COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES: DEFINITION AND TYPOLOGY.

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1. DEFINING COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

The term 'communication strategy' was coined by Selinker in his account of the processes responsible for 'Interlanguage'. There has been a steady increase of interest in the learner's communication strategies since then. Much of this interest, however, has been taken up with the problems of definition.

Communication strategies were discussed in psycho-linguistic terms. That is, they were treated as the mental phenomena which underlie actual language behaviour. Communication strategies are seen as attempts to bridge the gap between the linguistic knowledge of the L2 learner and the linguistic knowledge of the learner's interlocutor in real communication situations.

The term relates to a mutual attempt of two interlocutors to agree on a meaning in situations where the requisite meaning structures do not seem to be shared (meaning structures here would include both linguistic structures and sociolinguistic rule structures). Approximation, mime and circumlocution may be used to bridge this gap. Message abandonment and avoidance may be used where the gap is perceived as unbridgeable.

There are some difficulties with this interactional definition. First of all, it is difficult to apply to monologue (for example, writing), when the L2 learner's interlocutor is not present, and there is no overt negotiation of meaning. Communicative problems, however, occur in monologue just as much as in dialogue. Second, the application of a communicative strategy can take place without this becoming manifest in interaction. The learner may realise the inoperability of his initial production plan before he begins to execute it. The substitution of an alternative plan, therefore, can take place with no other signal than a pause, perhaps a slightly longer one than those characteristic of normal production. In some interactional definitions, however, only those communicative strategies that are marked in performance by some form of appeal on the part of the learner are considered. The interactional perspective is best tackled by discourse analysis, which considers the joint contribution of learner and interlocutor, rather than singling out the learner's activity for separate analysis.

Two key concepts figure in most discussion of communication strategies. These are that some strategies may be conscious, while others are problem-oriented.

L2 errors may arise either inadvertently or deliberately. In the case of the former, they are the result of production strategies and reflect the transitional state of the learner's L2 knowledge. In the case of the latter, they are the result of communication strategies that are consciously employed by the learner in order to reduce or replace some element of meaning of form in the initial plan. Some linguistic researchers suggest that communication strategies are 'potentially

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conscious', since learners may not always be aware of their use of communicative strategies.

Communication strategies are problem-oriented. That is, they are employed by learners because they lack or cannot gain access to the linguistic resources required to express an intended meaning. Communication strategies are classified as part of a particular kind of plan which is activated when the initial plan cannot be carried out.

However, communication strategies are not alone in being problem-oriented. Learner strategies can also be motivated by the learner's recognition that existing means are insufficient. But communication strategies differ from learning strategies in that the problem arises as a result of attempts to perform in the L2, and the strategies are needed to meet a pressing communicative need. If learning strategies are the long-term solution to a problem, communication strategies provide the short-term answer.

Communication strategies are employed by native speakers as well as by L2 learners. Most of the communicative strategies listed in the following typology are common to both. They are to be seen as one dimension of communicative competence.

Canale and Swain proposed a definition for communicative competence that included grammatical, sociolinguistic, sociocultural, discourse and strategic competence. We have to distinguish between sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence. While both sociolinguistic competence and communication strategies deal with the use of linguistic knowledge, the difference lies here: communication strategies are used to compensate for some lack in the linguistic system, and focus on exploring alternate ways of using what one does know for the transmission of a message, without necessarily considering situational appropriateness. Sociolinguistic competence assumes the existence of a linguistic system which is shared by both interlocutors and focuses on the appropriate usage of stylistic variants of this rule system based on a shared knowledge of social norms.

Some linguists define strategic competence as 'how to cope in an authentic communicative situation and how to keep the communicative channel open', as an integral part of the language user's overall communicative competence.

2.   EXAMPLES OF THE TYPOLOGY OF COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

It is possible to identify several distinct types of communication strategies commonly observable in 'Interlanguage'. The following are examples of those

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patterns as they involve the communication of phonological, morphological, syntactic and lexical elements of language.

a). Transfer from the Native Language:

It is the first communication strategy listed. Here we mean the type of negative transfer from the native language resulting in utterances that are not just inappropriate but actually incorrect by native standards (as distinguished from inappropriate but grammatically acceptable utterances described below as examples of overelaboration). This phenomenon can be observed in phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexicon.

