

Pragmatic Aspects of Metalinguistic Utterances

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Abstract

Verbal communication is an extremely many-faceted and complex phenomenon, and should be seen as a process which, besides sending and receiving messages about the object world, can also be focused on the use of the code through which the verbal interaction is taking place. Such spheres as teaching, translation, scientific discourse, court procedures, psychological treatment, to say nothing of verbal art, are obviously metalinguistically-oriented. However, in everyday interaction as well the discussion of metalinguistic issues by the interlocutors is almost as common as a talk about extralinguistic reality. The aim of the present study is to examine the interrelation of metalinguistic and pragmatic characteristics of utterances in everyday speech. We will try to show that only if a certain utterance of metalinguistic nature is perceived as such by the speaker and hearer, can communication be pragmatically successful. Conversely, provided that the interlocutors take into account certain pragmatic factors, the utterance can be actualized and realized as a metalinguistic one, the result being the interlocutors' mutual understanding.

Key words: “naive linguist”, object language, reflexive use of language, metalinguistic activity, pragmatic feature.

Introduction

As is well known, the metalinguistic function was first described by Roman Jakobson. He distinguished six functions of language: the referential, the expressive (emotive or affective), conative, poetic, phatic and metalingual (or reflexive). While the referential function relates to the description of a situation, object or mental state in reality, the metalinguistic function is the use of language (what Jakobson calls “code”) to discuss or describe itself.

According to R. Jakobson, a distinction is made between “object language” when we speak of objects in the extralinguistic world and “metalanguage” when

we refer to language itself. He states that the latter plays an important role in everyday communication: “Whenever the addresser and/or the addressee need to check up whether they use the same code, speech is focused on the code: it performs a METALINGUAL (i.e., glossing) function. ‘I don’t follow you — what do you mean?’ asks the addressee, or in Shakespearean diction, ‘What is’t thou say’st?’” (Jakobson 1960:356).

Metalinguistic Activity

Metalinguistic activity, whose basis is what L. Wittgenstein called “tacit knowledge”, permeates all spheres of language use. We talk about language, about its different aspects and specific linguistic entities, and in this way act as a “naive linguist”. It goes without saying that a scholar’s judgments about language are based on goal-directed and systematized manipulations, but the operations of a “naive linguist” with language are almost as diverse as those of a professional linguist. An ordinary speaker metarepresents a linguistic fact by performing so many activities that it would be hardly possible to enumerate all of them. Some of the most common metalinguistic activities are: defining a word, explaining the purpose of the utterance, justifying the choice of verbal means, repeating what has been said, reformulating it, commenting on it, quoting, making generalizations, etymologizing, playing on words. In these, and many other, ways we use language as a tool by which we explore the world and at the same time can explore the tool itself. Obviously, the process of language acquisition, both by a child and an adult learner, includes numerous additional activities.

V. Kashkin gives some interesting data about the frequencies of occurrence of a linguistic topic among Russian students. According to a survey conducted among 100 students (aged from 16 to 26), it appears that 44.0 % of the respondents think about language very often, 21.4 % – sometimes, 21.4 % conative not very often, 7.2% – hardly ever, and 6% – never.

Reflections about one’s mother tongue are usually accompanied by a sense of linguistic superiority, and generalizations about the exceptional merits of this or that mother tongue are widely spread in all languages. Just to quote one such statement: “*Only we, English people, call it properly – “water”*”. *We not only call it “water”, but it is water*” (Yuen 1968: 2, cited from Kashkin 2002).

Metalinguistic activities can be observed in linguistic errors, which are of quite different kinds and origins, one of which is hypercorrection. A language

user can have the idea of the rule in his mind and adapt the use of a linguistic unit to that rule. This is the case with children and learners, who either use an irregular verb as a regular one or vice versa. “Naive” users of a foreign language can make mistakes out of the erroneous concept of the foreign regularity, therefore creating a humorous effect (Kashkin 2002:5).

Just as people refer to an entity in extralinguistic reality, they can also make reference to a linguistic entity, be that a phoneme, a word, a sentence, or any other linguistic unit: “One of the most characteristic features of natural languages (and one which may well distinguish them, not only from the signalling-systems used by other species but also from what is commonly referred to as non-verbal communication in human beings [...]) is their capacity for referring to, or describing themselves. The term we will employ for this feature, or property, of language is reflexivity. Language can be turned back on itself, as it were” (Lyons 1977:5).

