

CHAPTER ONE

FORM AND FUNCTION OF UTTERANCES

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The notion that language is used to create meaning is the central premise of this study. Creating linguistic meaning or achieving communication between language participants is a dynamic process involving units, such as the form, context and function of the utterance. Dell Hymes (1967, 1972b) coined the phrase 'communicative competence' to refer to the ability of interlocutors to convey and interpret messages, and to negotiate meaning interpersonally within a given context. James Stalker (1989: 182) defines communicative competence as

that part of our language knowledge which enables us to choose the communicative system we wish to use, and, when that selected system is language, to connect the goals and contexts of the situation with the structures which we have available in our linguistic repertoire through functional choices at the pragmatic level.

John Gumperz (1982: 209) also identifies communicative competence

in interactional terms as 'the knowledge of linguistic and related communicative conventions that speakers must have to create and sustain conversational cooperation,' and thus involves both grammar and contextualization.

These two quotations underpin the point of discussion in this thesis, namely, that communication competence is the knowledge of both the structural and functional elements of a language. This study is an investigation into the communicative competence (Gumperz 1982; Stalker, 1989) of a particular group of English second language speakers, the Tshivendas. The argument of this research is that communicative competence involves the manipulation of the form, function and context of language. Hence the determination of Tshivenda English speakers' competence will rest upon an analysis of not only the structural form but also the function and context of their utterances. Such an approach is in accordance with functionalists' approach to language, that a syntactic analysis of an utterance's form will only determine interlocutors' mental competence (Noam Chomsky, 1965), while an analysis which examines, in addition, the function and context of the utterance will present a more comprehensive picture of interlocutors' competence.

An analysis to determine the communicative competence of individuals can be done using a variety of approaches. A Speech Act/pragmatic approach, which is the approach to be followed in this study, focuses on the relationship between the linguistic form, the communicative functions which these forms are capable of

serving, and the contexts or settings in which these linguistic forms can have those communicative functions (Charles Fillmore, 1981; Jenny Thomas, 1995).

Utterance analysis can be undertaken for any variety of purposes, to various degrees of ‘delicacy’¹ (Berry, 1975: 177-196; Morley, 1985: 24) using a range of methods. For instance, sociolinguists usually use conversational analysis within an ethnographical paradigm to pinpoint how linguistic forms of language functions might change according to gender, age or the roles of speaker and hearer, while psycholinguists, using a pure grammatical analysis of the surface and deep structure of discourse, may look at the sequence of acquisition of communicative competence with its corresponding physical manifestations. In accordance with Fillmore (1981), this report employs Speech Act Theory, as an utterance analysis tool, to establish the connection between grammatical forms and language functions, in specific contexts.

The sections that follow introduce, for initial operational purposes, the notion of communicative competence and its components, namely, communication, language, context and meaning (function). The rationale for isolating these units/components of analysis rests on the fact that, in order to describe and analyse communicative competence, it is necessary to deal with discrete units of some kind, with communicative activities which have recognisable boundaries (Muriel Saville-Troike, 1982: 20). The three units suggested by Hymes (1972a)

¹ ‘Delicacy’, in this context, refers to analysing data according to the fineness of the distinctions in meaning which they represent.

are: *event* (language and text), *situation* (context), and *act* (meaning). This same analytical format is exploited by this thesis. In other words, communicative competence centres on the premise that communication takes place when an individual uses a certain type of language, in specific contexts, to achieve certain meaning. The remainder of this chapter provides introductory comments on communicative competence and its unit of analysis; reasons for the formulation of the hypothesis; the objective; the practical procedures for collecting and analysing the data; and concludes by outlining what is discussed in each of the remaining five chapters.

1.1.2 UNITS OF ANALYSIS

1.1.2.1 COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

Communicative competence involves knowing not only the language codes, but also what to say to whom, and how to say it appropriately, in any given situation. In other words, it comprises structural, social, cultural as well as functional knowledge that is required in verbal interactions. Language in this paradigm is not viewed as the property of an individual, but as one of the many shared codes or symbolic systems that members of a society use for their daily survival. This concept of communicative competence is consonant with a semiotic approach to language, which holds that language consists of arbitrary symbols whose semantic values have been agreed upon by its users. Known as the 'functional

approach' to language, communicative competence is a reaction to the definition of language competence as more of a mental attribute (Chomsky, 1957, 1965, 1980).

1.1.2.2 COMMUNICATION

That the main objective of any language is to communicate the wishes of its users, is an obvious fact which needs hardly any elaboration. The communication process involves a complex verbal behaviour where the participants have to accommodate a variety of interconnected factors before meaning can be generated. The principal meaning-generating tool of humans is their ability to signal their linguistic system or language. This linguistic system can be exploited for communication if the speakers succeed in making hearers aware of something (thoughts, opinions, facts, emotions and so on) which they were not aware of previously. Successful communication depends not only on the receivers' reception of the message and their appreciation of the fact that it is intended for them, but also upon hearers' recognising the senders' communicative intent and making an appropriate behavioural or linguistic response to it. However, for one to assume that if one can speak, then one can communicate, is a fallacy. In this thesis, communication is viewed as behaviour dependent on multiple variables, such as the nature of the language used, the context of the utterance, as well as the function intended by the producer. Consideration of these variables is in addition to observance of general

conversation maxims which govern natural language interactions (Paul Grice, 1975).

1.1.2.3 LANGUAGE

There is no shortage of attempts to articulate the unique qualities of language. (See, for example, Jakobson [1956], Noam Chomsky [1972 and 1975] and John Lyons [1977]). However, one is inclined to concur with H. Robins (1979: 9-4) who notes that language definitions ‘tend to be trivial and uninformative, unless they presuppose...some general theory of language and of linguistic analysis’. In other words, to attempt a perspective-free or bias-neutral expose of language is of limited usefulness and of doubtful relevance to most analyses, unless underpinned by some theories. This comment is well illustrated in a clinically objective semantic-syntactic explanation or meaning of the word ‘language’. Exploiting the usual semantic-syntactic procedures of establishing meaning: componential analysis, identifying different relationships among lexical items, derivational backtracking, application in contexts, and so on, all leave one with a distinct feeling of dissatisfaction and bewilderment, according to Robins (1979: 9-14).

1.1.2.3.1 Socio-pragmatic versus structural-mentalist notions of language

The notion of ‘language’ adopted in the domain of discourse, and by this study, falls into two main paradigms: socio-pragmatic versus structural-mentalist. These classifications provide divergent claims about language; about the procedures for

its acquisition and use; about the system for its study, as well as about the criteria for demonstrating competence. These two divergent approaches to language underpin the differences between communicative competence and its stress on social use of language as articulated by Hymes (1967), and the Chomskyan concept (1965) with its high regard for language as a mental ability. Language within the mentalistic domain is observable from interlocutors' mastery of the structural codes of the grammar of the language and competence is evaluated by the abstract handling of these codes. Little latitude is made for idiosyncratic cultural-oriented utterances or speech events with a strong bias for socio-cultural considerations. On the other hand, a socio-cultural view of language meaning starts from a premise that the ultimate criteria for competence is the ability to communicate in the various social situations, therefore language is a dynamic functional attribute of the users not a passive, abstract ability.

To recap the above discussion, formalists tend to regard language primarily as a mental phenomenon as opposed to language being a societal attribute of the functionalists approach. Formalists explain language properties as a mental inheritance of human beings as against the functional view that a language's features is derived from its use in the society which develop from the communities communicative needs and abilities. Above all structural-formal notion sees language as an autonomous system rather than being functionalist and tied to social considerations.

For the purpose of this study, the functional/social definition of language is adopted. More detailed explanation of what constitutes a 'language' and how competence in it is demonstrated form part of the discussion in Chapters Two and Three.

1.1.2.4 CONTEXT

The next component in meaning creation, that is context, serves as the 'binding agent' or the channel through which the language of an utterance creates the intention (function) of the utterance. The study of the context of an utterance is based on the notion that utterances perform different functions or meaning because of their background and circumstance. Austin (1962: 100) notes that words

are to some extent to be "explained" by the context in which they are designed to be or actually have been spoken in a linguistic interchange.

The context of an utterance has to be factored into communication activities as theorists recognise that speaker intent, sentence meaning and hearer interpretation are not always the same. Often we utter sentences that mean more than or are even sometimes apparently differently from what we actually say, as in innuendoes or sarcastic and ironical comments. Yet listeners understand the additional or altered meaning and communication is achieved. Communication does take place in such situations because meaning is not created solely by

linguistic codes, but also by the commonality of the context of the interlocutors. (An elaboration of ‘context’ appears in Chapters Two and Three).

1.1.2.5 FUNCTIONS OF LANGUAGE

In the simplest sense, the word ‘function’ may be synonymous with the word ‘use’ or ‘meaning’. People perform activities with their language: that is, they expect to achieve an objective in speaking, writing, listening and reading. Competence in language is not simply the mastery of forms of language but the mastery of forms in order to accomplish the communicative functions of language, such as, to apologise, to greet, to disagree, to accuse, to warn and so on. Mastery of structural regularities of language remains a very passive asset if speakers do not exploit these forms for the purpose of transmitting and receiving thoughts, ideas and feelings between speaker and hearer or writer and reader. While forms are the manifestations of language, functions are the realisation of those forms. Douglas Brown (1987: 202) elucidates:

Communication may be regarded as a combination of ‘acts’ with a purpose and intent. Communication is not merely an event, something that happens: it is functional, purposive and designed to bring about some effect - some change, however subtle or unobservable - on the environment of hearers and speakers.

This research uses the term ‘functions of language’ in accordance with the theories of Austin (1962) and Searle (1969), where functions are equated with

the intention and meaning of a speaker. (Language functions are discussed in Chapter Three).

1.2 FORMULATION OF THE HYPOTHESIS

Corder's seminal work on interlanguage (1967) has generated considerable investigation into the developmental stages in language competence by non-first language speakers. The status of the interlanguage of second language users, in terms of its physical structure, pragmatic data, meaning and social acceptability has metamorphosed since the concept was advanced into language studies. But whatever the status accorded this mid-stage language, most language acquisition theorists, such as Corder (1967), Heidi Dulay, Marina Burt and Stephen Krashen (1982); Brown (1987) and Selinker (1992), agree that such a language displays distinct qualities, reflective, *inter alia*, of the learners' unique linguistic background.

The function of language, be it the language of a native speaker or a second language user is, as stated earlier, to transmit speakers' wishes and intentions. Selecting a piece of language is governed by three main considerations: the function that the utterance is supposed to perform; the physical structure of the utterance (morphemes and words); and the situation in which the utterance is to be utilised. That is to say, sentences are uttered for specific purposes, for example, to command, to request information, to question and to promise. And

these verbal activities are recognised as such by the interlocutors, because of regulated procedures: syntactic, semantic and pragmatic. These regulations do not detract from a language's ability to be dynamic, productive, creative and open-ended. Speakers wanting to articulate any linguistic function may be as creative as they want. For example, one could construct an infinitely long list of ways of directly and indirectly requesting a hearer to shut the door:

- I want you to close the door.
- