



Research Article

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Lingua-Ethological Causes of Communicative Failures: Pragmatic Aspect

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Abstract

The paper reveals and describes communicative failures caused by differences in structures of communicants' lingua-ethological encyclopedic knowledge based on the cognitive theory of dynamic construal of meaning. A communicative failure is viewed as a speech-behavioural act, where there is no semiosis (the addresser's verbal and/or non-verbal utterance does not evoke any conventional conceptual content in the addressee's mind) or there is ambivalent semiosis (the addresser and addressee privilege different aspects of the conceptual content structured by different frames (scripts)/domains, which results in the divergence between the addressee's inferences and addresser's presuppositions). It is alleged that communicative failures can be caused by differences in structures of communicants' lingua-ethological knowledge of general principles regulating communicative behaviour. The addresser's verbal and/or non-verbal utterance triggers different aspects of the conventional conceptual content in the minds of the communicants structured by different frames (scripts)/domains, which leads to the divergence between the addressee's inferences and addresser's presuppositions. Differences in structures of communicants' lingua-ethological encyclopedic knowledge result from the addressee's failure to select the most relevant way of interpreting the addresser's utterance due to the violation of interpersonal rhetoric principles, in particular, Relevance Theory principles caused by a disregard of lingual and extra-lingual context of a communicative act. This results in a false interpretation of homonymous verbal utterances, utterance implicatures enabling both literal and metaphorical interpretation or implicatures connected with recognizing irony/sarcasm as well as the addresser's communicative intentions and utterance addressing.

Keywords: communicative failure, communication model, implicature, inference, lingua-ethological knowledge, presupposition

1. Introduction

The anthropocentric paradigm of modern linguistics provides for the analysis of cognitive structures enabling human communication. The key problem connected with ensuring effective communication is the phenomenon of a communicative failure, which is mainly studied on the basis of *the transmission model of communication* (Shannon & Weaver, 1949): as a deviation from language norms (Kukushkina, 1998); in terms of pragmatics – as an unsuccessful speech act (Austin, 1986; Tepyakova, 1998) including an unplanned negative emotional effect (Loseva, 2007); considering both pragmatic and socio-cultural factors – as a failure to infer an implicit meaning of the utterance due to different lingual and/or cultural experience (Thomas, 1983); considering a psychological attitude towards reality and emotional traits of a person – as the divergence between a predicted and an actual effect of the utterance (Polyakova, 2009); on the cognitive basis – as the speaker's inability to generate the desired mental state in the mind of his/her communication partner (Bara, 2010), the addressee's inability to correlate the utterance with his/her own idea model in the way expected by the addresser (Ringle & Bruce, 1982); emphasizing the role of a non-verbal aspect of communication – as the communicant's misunderstanding or inadequate understanding of a speech-behavioural act of his/her communication partner (Gudkov, 2003; Loseva, 2007).

New possibilities for the study of communicative failures are provided by *the interactive model of communication*, which serves as a basis for the cognitive theory of dynamic meaning construal (see, for example, Fauconnier, 1985/1994, 1997; Langacker, 1987; Lakoff, 1994; Turner, 1991), within which it is regarded as a product of conceptualization, that is an inferential cognitive process of inferring the meaning of an utterance directly in the act of communicative interaction based on broad encyclopedic knowledge.

The goal of the present study is to discover and describe communicative failures caused by differences in structures of communicants' lingua-ethological encyclopedic knowledge.

This goal is achieved through the following objectives:

- to substantiate theoretical and methodological procedure and basic concepts of the research;
- to identify types of communicative failures;
- to discover causes of lingua-cognitive communicative failures caused by differences in structures of communicants' lingua-ethological encyclopedic knowledge;
- to develop a classification of lingua-ethological communicative failures.

2. Research Methods

The study has been carried out on the basis of cognitive theory of dynamic construal of meaning, within which a body of conceptual content associated with a lingual unit used by the speaker in the act of communication is regarded as raw material for contextualized interpretation and communication is viewed as an interactive interpersonal activity (both verbal and non-verbal) of working out common guidelines in life creating common meanings (see, for example, Croft & Cruse, 2004; Love, 2004; Turner, 1991; Tomasello, 2003; Fauconnier, 1997).

