Performative Speech Acts of Non-Verbal Communication in Iraqi Conversations

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Abstract:

The present study deals with the socio-pragmatics of sign language in Iraqi Arabic conversations. It concentrates on nonverbal actions of indirect speech acts including refusal ,threat , greeting , etc. Generally, a speaker may resort to such nonverbal actions when he is entirely out of mood or when he has intimate relationship with others (i.e. he speaks informally). These signs vary from one culture to another, for what is considered to be offensive speech act in one community, might not be so in others. Iraqis , speaking informally, express their feelings through non-verbal actions of refusal , threat , promise , greeting , insult and disrespect. A set of gestures and facial expressions can be more effective than speech because these are psychologically and socially bound which have direct relation to the strategy of power / solidarity norms.

Key Words: Speech Act Theory , Sign Language , Gestures and Proxemics, Performative Speech Acts.

الوظائف اللغويه للتواصل غير اللفظي في أحاديث العراقيين

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المستخلص:

يعالج البحث لغة الإشارات من وجهة نظر اجتماعية تداولية في المحادثات العراقية، ويركز بالتحديد حول الأفعال الغير كلاميه مثل الرفض والتهديد والتحية ، كما يعنى البحث بالإشارات وأهميتها في المحادثة كون هذه الإشارات تختلف من لغة إلى أخرى . قد يلجأ المتحدث إلى مثل هذه الأفعال عندما يكون مزاجه سيئ أو عندما تكون علاقته جيده مع المخاطب، وتتنوع هذه الأفعال حضاريا فما يُعد إساءة في مجتمع ما لا يُعد كذلك في مجتمع آخر . يستخدم العراقيين الإشارات التي تعبر عن أفعال الرفض والتهديد والتحية وعدم الاحترام كثيرا في كلامهم في

مواقف غير رسميه. ويمكن أن تكون هذه الإشارات أكثر تأثيراً اجتماعياً ونفسياً كونها ترتبط بمبدأ القوة والتلاحم بين الأشخاص.

1. Introduction

Sign language refers to gestures, facial expressions and body movements which reveal thoughts, beliefs in one community. They belong to nonverbal action when a speaker replaces linguistic expressions by gestures or body movements of daily interaction. Goss (1983 ; 50) defines nonverbal gestures as " the movements of hands , arms , legs , torso , and other major muscle groups of the body ". These signs are conventionally recognized and their learning goes hand in hand with the whole process of learning. In other words, acquiring gestures and body movements may even precede the acquisition of linguistic competence. In this respect, McNeill (1992 ; 295) states that" As children acquire their language they are also constructing a speech-gesture system. Gesture and speech grow up together. We should speak not of language acquisition, but of language-gesture acquisition."

Kendon distinguishes between two different types of gestures: 'Pragmatic' gestures which refer to the type of speech act or discourse structure and 'substantive' gestures that express the content of utterance (1995; 247). The present study focuses on those gestures which are socially and culturally significant, other unconventional personal movements (like self-touching and grooming movements of hands) will be discharged as they have no interpretation in everyday situation. Scharp et al (2007 ; 5) recommend that self touching and grooming actions are detached from verbal expressions and other communicative functions.

Proximity is another non-verbal communication which refers to the distance between interlocutors during speech. Unlike other cultures, Arabs express admiration and intimate relation through being proximate to other interlocutors. They have a common conception that an individual should be very close to others during speech; otherwise this act may be interpreted as expressing discontent. Hall (1966 ; 131-163) conducts a cross-cultural study about the rules of proximity coming with a conclusion that people differ in terms of the distance of speech. Accordingly , cultures are classified into contact and noncontact. For example, Arab, Latin

American, French, Italian , and Turkish are categorized as contact cultures i.e. their people touch each other more, position themselves closer, and hold mutual gaze longer than noncontact nations. Non-contact cultures involve Germany, England, Norway, Japan, Southeast Asia, and the United States. Hall emphasizes that ;

