CHAPTER SIX

RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 INTRODUCTION

This is the final chapter of an investigation into the application of Speech Act Theory to selected utterances of Univen students. The exercise has aimed at establishing the factors which contribute to communication between interlocutors. In other words, an attempt has been made to determine the procedure hearers undergo when interpreting the intentions of speakers by analysing the utterances in accordance with speech act principles. The results of the analysis are presented in Chapter Four while Chapter Five details the conclusions that can be reached from the presented data. This closing chapter offers some recommendations accruing from the analysed data.

This section, firstly, suggests ways of enhancing the communicative competence of second language speakers such as the Univen students who participated in the research. Secondly, with the benefit of hindsight, the discussion outlines some variables that can be incorporated into a research project of this nature to increase its contribution to scholarship in language use. The discussion focuses on the application of SAT as a discourse evaluator as well as the general methodology employed in this research. Thirdly, a section is also provided which

identifies possible related research areas, all aimed at extending our understanding of the meaning-creation process, particularly, of second language speakers.

6.2   RECOMMENDATIONS

6.2.1   ENHANCING COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

In most linguistic contexts, individuals who use the language, particularly those for whom it is a second language, are allowed a certain amount of latitude in their performance and a chance to be idiosyncratic to a certain degree. Nevertheless, in order to be considered pragmatically and structurally competent, one must be able to perform linguistically in such a manner as to avoid being unintentionally offensive and to communicate one's intentions accurately.

Pragmatic failure or inappropriateness is not as widely discussed in linguistic literature as, for example, phonologic, semantic and syntactic blemishes. It is not difficult to understand why this should be so and why many writers on language studies, such as Swan (Practical English Usage) [1980], Leech (An A-Z of English Grammar) [1989] and Sinclair (Collins Birmingham University International Language Database) [1992], prefer to contribute to the more formalised, well-established and easily observable branches of phonology, semantics and syntax. Pragmatic meaning description has yet to develop some

of the metalanguage for the precision the other branches have achieved in their description. Secondly, the relatively subjective nature of aspects such as politeness or prosodic features, the fact that pragmaticians talk of 'pragmatic norms' and not 'pragmatic rules' and the ambivalence of 'appropriateness' of a particular usage also mean that it is not immediately obvious how pragmatic proficiency can be enhanced in second language speakers. Despite these problems, the 1970s concerns with the 'communicative' aspects of English for second language speakers were attempts to address questions of 'use' (pragmatism) as well as problems of 'well-formedness' (grammar).

Before focusing on strategies to enhance pragmatic competence it is essential to distinguish two types of pragmatic failure namely, pragmalinguistic failure and sociopragmatic failure as outlined by Thomas (1983). Both of these types of failures were evident in the samples gathered from the Univen students and analysed in Chapter Four. Pragmalinguistic failure occurs when the pragmatic force or function mapped onto an utterance is different from the force most frequently assigned to it by proficient speakers of the target language, for example, samples 2, 10, 11 and 12[51] in Chapter Four. Sociopragmatic failure stems from cross-culturally different perceptions of what constitutes appropriate linguistic behaviour, for example, samples 6, 8, 14 and 17[52] in Chapter Four.

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[51] Sample 2: Sorry, I can pass. (With a rising intonation on the word 'pass')
Sample 10: A: Did you enjoy the film? B: Too much! (Please describe the second utterance)
Sample 11: I was left lonely in the class.
Sample 12: The broken plough, it is fixed.
[52] Sample 6: Lecturer: Where you in class today? Student: Of course. (Please describe the second utterance)
Sample 8: The lecturer said I was late but I denied.
Sample 14: Lecturer: I would like to speak to Kate. Student: No, she is not around. (Please describe the

When these lists of examples from Chapter Four are examined it becomes obvious that pragmalinguistic failures result from the unusual linguistic physical encoding of the various speech functions. For instance, the construction of the sample utterances in Chapter Four differs from the construction a proficient speaker would use. Thus, sample 2[53] would not normally constitute a request; sample 10[54] would be construed more as a complaint and not a compliment while sample 12[55] could be understood by other language users as a strong assertion of a fact following an implied question or criticism and not as an ordinary representative. Despite the shortcomings of these utterances, the speech acts that the speakers intended in these examples are logical for the specific contexts in which the exchanges took place, and similar exchanges are taking place. The failure occurred because the choice of linguistic codes was not that which a competent speaker would normally choose. The problem, therefore, is linguistic, arising from the wrong formation of the various speech functions. When such a failure is apparent the hearer takes into account both contextual and linguistic clues for interpreting the utterance. Therefore, the possibility of miscommunication is minimised.

 Sociopragmatic failure, in the examples given in Chapter Four, arose from the speakers not accommodating hearer-factors such as position, roles, status,

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second utterance)
    Sample 17: Leave me do it for you.
[53] Sample 2: Sorry, I can pass. (With a rising intonation on the word 'pass')
[54] Sample 10: A: Did you enjoy the film? B: Too much! (Please describe the second utterance)

relations, time and location. Sociopragmatic failures may result in speakers talking out of turn, introducing what hearers may view as taboo topics and generally behaving, linguistically, in an uncalled for manner.

The border line between these two types of failures is not so clear-cut, since one type of failure may lead to the other. In fact, it cannot be claimed that any absolute distinction can be drawn between the two; they form a continuum with a grey area between the two.

Pragmalinguistic failures are more correction-friendly as they usually reflect the developmental stage of the speaker and unless 'pragmatic fossilisation' has taken place in the speaker such failures will gradually diminish with time and more practice. Raising the awareness of the speakers to the possible misinterpretation of their utterances is usually the first step. In general, second language users are not noticeably more sensitive about having pragmalinguistic failures pointed out than about having grammatical errors corrected. Insofar as users are prepared to learn the language at all, they are usually willing to try to conform to the pragmalinguistic norms which govern the target language.

Sociopragmatic failures, however, are not so easily remedied, as the corrections often involve the speaker making far-reaching socio-cultural adjustments in accordance with the pragmatic norms of some other language which may not be

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[55] Sample 12: The broken plough, it is fixed.

explicit or objective. Sociopragmatic decisions are 'social' before they are 'linguistic' and while second language users are fairly amenable to corrections which they regard as 'linguistic', they understandably become quite parochial in decisions which such users see as 'betraying' their own sociopragmatic practices.

Sensitising second language users to recognise and accommodate the target language's pragmatic norms is one of the ways of ensuring that such users become competent and sophisticated users of the target language. When in doubt, most users of a second language resort to transferring language practices in their mother tongue to the target language, as the utterances in Chapter Four demonstrate. But it is an accepted fact that one does not learn a language in a vacuum; there are pragmatic norms that surround any language and users must accept the inevitable fact that 'correct' usage includes 'appropriate' usage. It is, therefore, important that learners understand the different pragmatic and discoursal norms associated with the target language, as this will go a long way towards eliminating simplistic and ungenerous classification of users whose linguistic behaviour is different from the target language users. Individualistic pragmatic behaviours, similar to some of the examples in Chapter Four, are sometimes exhibited by sophisticated users of the English language with impunity, because such linguistic behaviours is deliberate, appropriate and therefore represents informed choice. But when there is no overt justification for such constructions, questions are asked about the level of competence of the

speaker. Second language users need to familiarise themselves with the target language in its totality if they wish to exploit it as a communication tool.

6.2.2   ENHANCING SPEECH ACT THEORY AS AN EVALUATIVE TOOL

As established by this research report, the sameness of the criteria for the different illocutionary acts detracts from Speech Act Theory's viability as an analytical tool which can make definite statements about interlocutors' control of a language or their communicative status. One solution to this inadequacy would be for an extensive description about what exactly these speech functions are and what their distinguishing features are. For example, a statement is defined as an utterance that 'represents reality' (Mey, 1993). The question arises as to what exactly that expression means and also what 'reality' is in relation to language. If a hearer is ordered to shut the door, there is 'reality' here, in the sense that the door is open and there is a hearer around. However, such an utterance would not be classified as 'a statement' but as 'a directive'. It is arguable that only the commissives (see Chapter Three) which commit the speaker to a future action can be classified as 'not real' at the time the utterance is made. Such ambivalence poses restraints on a categorical evaluation of interlocutors' linguistic ability. For instance, it is problematic to declare that a hearer is unable to interpret directives if s/he has accurately deciphered representatives since directives are made up of representatives. This criticism