Interactive methodological framework of the research stipulates *interactive understanding of semiosis* as a process in which a lingual unit functions as a sign (Morris, 1983), that is becomes semiotic only in the act of communication bearing in mind a conventional conceptual content evoked by the utterance, encyclopedic knowledge, which includes this conceptual content (a concept) as well as other contextual parameters of lingual and extra-lingual context of a communicative act affecting interpretation (see, for example, Johnson, 1987; Croft & Cruse, 2004; Lakoff, 1994; Langacker, 1987; Talmy, 2000; Turner, 1991; Fillmore, 1985; Fauconnier, 1997).

Thus, *a communicative failure* is viewed as a speech-behavioural act, where there is no semiosis (the addresser's verbal and/or non-verbal utterance does not evoke any conventional conceptual content in the addressee's mind) or there is ambivalent semiosis (the addresser and addressee

privilege different aspects of the conceptual content structured by different frames (scripts)/domains, which results in the divergence between the addressee's inferences and addresser's presuppositions).

Based on the subject area of encyclopedic knowledge contributing to the interpretation, we distinguish communicative failures caused by the differences in structures of communicants': a) ontological knowledge (entities and cause and effect relations between entities and social relationships between people), b) ethological knowledge (ethic norms and values) and c) lingua-ethological knowledge (rules of communicative behaviour). Communicative failures of this type are referred to as lingua-cognitive.

The analysis of communicative failures has been carried out on the material of American cinema discourse represented by a genre of situation comedy and includes two stages:

- 1) applying the methodological procedure of choosing discourse local topics (van Dijk, 1981), the studied dialogical/polylogical communicative interaction has been divided into separate communicative exchanges to be analyzed: each communicative exchange correlates with a certain local topic, within which a communicative failure occurs;
- 2) the causes of communicative failures have been identified applying methods of cognitive-discourse interpretation (Martynyuk, 2006) having the notion of conceptualization in its foreground: a researcher assumes the role of an interpreter of a verbal utterance within the context of a corresponding communicative act and identifies the causes of communicative failures. The task of the researcher-interpreter is to make inferences corresponding to the addresser's presuppositions and identify causes of interpretation divergence considering both a conventional meaning triggered by a verbal utterance as well as cognitive, social and situational factors characterizing participants of a communicative act. The description of a structural organization of encyclopedic knowledge presupposing conceptual ontology and hierarchy of conceptual structures is provided by R. Langacker's *domain theory* (Langacker, 1987), whereas structuring relations between encyclopedic knowledge of the same hierarchy level is provided by Ch. Fillmore's *frame semantics* (Fillmore, 1985). Schematic arrangement of encyclopedic knowledge about different types of communicative situations presupposing succession of actions is described in terms of *a script* (Schank & Abelson, 1977).

3. Results and Discussion

The present research concentrates on pragmatic aspects of communication, that is the communicative manifestation of communicants' relationships and their attitude to the situation of communication, which is reflected in the addressee's interpretation of the addresser's utterance and the addresser's premises to create his/her utterance.

Therefore, within this study, we focus on lingua-cognitive communicative failures caused by differences in structures of communicants' lingua-ethological encyclopedic knowledge.

Lingua-ethological encyclopedic knowledge provides for observing principles of interpersonal rhetoric encompassing H. P. Grice's Cooperative Principle (Grice, 1975) and G. Leech's Politeness Principle (Leech, 1983) as well as D. Sperber and D. Wilson's Relevance Theory principles (Sperber & Wilson, 1986/1995).

As the analysis of the empirical material suggests, lingua-ethological communicative failures can result from the addressee's inability to make a presupposed inference as a result of violating Relevance Theory principles due to a disregard of lingual and situational (place, communicants' social and communicative roles) context of a communicative act. D. Sperber and D. Wilson's Relevance Theory assumes that while processing verbal and/or non-verbal utterances a person is trying to select the most probable way for their interpretation hoping that the assumption being processed is relevant and is trying to select a context to maximize its relevance (Sperber & Wilson, 1986/1995: 142). «Achieving maximal relevance involves selecting the best possible context in which to process an assumption» (ibid.: 144).