> They [Arabs] are, however, apt to take offense when Americans use what are to them ambiguous distances, such as the four- to seven-foot social-consultative distance. They frequently complain that Americans are cold or aloof or "don't care."   (ibid ; 161)

Hall (1966 ; 161) elaborated on this culturally bound recognition by saying that an elderly Arab diplomat used to complain of American nurses who used " professional " distance commenting that he was ignored and received no care. Another Arab person say about American behaviors "What's the matter? Do I smell bad? Or are they afraid of me? "

2. Definition of Gestures and Signs

According to the Oxford English Dictionary (1989 ; gesture), gesture refers to " a movement of the body or any part of it that is expressive of thought or feeling". However, sign refers to " a gesture or motion of the head, etc. serving to convey an intimation or to communicate some idea ". A native citizen requires good knowledge about the role of gestures of his/her community. For example, Arabs , in official situations, shake their cups of coffee as indirect speech act to say "enough or thanks". Arabs pay great attention to these nonverbal acts as they have cultural conventions and violation of these conditions may bring shame and insult. Liddell (2003 ; 362) comments on this point saying that language signal "…includes gradient aspects of the signal, and gestures of various types. All of these coordinated and integrated activities constitute the language signal and contribute to expressing the conceptual structure underlying the utterance. "

In the Arab condolence ceremony , the man who serves coffee should give the cup with his left hand and the guest should receive it with his right. Arabs respect these behaviours because they form part of their cultural traditions and their social competence. Blonder et al. (1995 ; 4) state that " Verbal communication and gesture are

produced in parallel, and gesture is a potentially equal participant in the conceptual/planning stages. Communicative expression thus occurs via both verbal and spatial means. "

Sometimes, body movements may reveal the nationality of a person. For example, neat walking in well-organized pace characterize French People. Arabs have some religious conventions to start movement with their right hand or leg. The reason is that the right always indicates goodness and Muslims are ordered to enter good places (home , mosque ,etc.) with the right leg. For other dirty places , such as toilets, Muslims should enter with their left leg. This belief stems from the teachings of the Prophet Mohammad (PBUH):

«كان النبيُّ صلى الله عليه وسلم يُحبُّ التيمُّنَ ما استطاعَ في طهورهِ وتَنَعلهِ وترَجُّلهِ و في شأنِهِ كله».   (صحيح البخاري , الحديث 5253)

"The Prophet (PBUH) likes to start with the right in everything: his washing, wearing shoes, and walking ".

Sign language forms part of the folklore of nations as they are historically inherited from descendant generations. In communication, a certain sign , however, may not be recognized unless it acquires a degree of acceptability among the members of the society. Some native citizens may not perform a certain gesture rightfully because they are not accustomed to their traditions.

3. Speech Acts and Sign Language

Austin (1962; 101) defines speech acts as statements whose vocalization requires the performance of a certain action on the behalf of speaker or hearer. He adds that " saying something will often, or even normally, produce certain consequential effects upon the feelings , thoughts , or actions of the audience, or of the speaker, or of other persons: and it may be done with the design, intention , or purpose of producing them ". Accordingly, he (ibid ; 150) classifies speech acts into five categories ;

1. 'verdictives', (such as giving a verdict by jury)
2. 'exercitives' (such as appointing , voting , ordering , urging , advising , warning) ,
3. 'commissives' (such as making a promise),
4. 'behabitives' (such as apologizing , congratulating , commending , condoling , cursing , and challenging) and ,

5. 'expositives' (such as arguing , conceding , illustrating , assuming , postulating).

Searle (1969 ; 60-68) maintains the same classification with different terminologies 'directives (request)', 'commissives (promise)', 'representatives (assertion)', 'expressives (apology)' and 'declaratives (changing a state)'. On the other hand, he suggests four basic conditions for 'felicity conditions' which are necessary for the successful performance of speech acts :   'propositional content' , 'preparatory' , 'sincerity' and 'essential' conditions.