has been partially resolved by the notion of indirect speech acts but the solution would be enhanced further if the theory can, additionally, examine the notion of multi-classification of functions and the conditions for speech acts articulation. Thomas (1995: 109) has offered an alternative suggestion. Where Searle (1969) has formulated 'rules' in describing speech acts, Thomas *(ibid.)* suggests that these should be replaced by 'principles' which are regulative, tentative and are motivated by the context; all of which, she feels, are the characteristics of speech functions.

Opponents to this suggestion may argue that putting such principles into practice could reduce the definitive quality of speech functions which could, ultimately, lead to miscommunication. That possibility cannot be ruled out. However, as the analysis in Chapter Four has demonstrated, actual miscommunication and ambiguous utterances are quite rare, as interlocutors employ a variety of clues in the interpretation process, ruling out the less likely interpretation in favour of the more logical meaning. Interlocutors employ clues such as the syntactic arrangement, pragmatic conditions and conversation maxims to negotiate the meaning of an utterance.

Although such an exercise in the multi-classification of functions would result in copious details about speech functions, the exercise would be in line with Austin's observation about language, that we 'do things with words' (from the title of his book) (1969).

As noted earlier, in Chapter Four, SAT as a discourse-analysing tool falls within the concept of cross-cultural communication. This implies a sharing of attributes with other culture-analysing paradigms like conversational, ethnographic and sociolinguistic. The similarities among these discourse strategies are quite unmistakable while their points of departure are very tenuous. SAT, therefore, needs to have more distinguishing features to separate it from the other such theories. SAT, for example, might evolve into an evaluative tool which requires a very extensive cultural context and not just general social context, as is currently the case. Here, the recognised distinctions between 'society' and 'culture' are invoked. The former is usually taken to refer to the fixed and stable characteristics like region of origin, social class, ethnicity, sex, age and so on, while the latter term refers to more changeable features of an individual, such as the relative status, social role and current beliefs and behaviour. This is an indication that social factors are more static, whereas culture is more dynamic and transient. Although pragmatic analysis is parasitic upon a sociolinguistic analysis there is a point of departure in that the latter analysis provides data on what linguistic repertoire the individual has while the former analysis tells us what the individual is doing with it in a particular instance. A pragmatic analysis with extensive cultural information extends the analysis in such a way that cultural, as well as grammatical answers, are provided for the linguistic choices that the interlocutors make. The variety of cultures which employs English as a second language would ensure even more prominence for the theory. The amount of literature which would be generated in such a dynamic setup is unimaginable.

SAT is not very forthcoming on the role of structural codes in the processing of meaning. The significant role of context is unquestionable and the discussion of speech acts is abundant with examples of the drastic alterations in utterance meaning, in reaction to context changes. A similar treatment, on such scale, is not available with alterations in structural codes. This point is particularly pertinent, as an evaluation of second language utterances will focus, equally, on the pragmatic and the structural statuses of the utterance. If this point is accommodated, some kind of comment should be possible on meaning-bearing structurally-blemished utterances, such as those analysed in Chapter Four of this research. The flexibility of such an approach will enable the richness of expressions, particularly those of second language speakers to come through.

Another distinguishing feature of SAT is the passive or reactionary role accorded hearers in the communicative event. Although some recognition has been given to the cooperative nature of communication, Speech Act theorists are not very vocal on the hearers and the context in which hearers also become dominant creators of meaning. The hearer has to interpret the speaker's utterance for the act of communication to take place, thus ensuring hearers do play a role, albeit not as initiators of the process. Thomas (1995: 203) notes that 'meaning is not given, but constructed (at least in part) by the hearer; it is a process of hypothesis-formation and testing, of making meaning on the basis of likelihood and probability'. Pragmatics is not about one-directional meaning; it is meaning

creation through negotiation by the participants. In a situation where the onus of the creation is on both parties, the role of the hearer is just as important. The book, *Language for Hearers* (Graham McGregor, 1986) puts some of the spotlight on the hearers by investigating what processes hearers require to decipher the intentions of the speakers. That is another area that almost all the other strategies of discourse analysis are also silent on and work in a SAT paradigm to pursue that aspect of meaning production would enhance the understanding of communication.