The focus on a linguistic entity is described as autonymy – within the linguistic sign we have the following relationship between the signifier and the signified: in an autonomous use of the word, the metalinguistic expression does not refer to the signified, but to the signifier. This happens, for example, when we are defining the meaning of a word: “Imagine such an exasperating dialogue: “The sophomore was plucked.” “But what is *plucked*?” “*Plucked* means the same as *flunked*.” “And *flunked*?” “To be *flunked* is to fail an exam.” “And what is *sophomore*?” persists the interrogator innocent of school vocabulary. “A *sophomore* is (or means) a *second-year student*.” All these equational sentences convey information merely about the lexical code of English; their function is strictly metalingual. Any process of language learning, in particular child acquisition of the mother tongue, makes wide use of such metalingual operations; and aphasia may often be defined as a loss of ability for metalingual operations” (Jakobson 1960:6).

Metalinguistic Utterances in Use

We are going to analyze various types of metalinguistic utterances from the point of view of their pragmatic characteristics and bring out the messages which are not explicitly transmitted by object language. These utterances have to do with certain expressions of speaker meaning, of inferred meaning, of background information known to either or both of the speakers.

A case of reflexive mention of a linguistic entity is the speaker's reference to the form of the word, which can be made in various ways. In one of such reflexive uses the word is mispronounced or misspelt, because the speaker considers the parts of the word to be meaningful and gives his own interpretation to the inner form of the word. For example, the Armenian word «ամսանոթ» is often wrongly spelt «ամսանօթ» because the user connects the word with the concept «օթ», though actually it is connected with «նոթ», “new”. Likewise some people say «սարկղետունմ» instead of «սարկղետում» for “academic leave of absence for the whole term” having in view the word «սարի», “year”.

Thus, in such cases the linguistic item acquires a different meaning, often characterized by a pragmatic feature; the new “etymology” can be directly connected with speaker meaning:

“See more glass,” said Sybil Carpenter, who was staying at the hotel with her mother.

“Did you see more glass?” “Pussycat, stop saying that. It’s driving Mommy absolutely crazy. Hold still, please.”

(J.D. Salinger “A Perfect Day for Bananafish” p. 10)

The little girl is referring to a person whose name is “Seymour (pronounced [ˈsi:mo]) Glass”, which she identifies as “see more glass”. Though the child does not invest the name with meaning deliberately, this is a case of metalinguistic play on words connected with the meaningful perception of the pronunciation of the word. In reality the child would like to see the young man more often as they have become good friends. So unless we take into account this information about the little girl, the transformation of the name “Seymour” will be considered a mere mispronunciation, like any other case of children’s funny (and mostly cute) mistakes. But in the given situation the hidden meaning of the utterance is revealed owing to the “naive linguist’s” etymologizing.

If the girl had performed this action deliberately, it would be a joke, a witticism. Thus, it has been observed that children’s jokes are very creative and “a child’s cognitive development of metalinguistic jokes is as follows: (a) a joke on the phoneme is appropriate for ages 6-8 years, (b) a joke on the word is most appropriate for ages 8-10, and (c) a joke on sentence structure is appropriate for ages 10-14” (Mechanisms of Linguistic Behavior, <<http://www.lacus.org/volumes/36>>).

The girl in the story, however, is only 4 years old, and semanticizing the word is not purposeful on her part. She is not joking, she is just saying the name in the way she perceives it.

The same character makes another mistake, which in that situation is devoid of pragmatic features. This time it is based on a wrong perception of the phrase *article+noun* – “an airplane”, which she cuts into elements in a wrong way, presenting her own phonetic linking of an unknown word with an article:

“My daddy’s coming tomorrow on a nairplane”

(J.D. Salinger “A Perfect Day for Bananafish” p. 11)

The child does not make a distinction between the two variants of the indefinite article (“a” and “an”), and she does not know the word “airplane”. There is no hidden or implied meaning in the deformation of the phrase. The only information the hearer can receive from the child’s mistake is that the word “airplane” is unknown to the speaker.

A metalinguistic use can be essential for the recognition of this or that contextual meaning within a polysemantic word. To illustrate the point let’s consider the following scene from TV series “Monk”.