Regarding a number of pragmatic factors, we distinguish several types of such communicative

failures. One of the most obvious reasons for communicative failures of this type is **the addressee's false interpretation of homonymous verbal utterances:**

TIM: *Yeah, that's exactly what it feels like, it's that visceral gut-thing. I like to create Wilson, everything I do, I wanna make bigger and better.*

WILSON: *Well, Tim. This obsessive desire to create partly happens because men feel inferior to women.*

TIM: [grunts] *Uh?*

WILSON: *It's because we can't bear children.*

TIM: *Ahh... I don't mind the boys that much.*

WILSON: *No, no, no, Tim. What I mean is, Tim, women can give birth and we can't.* (Home Improvement: season 1, episode 9)

Wilson is trying to explain to Tim that men's desire to constantly create something new is due to their wish to overcome an inferiority complex resulting from women's ability to give birth. Within this lingual context, the only relevant interpretation of the utterance *to bear children* is *to give birth*. However, Tim chooses another way of interpretation – *to hate*.

A rather common cause for lingua-ethological communicative failures is **the addressee's false interpretation of the addresser's utterance implicatures.** In the present study, implicatures are understood as meanings inferred by an interpreter from figurative meanings of verbal utterances used by a speaker based on lingual and situational context through perceptual, cognitive and emotional appraisal experience (Martynyuk, 2012: 25).

The notion of implicatures is valuable for the analysis of communicative failures as an interpreter mainly deals with implicit information, that is the one which is beyond the language code and is inferred taking into account both lingual and extra-lingual discourse context, which together with other factors (all possible types of knowledge about the world as well as about language and discourse, experience of interaction in similar communicative situations, a system of norms and appraisals of a certain linguaculture affecting this knowledge and also emotions and impressions connected with it) provides for the knowledge of communication principles (Martynyuk, 2012: 27).

The analysis of the empirical material suggests that the addressee's false interpretation of the addresser's utterance implicatures takes place in two instances: 1) the speaker intends no implicature though the addressee infers one; 2) the addressee infers an implicature different from the one intended by the speaker.

First, we consider the cases when **the speaker intends no implicature though the addressee infers one:**

Monica invited her neighbour Joey for some lemonade.

MONICA: *Oh my God!!! What are you doing?!!*

JOEY: *You said, you wanna come in for some lemonade?*

MONICA: *So?!*

JOEY: *Whoa, ah!! Were you just gonna give me some lemonade?*

MONICA: *Yeah huh!! Cover yourself up!*

JOEY: *Oh right, right.*

MONICA: *I don't believe this! When someone asks you in for lemonade, and to you that means they wanna have sex?*

JOEY: *Well usually...yeah! Well, not just lemonade, iced tea, sometimes juice. Well, sorry, I just, I thought you liked me. I'm such a jerk.*

MONICA: *It's okay. I suppose it could happen to anyone, not anyone I know, but...* (Friends: season 3, episode 6)

In this situation, a communicative failure results from the addressee's false implicature. Joey interpreted AN INVITATION TO HAVE LEMONADE as AN INVITATION TO HAVE INTIMACY relying on the knowledge of youth culture stereotypes. This mistake may result from the addressee's lack of information about such parameter of the communicative act as the addresser's personality, namely Monica, who is reluctant to have intimacy with somebody she barely knows.

In the following communicative exchange **the addressee infers an implicature different from the one intended by the speaker**:

When Frasier's friend, Sam, introduced his fiancée to him, it turned out that Frasier had slept with her before.

