that language learning should be personalized whenever possible. Playing roles in situations which do not involve the student's existential commitments to life will never answer such a need. There is too much of the "game" aspect to playing "Mr. Smythe who is buying a house" or "Miss. X, who is going on a camping trip". My experience has been that ESL students in the United States can manage to get themselves into situations which have a far greater potential for adaptation to the classroom than any imaginary camping trip or shopping excursion. ESL teachers working in other countries can even draw upon their own experiences as the source for real-life situations adaptable to the classroom.

To conclude, I call upon ESL teachers in Mexico and elsewhere to begin compiling situations which commit learners to making personal judgments in order to extricate themselves linguistically in the target culture. A compendium of these situations could form the foundation for a functional approach to developing communicative competence in our students.