Detective Monk and his assistant Sharona are in the street, at the scene of the crime. Sharona is standing behind Monk, so that he does not see her. She suddenly notices a stray dog, bends down to it and says in a sweet tone: “*Hey, you lost?*” Sharona, certainly, addresses the dog and means that it cannot find its master. Monk, who is investigating the case and is thinking over it, assumes that Sharona has addressed *him*. He answers: “*No, just thinking*”, implying “not lost” in the meaning of “not perplexed”. Sharona retorts: “*I wasn’t talking to you*”. This is a metalinguistic utterance which aims to correct the interlocutor’s mistake and identify the real addressee of the utterance.

As a matter of fact, Monk is an overhearer, while the real addressee is the dog. The difference between an addressee and an overhearer is easily defined on grounds of mere common sense: the addressee is chosen by the speaker as the target of his utterance, while the overhearer is not, or in other words, “Addressees are participants in the conversation at the moment, and overhearers are not ([...]). Speakers are responsible for making themselves understood to the other participants, but not to overhearers” (Shober, Clark 1989).

The comical effect of this dialogue is the result of several factors. First of all, it is due to the mistaken attribution of the address of the utterance, the mistake being made by the overhearer, who “usurps” the position of the addressee. As we have said, this leads to the wrong interpretation of the word “lost”, and hence – to the wrong interpretation of the speaker meaning. Besides it is important to take into consideration the character’s personality: Monk is extremely self-centered, and it is natural for him to place himself *within* and not *outside* the speech act. Thus, the understanding of the word “lost” depends on who the addressee is, and the discovery of the intended receiver of the message eliminates the ambiguity of the situation. The problem is solved by means of the metalinguistic expression “*I wasn’t talking to you*”.

Now let’s examine utterances whose metalinguistic character gives rise to a complex implied meaning, containing a performative component.

(1) *I speak twelve languages, English is the **bestest**.*

(D. MacHale “Wit. The Draught Bass
Book Humorous Quotations” p. 30)

(2) *There he goes – the man **what learned me** English.*

(D. MacHale “Wit. The Draught Bass
Book Humorous Quotations” p. 34)

Both of these utterances are self-referential. The illustration of how “well” the writer speaks several languages and how “well” he was taught by his teacher is to be found in the way these utterances are constructed. The humorous effect is due to the metalinguistic aspect of the statements, and not to their referential meaning. It goes without saying that the reader understands what is meant: “*I speak twelve languages, English is the best.*” “*There he goes – the man who taught me English.*”, but there is nothing funny in these utterances if we correct the mistakes. As a matter of fact, in the original utterances the referential meaning is absorbed by the metalinguistic function: the utterances focus on the agrammatical forms and uses of the adjective (*“bestest”), the pronoun (“the man – *what”), and the verb (* “learned me”), which are crucial for the comic effect of the statements. These utterances have a complex structure, and include an implied performative component. Actually, if we expand the hidden meanings of these sentences, they will look like this: “*I know several languages, and this*

is the way I speak English”, “There goes my teacher, and if you look at the way I speak English, you’ll see the result of his instruction.”

In both examples we can see the speaker’s linguistic performance because we are focused on the autonomous uses of the highlighted words, and not exclusively on their meanings. The effect is, naturally, connected with pragmatic factors, as we deal with such a situation in which more is communicated than is actually said.

The classical liar paradox “*I lie*” is also an example of a self-referential utterance. It is an assertion of someone who states that he is lying. This means that the pronouncement that he is lying is a lie, hence he is telling the truth. We thus arrive at a contradiction. The reflexive use of language in this case leads to a pragmatically anomalous utterance. Speaking about the famous Moore’s paradox (“*John has two PhDs but I don’t believe he has*”), S. Levinson concludes that this sentence is pragmatically anomalous “because it contradicts the standard Quality implicature that one believes what one asserts” (Levinson 1983:105). The liar paradox is another case of violation of the quality maxim, and both paradoxes are based on the metalinguistic component “*I assert that...*”

Let’s consider another case of violation of Grice’s maxims, this time of the maxim of quantity. Here is a scene from the film “Groundhog Day” (1993). A lady in charge of the hotel service talks to her guest, a famous and arrogant weatherman Phil Connors, who is fed up by all kinds of weather forecast talks. She says, “*There’s talk of a blizzard*”. Phil’s response is unnecessarily detailed and professional: “*We may catch a break and have that blizzard blow by us. All this moisture coming up out of the south will probably push on east of us. At high altitudes it will crystallize and give us what we call snow. Probably will be some accumulation, but here in Punxsutawney our high will be about today, teens tonight. Chance of precipitation about percent and tomorrow. Did you want to talk about the weather or were you just making chitchat?*” “Chitchat” “See you later”.