SHEILA: *I want you to know that I love Sam and I'm going to do everything I can to make this marriage work.*

FRASIER: *Well, you certainly do seem sincere about this. I think, in all good conscience I can support this marriage, but I want you to know if you start to feel yourself slipping, here's my number [he hands her his card, which stuns her]. No, no, no... so I can help you as a psychiatrist!*

SHEILA: *Oh! Thank you.* (Frasier: season 2, episode 16)

Sheila is in love with Sam and is going to marry him, so she agreed with Frasier to forget about their intimacy. Finishing the conversation, Frasier expressed his readiness to help and handed over his phone number. As Sheila's non-verbal behaviour suggests, this shocked her: *he hands her his card, which stuns her*. This communicative failure was the result of a misinterpretation of the implicit meaning of the addresser's utterance caused by a disregard of Relevance Theory principles: Frasier is a psychiatrist and in creating his utterance he was relying on A PROPOSAL TO PROVIDE PROFESSIONAL ASSISTANCE script rather than A PROPOSAL TO RESUME INTIMACY as Sheila interpreted it.

The following communicative exchange illustrates the case of **rejection to interpret an ambiguous implicature**:

PENNY: *So hey, how are things with you and Lesley?*

LEONARD: *Oh, to be honest, I don't think it's going to work out.*

PENNY: *Oh, oh that's too bad. Well hey, don't worry, I'm sure there is someone out there who is just right for you [walks away smiling].*

LEONARD: *Well what did she mean by that? Was that just a generic platitude or was that a subtle bid for attention?* (The Big Bang Theory: season 1, episode 5)

Penny, trying to comfort Leonard, creates an ambiguous utterance causing interpretation problems. Therefore, Leonard can't understand what the addressee means: a HACKNEYED ETIQUETTE PHRASE or a HINT THAT SHE LIKES HIM.

In the given situation a communicative failure is caused by the addresser violating the Cooperative Principle, namely, the Maxim of Manner that provides for avoiding ambiguity (Grice, 1975: 46). Thus, the addressee fails to select the most relevant way of interpretation due to the lack of knowledge about the parameters of the communicative act.

There are cases when **the addressee cannot interpret implicatures of the addresser's utterance due to its irrelevance and inadequacy for the situation of communication** rather than the addressee's inability to select a relevant interpretation:

FRASIER: *Hello, Seattle, this is Dr. Frasier Crane, KACL 780. We're with you for the next three hours so let's get straight to it. Roz, who's our first caller?*

ROZ: *On line one we have Linda, she's calling from a car phone.*

FRASIER: [presses button] *Hello, Linda, I'm listening.*

LINDA: *Oh, Dr. Crane. My husband and I are right in the middle of a fight. You see, we're on our way to the antique mart, we're obviously lost, but he refuses to stop and ask for directions.*

FRASIER: *Yes, well, Linda, this is a common source of friction among couples. [laughs] Some men feel the need to be in control, they see asking for help as a sign of weakness.*

LINDA: *Oh, everybody knows that. Look, the reason I called is to ask how the hell do we get to the antique mart from Cherokee Street and 14th Street.* (Frasier: season 2, episode 10)

Frasier works as a radio psychiatrist, that is why when Linda got through and started telling him that she was having a fight with her husband as they got lost and couldn't find a way to the antique shop, Frasier, having interpreted her utterance based on A PSYCHIATRIC CONSULTATION script, qualifies it as ASKING FOR HELP IN SOLVING A FAMILY PROBLEM. In fact, Linda created her utterance based on ASKING FOR HELP IN FINDING THEIR WAY AROUND THE CITY script. Thus,

the addresser's communicative behaviour doesn't correspond to the situation of communication: the addresser asks a psychiatrist an everyday question asking him to provide directions for finding the way in a literal sense (around the city), whereas a psychiatrist assists with finding one's way in life, that is in a figurative sense.

The analyzed communicative failures can also result from *the addressee's false interpretation of utterance implicatures enabling both literal and metaphorical interpretation*. In this case, lingual and situational context plays a leading role in choosing a relevant interpretation. For example:

Rachel and Ross were playing poker.

RACHEL: *See your twenty-five...and...uh, Monica, get my purse.*

MONICA: *Rachel, there's nothing in it.*

RACHEL: *OK, then get me your purse.*

MONICA: *OK, here you go. Good luck.*

RACHEL: [to Monica] *Thank you.* [to Ross] *I saw your twenty-five, and I raise you... seven.*

PHOEBE: *...teen!* [throws in a ten-dollar bill]

[Ross looks in his wallet, pulls out two dollars].