However, Searle (1969) concentrates on the verbal side of communication, the non-verbal side has not received much attention. The present study focuses on the performative nature of non-verbal communication (body movements) in the successful performance of speech acts. It categorizers non-verbal speech acts into ; refusal , threat , promise , insult , etc.

3.1 The Speech Act of Refusal

Just like ordinary language, there are two ways of non-verbal communication: formal and informal. Arabs may show refusal or disagreement to others through shaking their heads i.e. by moving their heads diagonally. This body movement is well recognized in formal contexts of situation than any other action. Iraqis may use other gestures of refusal through raising of one's head joined with raising eye-bows. This act is used to show refusal to close friends in formal and informal contexts of situation.

In other informal contexts, Arabs may express refusal through raising their shoulders in upright position continuously. However, this non-verbal action is applied among relatives and close friends because strangers do not accept such an action which means violation to the strategies of politeness.

Generally, people may resort to gestures for enhancement of their speech because of the symmetrical relationship between verbal and nonverbal action. Sometimes, body movements may have more than one meaning which can be identified through the appropriateness of situation. For example, rapping of nose or eye-gazing may have different interpretations either admiration or hostility i.e. gazing means hostility when the speaker has bad feelings towards the addressee.

3.2. The Speech Act of Threat

Threats and promises are classified under the general category of commissives, where the speaker commits himself to a future action. Sometimes, body movements of threat can serve better than any linguistic expression. For example, Arabs , in informal context , may express threat to other interlocutors through raising their right hand pointing and moving their forefinger forcefully. This is a performative non-verbal speech act which is used when there is a quarrel between two Arab persons.

Halliday (1973 ; 86-89) recognizes three types of threat (1) physical punishment (2) mental punishment and (3) restraint on behaviour. Sometimes , Arabs express threat through moving their forefinger over their neck (just like slaughter) which is used by elders to threaten young people or children. In other informal contexts, Arabs may bite their forefinger to show passionate warning. This non-verbal speech act expresses intimate warning as used by parents to frighten their children not to do bad actions. In another example, Arabs may show threat through clashing their hands forcefully accompanied with a statement of threat or complain " باطل " (curse) or " الله اكبر " (Allah is the greatest). This action implies the utmost degree of threat used in formal and informal contexts of situation.

3.3 The Speech Act of Promise

Vanderveken (1994 ; 14) lists a number of conditions for successful promise; (1) to commit oneself to performing an action (2) the speaker puts himself under obligation to perform the action (3) the propositional content of the speaker will perform the action (4) the speaker presupposes that he is capable of doing the action. (5) he expresses with ultimate intention to accomplish such an act.

Arabs may express binding promise through twisting their moustache in a formal context of situation. This behaviour is more binding than linguistic expressions because Arabs have a common tradition that the moustache indicates power, manhood and loyalty. Anyone who twists his moustache should have authority enough to fulfill his promise ; otherwise, he will be regarded a coward man. A person should not promise in this way unless he has a real intention to perform his speech. A Less binding promise , which is widely used

among Arabs who have less desire to speak or very tired , is when a speaker moves his head in a downward position.

3.4 The Speech Act of Greeting

Greeting is defined as a social bond to enhance the relation among the members of a particular society. Arabs may express greeting through waving their hands. However, this non verbal action should be accompanied with smiling or other satisfactory looking. Arabs regard greeting incomplete unless accompanied by shaking of hands as mentioned by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH);

عن ابن مَسْعُودٍ ، عن النبيّ قال : " مَنْ تَمَام التَّحِيَّةِ الأَخْذُ بِالْيَد "
(سنن الترمذي ص 505 , رقم الحديث 2802)

Narrated Ibn Masood that the Prophet said, " to have ultimate greeting is to take hands."