In actual fact the lady’s intention is to prolong the contact, which is an end in itself. Her aim of striking up a conversation is that of filling the minutes between the greeting and parting with some formal exchanges, the best topic being that about the weather. So the lady’s purpose of communication is doubtlessly phatic, and Phil is supposed to react in an adequate way – just make some small talk in return. However, he pretends not to understand this, and his reaction places the woman in the position of an inquirer, who expects relevant

information from a qualified expert. By deforming the purpose of communication, Phil violates Grice's maxim of quantity burdening the addressee with superfluous information, and actually, making fun of her. He even makes his usual TV forecaster's gestures in the air, pointing to non-existent places on an imaginary map. The implication is: "*You wanted to talk about the weather with a weatherman, you will have the most thorough lecture on the topic. This will teach you not to annoy other people.*"

In the article, which we cited above, we find a useful definition of humour involving metalinguistic discourse: "Metalinguistic jokes are based on the language form and not the meaning. In order to understand metalinguistic jokes, we have to be able to understand about language and its mechanics. The humor comes from the discrepancy between the actual world and the metalinguistic world, between the abnormal spelling and the normal spelling, and so on" (Mechanisms of Linguistic Behavior, 2011, <<http://www.lacus.org/volumes36>>).

The identification of a metalinguistic construction by the addressee is something that a speaker may take for granted, and the interlocutor's disability to do this often causes the speaker's disappointment.

A: Don't you ever get tired of being right? I do feel tired.

B: More fatigued, really. I don't know if it's from being right.

A: It was a rhetorical question, Monk.

(“Monk”, film, USA)

In his second utterance, speaker A specifies the purpose of his first utterance after his interlocutor, speaker B, has misinterpreted it. Speaker A uses the metalinguistic term “rhetorical question” to explain that what he said in his first utterance did not require an answer. Moreover, no one expected a metalinguistic answer on B's part, in which by suggesting a synonym, speaker B tried to give an especially accurate account of his state of mind.

The confusion of referential and metalinguistic functions is sometimes easy and, naturally, it can cause failure in communication. The following joke shows the unhappy effect of substituting the referential function for a metalinguistic one:

“My Mom texted me: What do IDK, LY & TTYL mean?” I answered: “I don’t know, I love you, talk to you later.” Mom: “Ok, I’ll ask your sisters!” xD”.

(<http://jokideo.com/my-mom-texted-me>)

Unless the metalinguistic definitions of these abbreviations are used in quotation marks, italics or bold type (three common conventions employed to draw attention to metalanguage), they will be understood as referring to object language.

Conclusion

Everyday communication deals not only with extralinguistic reality but also with the code used in the verbal interaction. While object language represents the actual world, metalanguage focuses on the verbal means of representing reality. By referring to language in his speech, a “naive linguist” performs various functions manifesting his metalinguistic awareness.

We argue that certain metalinguistic utterances can be understood only if the interlocutors actualize the pragmatic features of the given utterance. Pragmatics explains how the participants of the act of speech manage to engage in successful communication and overcome ambiguity. With a certain type of metalinguistic utterances, we have to take into account such factors as who are the speaker and the hearer, in what circumstances communication is taking place, what are the presuppositions and inferences of the utterance, what cooperative principles are observed or violated, and what are the intentions of the interlocutors in the process of their verbal interaction.

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Մետալեզվական ասույթների գործաբանական հայեցակետերը

Մարդկային հաղորդակցման թեման կարող է լինել ոչ միայն արտալեզվական իրականությունը, այլ նաև բուն կողը, որի շնորհիվ իրականացվում է այդ հաղորդակցումը: Անդրադառնալով լեզվին՝ որպես իր ասույթի թեմային, խոսողը կատարում է բազմազան գործողություններ, կապված լեզվի օգտագործման հետ, դրսևորելով «նախվ լեզվաբանին» բնորոշ մետալեզվական իրազեկություն: Այսպիսի մետալեզվական ասույթներից որոշ կառույցներ ունեն գործաբանական ուղղվածություն՝ խոսողը հրավիրում է լսողի ուշադրությունը իր ասույթում թաքնված իմաստներին: Ասույթի ճիշտ մեկնաբանությունը մեծապես կախված է նրանից, թե ովքեր են խոսընկերները և ինչ հանգամանքներում է ընթանում հաղորդակցումը: