

### COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES AT THE SYNTACTIC LEVEL

The concept of “communicative competence” introduced by Dell Hymes in the 60s has sparked off a lot of research in linguistics and applied linguistics (4). In the process of research several interesting models of communicative competence have been developed emphasizing some of the aspects neglected in Hymes’ interpretation. Strategic competence is clearly one of these. According to the initial model suggested by Canale and Swain, it is “made up of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or to insufficient competence” (1, p.30). This interpretation has proved controversial. Majority of linguists views this concept in much broader light than implied here. The criterion of problematicity, the basis of this definition is in itself questionable. First of all, we need to define what is meant by a ‘problem’ in the process of communication. Widdowson makes a point that seems relevant to the issue in point. He defines language use as “a series of problems that have to be solved on the spot by reference to a knowledge of linguistic systems and communicative schemata.” (7, p.239). This definition would lead us to a much broader interpretation of the notion of ‘problem’ and consequently, communication strategies would need to be viewed in a different light. If we accept the view that generally the process of language use can be perceived as an attempt to overcome a communication problem, it becomes impossible draw a clear dividing line between strategic and non-strategic language use. Thus, we encounter use of communication strategies whether ‘problems’, in their narrow sense, exist or not.

Consequently, we can claim that *communication strategies are tools that allow speakers to organize utterances so that the message is conveyed to specific listeners with maximum effectiveness*. This viewpoint suggests a completely new direction for research. Communication strategies have generally been studied as part of interlanguage, a language of second or foreign language learners. It is obvious that language learners experience more difficulties in communicating meaning than native speakers due to limited mastery of the target language. Consequently, there are more overt cases of using communication strategies (defined in terms of problem-orientedness) that can be studied and classified. The broader definition presented above shifts the focus away from language learners so that the theories suggested encompass native speakers and first language communication as well. A speaker’s ability to select a communication strategy that would enable them to carry out their communicative intent and ensure the success of communication is what we call strategic competence.

In the process of research into strategic competence several interesting taxonomies of communication strategies have been developed. However, researchers mainly focused on so called lexical strategies, i.e. strategies that are associated with difficulties with vocabulary. Such concentration on lexis is a direct consequence of the criteria used to identify communication strategies, specifically criteria of problematicity (discussed above) and

consciousness. It was believed that communication strategies are always used consciously. Empirical research has shown that lexis is the area where speakers are most aware of their lack of knowledge and the tools they use to overcome the difficulty (2). Therefore, lexical strategies are more readily identifiable than any of the others. This concentration on lexical strategies has had its positive outcomes as narrow focus has resulted in in-depth analysis of the phenomenon – several sets of communication strategies have been identified and classified; besides, theoretical models have been developed explaining their use.

At a later stage attention shifted from lexical strategies to referential strategies; and this is not merely a terminological difference. As Kasper and Kellerman (5) explain, the term 'lexical' implies a semantic view of the phenomenon whereas 'referential' is expressive of a pragmatic approach. The former is the result of research in language acquisition theory and, logically, the interest mainly lies in the linguistic resources available for dealing with linguistic (namely lexical) problems. The latter is the product of cognitive linguistics and refers to strategies used by native speakers of a given language. Instead of the linguistic resources used for implementing a communication strategy, researchers' interest is centred on cognitive strategies underlying specific utterances, changes in speakers' evaluation of the situation and the resulting alterations in their strategic behaviour.

It is evident that at the present stage of research into strategic competence there is a need for broadening the scope of research. It is logical to assume that vocabulary is not the only area where speakers make choices of the most effective means for implementing their communicative intentions. They have to plan whole phrases and sentences in order to make them optimal for their purpose, 'tailor-made' for their listeners and communicative situation. Thus, choices need to be made between various phrases and sentences i.e. syntactic constructions. From this point of view, I believe, study of syntactic synonymy is of particular interest as syntactic synonyms are alternative structures conveying varying shades of a similar meaning that make this or that construction best suited for the given situation.

Elsewhere I have suggested a definition of syntactic synonymy according to which *syntactic synonyms are the units of a syntactic level that share predicate-argument propositional structure and function, but differ in subjective modality and grammatical structure and consequently, can be viewed as variants of the same semantic invariant* (6). Building on this definition we have identified the following syntactic synonyms:

1. active and passive constructions, if the same arguments are present. e.g.:  
"Who was it that invented religion, and sin and all that? And why?"  
John laughed. "It was invented by Adam" he said...  
*Adam invented it...*

Also an active construction with the subject expressed by an indefinite pronoun (they, you, one) and the corresponding passive construction without a prepositional object:

1. "They tell me there's a man called Freud, an Austrian I believe-"  
*I'm told there's a man....*

2. sentences with and without introducers *it* and *there*, for example:

There is a good film on tonight.

*A good film is on tonight.*

It's her damned virtue that caused the whole trouble.

*Her damned virtue caused the whole trouble.*

3. complex or compound sentences and corresponding simple sentences containing

nominalized propositional constructions i.e. secondary predication, e.g.:

I felt somebody touch my shoulder.

*I felt that somebody had touched/was touching my shoulder.*

4. simple sentences with direct and inverted word order, e.g.:

Along this cool avenue my girlfriend led me.

*My girlfriend led me along this cool avenue.*

These examples clearly do not exhaust the whole wealth of syntactic means available in the English language for expressing synonymous meanings. Some of these examples may be arguable and they certainly require further empirical examination (For further discussion see 6). What is evident though, even at this stage, is that there are interesting differences in the communicative value of syntactic synonyms. The differences in the meanings of syntactic synonyms may be functional as well as purely linguistic.

From purely grammatical point of view a choice of a syntactic structure may be determined by the manner of expressing the subject. The sentences under analysis mainly have either a single-subject structure or multi-subject structure. A decision is made in favour of a complex (or compound) sentence mostly in the case of multi-subject structure. An important difference between complex sentences and simple sentences with non-finite verb forms lies in the way of expressing modality. Dependent clauses express objective modality independently whereas modality expressed by constructions with non-finite verb forms fully depends on the modality of the main clause of the sentence. Another factor the choice of a complex sentence may be based on is the content features of the main clause. If its content is expressed explicitly, either of the syntactic synonyms may be used. However, if the content of the main clause is implicit, the use of non-finite clauses is rare. As for the stylistic motivation of the choice of a syntactic synonym, the research shows that none of the synonymous syntactic structures is exclusive to any particular style and each of them can be found in all functional styles. The difference mainly lies in the frequency of their occurrence.

Functional motivation of the choice between the synonymous syntactic structures is mainly determined by the actual division of a sentence i.e. its theme-rheme structure where theme denotes the point of departure, what the sentence is about, while rheme refers to what is said about the theme. At a later stage Halliday drew a dividing line between given (information) and theme on the one hand and new (information) and rheme on the other (3). He believes that theme/rheme are speaker-oriented concepts whereas new/given are generally listener-oriented.

Analysis of synonymous syntactic structures from the point of view of their information structure shows that the choice between active and passive constructions is often determined by the speaker's decision whether agent or patient (or goal) should be given the role of a theme, or given, familiar information and which to present as new information to the listener. The information structure of a sentence may serve as the main motivation for the speaker's choice in the case of the constructions with introducers. It would be justified to claim that the main function of expletive pronouns is to give the status of new rather than given information to an argument in accordance with the speaker's communicative intention and subjective modality. In some cases the choice of a syntactic synonym may be conditioned by the speaker's desire to maintain the topic of the conversation. Furthermore, information structure is what differentiates simple sentences with inverted subjects (expressed by infinitive or gerund) from their synonyms. The same claim can be made about

the difference between a complex sentence with a subjective clause and a simple sentence with a subject expressed by gerundial phrase, complex infinitive or participle constructions. Considering the importance of word order in revealing the information structure of the English sentence, inverted order of words can be used by speakers as a major tool for structuring the information in the desired way in order to convey it to the listener. Inversion leads to thematisation of various parts of the sentence i.e. their removal from their unmarked position to a marked sentence-initial position.

In spite of similarity in meaning syntactic synonyms have some differentiating features. Their differing grammatical, stylistic and functional characteristics motivate the choice of one of the synonyms from a pair. The choice is made in favour of the synonym that fulfills the speaker's communicative intention better in the given communicative situation. Thus, making a choice of a syntactic synonym is an intentional strategic action and this allows us to view syntactic synonymy as an example of a communication strategy.

Consequently, whenever there is a communicative intention and a transition from paradigmatics of language to syntagmatics of speech, speakers face a difficult choice. From the syntactic structures available they select the ones that are best suited for the context. This decision is wholly determined by the additional information, those shades of meaning that differentiate these structures from one another. Therefore, research into syntactic synonymy needs to be closely linked with the analysis of the linguistic and psycholinguistic motivation of speakers' choice. This would shed further light on strategic competence as a speaker's creative ability, as any choice undoubtedly represents a creative act, however small.

### REFERENCES

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