6.2.3   FURTHER SUGGESTIONS FOR RESEARCH

- The analysis in Chapter Four suggests that the respondents, to some extent, had problems with the number of speech acts they had to react to; in other words, there may have been too many alternatives offered. A similar investigation might be undertaken where the options are reduced. The improvement in validity from such a format, in addition to ensuring that the respondents are more focused, will also lessen the danger of 'guess work'.

- One of the criticisms which has come to the foreground during this investigation is the difficulty in achieving communication between interlocutors because of the sameness of the conditions for the various speech acts. This issue has resulted in anomalies where in one instance respondents have accurately identified one speech act but failed to recognise the same act in

another context. One of the reasons may, of course, be that the respondents are really not conversant with the speech acts and had been guessing accurately for the majority of the items in the questionnaire but it is also possible that the problem arose from the sameness of the conditions for the various speech acts. Although such respondents' behaviour is certainly not limited to this research project, nevertheless such practice should be discouraged in any attempt to obtain empirical data. That is the rationale for suggesting that a similar research project with less easily-confused speech acts has the potential to generate even more valid results. Such a project should aim at items from the different classes of speech acts (representatives, commissives, expressives, directives and declaratives) and not different acts from the same class, as this type of selection is open to confusion.

- As indicated in Chapter Four, there are some commonalties among the speakers and the respondents. A similar project in which participants have fewer characteristics in common might yield some exciting results. For example, the respondents might be chosen from other South African linguistic groups, from those who are non-Tshivenda speakers. In fact, in an attempt to bring different dimensions to the study, variables such as age, gender, location, socio-economic status and educational background, can all be introduced into the investigation.

- As mentioned earlier, the speakers play a dominant role in the creation of meaning since they determine the meaning or the intention of an utterance. Research, similar to the one carried out in this study, usually evaluates discourse from the speakers' perspective and miscommunication is said to have occurred if the hearers fail to match their interpretation with the stated intention of the speakers. A research project with a different approach could be one which starts off with the hearers' interpretation and if no communication occurs the speaker does the explaining and the justifying for his choice of codes and the speech function. Such research would examine the 'created meaning' and work backwards to determine the negotiations (from both parties) which have gone into the creation of meaning.

- An even more challenging research scenario can be designed where the participants can be asked to indicate, in sequence, the deductions they have made to arrive at a particular decision. In other words, the process of hypotheses testing would become more transparent, more formalised and more structured. Naturally this kind of investigation would require a certain calibre of participants, that is, those who can introspect psychologically, and put a linguistic label to the processes they have undergone.

- A similar research project, but this time undertaken jointly by researchers, one of whom should be a native speaker of Tshivenda, should produce some insightful results. With such a project some of the advantages of cross-

cultural research would be exploited, which should provide even more comprehensive data.

- Another challenging research project could be one that uses other discourse evaluators more in the line of ethnographic analysis. It should be quite insightful if these same utterances were subjected to ideas proposed by Halliday (1994) in his functional grammar approach. This would be a case where an identification of the quality of the message would be paramount. Similarly a systemic functional approach of writers like Berry (1975) would establish the systems portrayed in these utterances.

6.3   CONCLUSION

In this final chapter of this investigation attempts have been made to identify strategies in enhancing the pragmatic ability of the researched population, that is, selected students from Univen. Secondly, amendments have been suggested to certain features of Speech Act Theory to boost its status as an analytical tool and its application to various aspects of this investigation. Thirdly, the last section has offered possible similar research areas, all aimed at providing more insight into the process of negotiating meaning within a second language context.

The hypothesis of this research was that '**the correlation of form and function implicit in the pragmatic approach of the Speech Act Theory may not**

always occur in the utterances of non-native speakers of English (for example, in the utterances of Tshivenda speakers of English) because of syntactic, semantic and pragmatic blemishes but that these blemishes may not always result in a violation of the intended meaning and function of the utterance.' This investigation has shown that this is indeed the case.