ROSS: [to Joey] *Joey, I'm a little shy.*

JOEY: *That's OK, Ross, you can ask me. What?* [Ross looks at Joey, dumbfounded at his stupidity]. (Friends: season 1, episode 18)

The communicative event above should be qualified as a conversation during a poker game. The expected metaphorical interpretation of Ross's utterance *I'm a little shy* is stipulated by the communicative situation as a whole and the addresser's non-verbal actions, in particular: *Ross looks at his wallet, pulls out two dollars*, thereby demonstrating that he doesn't have enough money to continue the game. The addresser created his utterance based on ASKING FOR MONEY TO CONTINUE A POKER GAME script, which is the most relevant from both a perspective of the communicative event (a conversation during a poker game) and the addresser's non-verbal actions. However, the addressee, Joey, interpreted Ross's utterance based on ASKING FOR ADVICE IN PERSONAL MATTERS script, irrelevant in these circumstances, which causes the communicative failure.

Another cause of the analyzed communicative failures is *a false interpretation of implicatures connected with recognizing irony/sarcasm*. The following communicative exchange illustrates the case of the addressee's failure to recognize irony in the addresser's utterance:

Penny could not get into her apartment and was crying on stairs.

SHELDON: *There, there.* [reluctantly] *Would you prefer to wait in our apartment?*

PENNY: *No Sheldon, I'd rather sit on this freezing cold floor sobbing like a three year-old.*

SHELDON: *Alright then* [turns to go inside again].

PENNY: *For God's sake!* [stomps into apartment].

SHELDON: *Just when I think I've gotten the hang of sarcasm.* (The Big Bang Theory: season 2, episode 3)

Unwilling to be in Penny's company and having offered help to her only trying to be polite, Sheldon doesn't notice the irony in Penny's utterance and interprets it literally as REFUSING HELP rather than ACCEPTING HELP expressed in the ironic form. However, Sheldon can't but understand that such an interpretation is not relevant in this situation.

There are cases when the addresser sees sarcasm in the addressee's words, though the latter hasn't implied one:

JOEY: *Okay, listen, my girlfriend is an amazing photographer, and she's looking for more interesting work, and I thought maybe you'd know someone.*

BOBBIE: *Oh, sure. My brother works at Newsweek. I'm sure he could fix her up with a job like that* [she snaps her fingers].

JOEY: *Okay. Bobbie, if you don't want to help me, fine, all right? But you don't have to be sarcastic.*

BOBBIE: *I wasn't being sarcastic. This is how I talk. My brother works at Newsweek. I'll give him a call.* (Joey: season 1, episode 23)

Bobbie responds unexpectedly quickly to Joey's request to help him find a job for his girlfriend. The addressee created her utterance based on PROVIDING REAL ASSISTANCE script, whereas the addresser puzzled by such a quick reaction interprets it based on REFUSING TO PROVIDE REAL ASSISTANCE considering the utterance a sarcastic one. First of all, it happens as a result of being uncertain about the addressee's abilities: Joey doesn't expect real help from Bobbie.

Another common type of communicative failures resulting from the violation of Relevance Theory principles is **a false interpretation of the addresser's communicative intentions** reflected in **reconsidering an illocution and/or a proposition**. Intention is understood as a preverbal, meaningful intent (aim) of the speaker stipulating communication strategies, inner speech and ways of its embodiment (Selivanova, 2010: 203).

We interpret an illocutionary act after J. L. Austin as an act by which a speaker achieves a certain communicative result, influence on the audience (Austin, 1986: 95).

The interpretation of a proposition within a framework of traditional pragmatics as a model of any area of human experience that includes terms and actants capable of reference as well as a predicate, acquiring modal and aspect-temporal characteristics (see, for example, van Dijk, 1995; Levinson, 1983; Anderson, 1996; Makarov, 2003) does not contradict its understanding as a basic element of the frame.

The communicative exchange below exemplifies the case of **the addressee reconsidering the illocution of the addresser's utterance**:

Rachel's office, Rachel and Sophie are sitting at their desks working as Joanna walks in.

RACHEL: *Oh, uh, Joanna I was wondering if I could ask you something. There's an opening for an assistant buyer in Junior Miss...*

JOANNA: [interrupting] *Okay, but that would actually be a big step down for me.*

RACHEL: *Well, actually, I meant for me. The hiring committee is meeting people all day and...*

JOANNA: *Oh. Well, I wish I could say no, but you can't stay my assistant forever. Neither can you Sophie, but for different reasons.* (Friends: season 4, episode 9)

Telling her boss about an opening for an assistant buyer, Rachel was relying on ASKING PERMISSION TO HAVE AN INTERVIEW script rather than OFFERING TO HAVE AN INTERVIEW script as it seemed to her boss, since Joanna thought Rachel told her about the vacancy caring about her rather than her own ambitions.

The following communicative act illustrates an instance of **the addressee reconsidering both the illocution and proposition of the addresser's utterance**:

FRASIER: *Have a good weekend, Roz.*

ROZ: *Wait, Frasier. I want to ask you a question, and I want you to give me an honest answer.*

FRASIER: *No, that outfit does not make you look fat.*

ROZ: *Well, that wasn't the question. But why would you think it was?*

FRASIER: *Well, as a rule, when a woman prefaces a question with «I want an honest answer», that's usually the question.*

ROZ: *Well, I'm not that insecure.*

FRASIER: *Good. I'm sorry, you were right. Your question, please.* (Frasier: season 2, episode 11)

Frasier interprets Roz's question based on FLIRT/EXPECTING A COMPLIMENT script, since he believes that women always expect to hear a compliment making them feel confident. However, it turns out that Roz is a confident woman building a question based on INFORMATION REQUEST script.

Another type of communicative failures connected with the violation of Relevance Theory principles is a result of **a false interpretation of utterance addressing**:

Carol was pregnant. Ross and Susan went with her to hospital. They were arguing when the doctor entered.

DR. OBERMAN: [entering] *Knock knock! How are we today? Any nausea?*

ALL: *Yeah. Yeah. A little.*

DR. OBERMAN: *Well, I was just wondering about the mother-to-be, but... thanks for sharing.*
(Friends: season 1, episode 2)

The given example illustrates a communicative event of VISITING A DOCTOR. Ross and Susan are accompanying pregnant Carol and arguing while waiting for the doctor. When a gynecologist asks Carol *How are we today* Ross and Susan take it personally including themselves into the reference sphere of the personal pronoun *we*. Such an interpretation is irrelevant within a communicative event of VISITING A DOCTOR: the utterance *How are we today* is a conventional pattern for inquiring about a patient's health. Thus, the communicative failure results from ignoring a communicative event script: the doctor asks a question inquiring about the patient's health rather than the patient's company.

4. Conclusion

The application of cognitive-discourse analysis methods, taking into account the role of participants of discourse interaction in meaning construal and thus complying with an interactive version of anthropocentrism aimed at studying communication as a process of regulating human social behaviour, opens new perspectives for the study of communicative failures allowing to get insight into the essence of this phenomenon, identify types of communicative failures, discover their causes and develop their detailed classification.

The results of the interpretive analysis applying tools of cognitive linguistics show that lingua-cognitive communicative failures can be caused by differences in structures of communicants' lingua-ethological encyclopedic knowledge activated in the minds of the addresser and addressee while producing/interpreting verbal and/or non-verbal utterances in a communicative act. As a result of such differences, the addresser and addressee privilege different aspects of the conventional conceptual content structured by different frames (scripts)/domains, which results in the divergence between the addressee's inferences and addresser's presuppositions.

It has been proved that differences in structures of communicants' lingua-ethological encyclopedic knowledge result in a false interpretation of homonymous verbal utterances, utterance implicatures enabling both literal and metaphorical interpretation or implicatures connected with recognizing irony/sarcasm as well as the addresser's communicative intentions and utterance addressing. A key reason for lingua-ethological communicative failures is the violation of Relevance Theory principles due to a disregard of lingual and extra-lingual context of a communicative act resulting in the addressee's failure to select the most relevant way to interpret the addresser's utterance.

The study opens perspectives for further inquiry in the specificity of communicative failures in other types of discourse, their further classification and description.

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