In phonology, the speaker may transfer a sound from his native language to the target. For example, /ʃiːp/ for /ʃɪp/.

In morphology, the speaker may substitute his native language's rule for forming the possessive. For example, _the book of Jack_ for _Jack's book_.

In syntax, the learner transfers his native language system to the target language. For example, _I want that you stay_ for _I want you to stay_.

In lexicon, the learner indulges in loanshift, whereby he uses a native language meaning for an already existing word in the target language. For example, _pretend_ for _try_ (from the Spanish _pretender_).

b). Overgeneralisation:

A second communication strategy is that of overgeneralisation - the application of a rule of the target language to inappropriate target language forms or contexts. This phenomenon may also be observed in phonology, morphology, syntax and lexicon.

In phonology, one may find a newly-learned sound pattern used in inappropriate contexts, such as when /b/ is made silent after /m/ in words in which it should be pronounced. For example: /ˈklæmə/* for /ˈklæmbə/ (_clamber_).

A morphological example of overgeneralisation might be the English-L2 utterance _he goed_, or when the irregular plural of nouns is unknown and the regular rule is applied. Examples could be _womans_ or _childs_. It is not always easy to differentiate between L2 learner overgeneralisation and an L1 dialect speaker's overgeneralisation. A look at the input language might help error analysis in such cases.

A syntactic overgeneralisation in English-L2 might be _I don't know what is it_, where the question word order with subject-verb inversion is generalised for statements.

Finally, we may find a type of overgeneralisation in the use of lexical items, where an item may be used in inappropriate contexts because the learner is unaware of the semantic limitations contingent on its use. For example, _He is pretty_.

At theoretical level, overgeneralisation is differentiated from transfer from the native language in that in overgeneralisation it is always a rule of the target language which is used in place of the correct target language rule. In transfer, the learner is using a native language form (perhaps motivated by a native language rule) in place of the correct target language rule.

At the empirical level, it is a matter of controversy as to whether certain interlanguage forms should be considered a result of transfer from the native language or rather overgeneralisation of the target language. One way to attempt to resolve the controversy is by using learners as informants in explaining the errors, assuming that they can provide reliable explanations. In reality, it may not be possible to firmly establish whether a learner is utilising the communication strategy of transfer or of overgeneralisation in producing an interlanguage form. He may, in fact be utilising some combination of both.

c). Prefabricated Pattern:

This is the third communication strategy we observe. It was defined by Hakuta (1976) as a _"regular patterned segment of speech"_ employed _"without knowledge of its underlying structure, but with the knowledge as to which particular situations call for what patterns"_. Prefabricated patterns could in a way be considered as a sub-category of overgeneralisation; to our knowledge, they have been shown to occur only in the syntactic domain. The 'do-you' pattern described by Hakuta is a typical example, producing: _What do you doing?_ for _What are you doing?_

d). Overelaboration:

This is the fourth communicative strategy, in which the learner, in an attempt to produce careful target language utterances, produces utterances which seem stilted or inordinately formal. While these utterances are not native-like, they might well be correct in purely grammatical terms. It is reasonable to suppose that this strategy may be closely related to the character of the learning situation. Thus, an emphasis on the written language in the learning situation would likely lead to the production in speech of forms usually restricted to writing. The identification of overelaboration calls for an awareness of context, an overelaboration being a form judged anomalous in a given context. An example of

phonological overelaboration would be the production in casual speech of the utterance /ˈwɒt ˈɑːr ˈjʊː ˈduːiːŋ/, rather than the more typical /ˈwɒtʃəˈdʊɪŋ/.

In morphology, a consistent use of full forms rather than contracted forms might be considered a type of overelaboration. An example would be _I would not have gone_ for _I wouldn't've gone_.

In syntax, similarly, one might find forms specified which are ordinarily deleted, especially in casual styles. For example, _That's my pen which you're using_ for _That's my pen you're using_. Such overelaboration may be the result of transfer from the native language. English speakers learning Spanish or languages which have optional or preferred deletion of the subject pronoun in all or in certain tenses, will overuse the subject pronoun and come out with, for example, _Yo quiero ir_, where _Quiero ir_ is sufficient. An overelaboration might occur also in the use of overly-formal or esoteric lexical items in place of more frequently used target language words; for example, _the people next door are rather indigent_, where _lazy_ would be more appropriate.

e).   Epenthesis or Vowel Insertion:

This fifth communication strategy occurs only in the phonological domain and is quite typical in Spanish speakers. Here the learner is unable to produce unfamiliar consonant clusters in the target language, and in an attempt to produce them, he uses vowels between consonants, as /eˈstreɪ/ for /ˈstreɪ/ (_stray_) or /eˈsteɪʃən/ for /ˈsteɪʃən/ (_station_).

f).   Types of Avoidance:

The last six communication strategies are all classed as different types of avoidance, that is these strategies are all different means of getting around target language rules or forms which are not yet an established part of the learner's competence. Upon questioning, the learner may indicate an awareness of the target language form or rule, but prefers not to attempt to use it.

I).   Topic Avoidance:

This is the attempt to totally evade communication about topics which require the use of target language rules or forms which the learner does not yet know very well. Topic avoidance may take the form of either a change of topic or no verbal response at all. For example, a learner may move from a discussion about cars because he cannot pronounce /dʒ/ in _garage_ properly, or avoid a discussion of what happened the previous day because it calls for the past tense inflection. Likewise, the learner may avoid discussions of an abstract or theoretical nature due to an uncertainty as to the appropriate syntactic constructions or the appropriate technical vocabulary.

II).   Semantic Avoidance:

Here the learner evades the communication of content for which the appropriate target language rules and norms are not available, by talking about related concepts which may presuppose the desired content. For example, where the learner wants to avoid the use of frequency adverbs and is asked "*How often do you practise sports?*" he responds: "*I don't like football*".

III).   Appeal to Authority:

This occurs when the learner asks someone else to supply a form or lexical item, asks if a form or item is correct, or else looks it up in a dictionary, other reference book or on the Internet. This pattern may be used to deal with problems in all four domains (phonological, morphological, syntactic or lexical).

IV).   Paraphrase:

This refers to the rewording of the message in an alternate, acceptable, target language construction, in order to avoid a more difficult form of construction. Thus, we may find an example where a learner would say "*I went to the hairdresser's*" to avoid the seemingly more complicated "*I had my hair cut*".

In the area of lexical paraphrase, we may find different types:

- A high coverage word is a superordinate term used in place of a subordinate which carries more information in a particular context; for example, *tool* for *spanner*. The learner may find it economical to learn abstract, superordinate words which can be used more frequently. A low frequency word is a relatively obscure, uncommon word used in place of the more appropriate general term. For example, *to labour* for *to work*.

- Word coinage is the creation of a non-existent lexical item in the target language, in situations where the desired lexical item is not known. For example, *airball* for *balloon*.

- Circumlocution is a description of the desired lexical item or a definition of it in other words, as in *a thing you use to make a hole in the wall* for *drill*.

V).   Message Abandonment:

This is another type of avoidance strategy, whereby communication on a topic is initiated but then cut short because the learner runs into difficulty with some aspect of the target language. The learner stops in mid-sentence, with no appeal to authority to help finish the utterance; for example, "*If I . . .*"

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VI).   Language Switch:

The final type of avoidance strategy that we have been able to catalogue is that of linguistically motivated language switch. Here, the learner transports a native word or expression, not translated, into the interlanguage utterance. Actually, the motivation for the language switch may be either linguistic (an attempt to avoid a difficult target language form or one that has not been yet been learned) or social (such as a desire to fit in with one's peers).

3.   DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Here we have redefined and operationalised in a detailed manner the notion of communication strategy, a central component of inter-language. We can see more fully what 'non-native-like' may actually mean beyond the realm of grammatical correctness and into the unclear area of 'inappropriateness'. As we have seen, there are really at least two such sets of strategies, over-elaboration and avoidance. In some ways, as we have used it, 'overelaboration' is dependent upon negative transfer from native language. Levenston (1971) actually attributed to both what he called 'over-indulgence' and 'under-representation' to transfer from the native language. And although we have suggested that the end product of overelaboration are forms which are too formal or elegant, Levenston points out that the end result may also be excessive verbosity or informality. All of this should be explored in greater detail.

The avoidance strategies enumerated here are considered to be by and large distinct from transfer and overgeneralisation - perhaps the principal reason why their mention has generally been left out of much of the second-language acquisition literature. They may have been considered as behaviour at the margin. The reality is that such behaviour is in some ways central to interlanguage in that it helps reveal how the learner's interlanguage develops. However, there is clearly a lot of work to be done in this area.

4.   IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

Students of English as a second or foreign language rely more on avoidance, while native-speaking English children tend to paraphrase more. Advanced learners use significantly more L2-based strategies and significantly fewer L1-based strategies than less advanced learners.

The proficiency level of the learner influences his choice of strategy. In general, L2 learners of limited proficiency prefer either reduction-type strategies or L1-based achievement strategies while the more advanced learners prefer L2-based achievement-type strategies such as paraphrase.

The specific nature of the problem may influence the strategy chosen. Code-switching is more likely when the first and second languages have close cognates, and that the extent to which L2 child learners display avoidance depends on the grammatical structures involved.

It has been suggested that personality factors may correlate highly with strategy preference. The age also influences: adults tend not to speak until they are sure; they don't like to make mistakes and don't take risks as much as teenagers do.

The situation may also influence the type of strategy used. For instance, learners may use fewer strategies in a classroom environment than in a natural environment, particularly if the pedagogic focus is on correct L2 use, rather than on fluent communication.

Of central importance in the study of communication strategies, however, is their effectiveness in promoting L2 communication. L1-based strategies are the least effective and L2-based strategies the most. However, it may not be appropriate to argue about the relative merits of alternative strategies, as learners often use several communication strategies together, first trying one and then turning to another to supplement the first choice or to try again if it fails.

Communication strategies have been allocated a constitutive role in Second Language Acquisition. Some have characterised reduction strategies as 'risk-avoiding' and achievement strategies as 'risk-taking'. This view is based on the grounds that only achievement behaviour encourages hypothesis formation, and that risk is essential for automatisation. Others think that all strategies can help to expand resources. Another argument to reinforce this point of view is that the main contribution of communication strategies is to keep the channel open. Thus, even if the learner is not provided with the particular structure he needs, he will be exposed to a number of other structures, some of which may constitute a suitable intake for his learning strategies to operate on.

It has been observed that the strategies are common to both learner and native speaker performance. In the case of native speakers, it is the lexical knowledge which is mainly expanded. In the case of foreign students, communication strategies help to expand both lexis and grammar.

	PHONOLOGICAL	MORPHOLOGICAL	SYNTACTIC	LEXICAL
Transfer from Native Language	/ʃiːp/ for /ʃɪp/	The book of Jack for Jack's book	I want that you stay for I want you to stay	pretend for try (pretender in Spanish)
Overgeneralisation	/ˈklæmə/* for /ˈklæmbə/ (clamber)	He goed for He went	I don't know what is it for I don't know what it is	He is pretty for He is handsome
Prefabricated Pattern			What do you doing? for What are you doing?	
Overelaboration	/ˈwɒt ˈɑːr ˈjuː ˈduːɪːŋ/ for /ˈwɒtʃəˈdʊɪŋ/	I would not have gone for I wouldn't've gone	That's my pen which you're using for That's my pen you're using	The people there are indigent for The people there are lazy
Epenthesis or Vowel Insertion	/eˈsteɪʃən/ for /ˈsteɪʃən/			
Topic Avoidance	avoid using certain sounds, like /dʒ/	avoid talking about the past, if unsure of past forms	avoid the use of conditional tenses	avoid talking about a specific subject, due to lack of vocabulary
Semantic Avoidance	/bæd/ for /ɪnˈkɒmpɪtənt/	I like to swim in response to What happened yesterday?	I don't like football in response to How often do you play . . . ?	He was doing many things for He was busy

	PHONOLOGICAL	MORPHOLOGICAL	SYNTACTIC	LEXICAL
Appeal to Authority	/ɾek . . . / for /ˌɾekəɡˈnaɪzəbl/	Q. *I haven't . . .* A. *begun*	Q. *He asked . . .* A. *me to go to the cinema*	*How you do say 'repisa' in English?*
Paraphrase	/ðə ˈpet/ for /ðɪ ˈænɪməl/	*Thank you* for *I am very obliged*	*I went to the hairdresser's* for *I had my hair cut*	*airball* for *balloon*
Message Abandonment	*I read it in an adver . . . .* for *I read it in an advertisement*	*If I . . . ?*	*What you . . . ?*	*If only I had a . . .*
Language Switch	*I want a cuchillo* for *I want a knife*		*I don't want prestar atención*	*The leche comes from the vaca*