If the speaker does not shake hands with other interlocutors, greeting becomes unsuccessful. So, shaking hands forms one of the felicity conditions of perforemative speech act of greeting in Arabic. English people usually learn to shake hands only the first time they meet someone. Arabs usually shake hands every time they meet and every time they leave. This applies when you meet them on the street, in an office, at a restaurant, or at home (globalsecurity, 1997; 58). Sometimes, there is a social necessity to embrace each other as in the case of longing among relatives and close friends. Embracing each other is a common Arab tradition which is originally derived from Islamic teachings. However, a full body embrace, accompanied with hugging, should not be performed unless you are sure that the Arab is a close friend. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) embraces Zaid bin Harith in order to express his admiration and longing;

عن عُرْوَةَ بن الزُّبَيْرعن عائشه(رض) : " قَدِمَ زَيْدُ بنُ حَارثَة المَدِينَة وَرَسُولُ الله في بَيْتِي فَأَتَاهُ فُقرَعَ البَابَ، فقَامَ إلَيْهِ رَسُولُ الله عُرْيَاناً يَجُرُّ ثوْبَهُ وَالله مَا رَأَيْتُهُ عُرْيَاناً قَبْلَهُ وَلاَ بَعْدَهُ فَاعْتَنَقَهُ وَقَبَّلَه ." (سنن الترمذي ص 509 , رقم الحديث 2805)

Narrated Urwah ibn al-Zubayr and Aa'isha (Allah may bless her) said that " When Zaid bin Haritha comes to al-Madeena and the Prophet was in my house, Zaid knocked

the door. The Prophet went to him unclothed pulling his robe (I never saw the Prophet unclothed neither before nor after) and he hugged and kissed him.

Arabs adopt other signs and gestures to show reverence to highly elevated persons as in the case of greeting sheiks and religious preachers. Here, greeting can be expressed through humble kissing of hands. Generally, Arabs appreciate kissing the hands of elder people, parents and religious personalities as it reveals dignity. This act expresses an excessive sense of reverence to the addressee and it is widely noticed in the case of intimate son-parent relationship. Jackubowska (1994 ; 4) states that hand kissing as an act of greeting is mostly observed among conservative families and rural communities. Other non-verbal action of greeting is that of standing-up on the coming of elder and important personalities. Standing may be accompanied by placing the palm of the right hand on the chest immediately after shaking hands with another man in order to show respect and thanks. This act has good implications as it strengthens the social bonds of relation among Arabs.

3.5 The Speech Act of Insult

Every speech community seems to be conservative about a set of social rules and values peculiar to the verbal and nonverbal actions of respect. Cultures differ in their appreciation of what constitutes an offence . For example, Arabs may express scorn and insult to others through leaving their legs facing other interlocutors. This behaviour has bad connotations because it shows humiliation and insult to others. Unlike English people, Arabs regard this act as degrading and disrespectful which may threaten the positive face of other interlocutors. They are aware of putting their legs one over the other in speech because this may terminate the bonds of social relation.

Arabs usually turn their back against other interlocutors either consciously or unconsciously in order to show insult. This is interpreted as impolite behavior which may threaten the negative face of both interlocutors (speaker and hearer). Sometimes, the speaker may use silence to express disrespect to others i.e. one partner may express hostility through silence avoiding any reply to the questioner. This behavior may reveal insult and degradation

towards other participants which are very common in the Arab traditions.

Conclusions

Linguistic meaning can be revealed in terms of three divisions: formal, semantic and situational. The first group consists of formal expressions used in different languages. Semantic differences are found in the use of expressions which may be formally similar, but differ in their meaning. Situational differences show that the same formal or semantic expression has a different signification as a result of situational differences (speaker / hearer relationship, background knowledge, cultural norms etc.). However, it is very difficult to find differences which are purely formal , purely semantic or purely situational. Gestures are attributed to situational differences but not to formal or semantic one. The reason is that gestures are bound to the behaviour and psychological state of the speaker.

We must stress the inseparability of language and culture. We cannot treat language as a phenomenon which can be perceived , taught or learned separable of cultural context. This paper makes the reader aware of the cultural norms and etiquette of our own language. The awareness of our own culture norms and linguistic etiquette may help greatly in understanding and acquiring the norms of another culture .

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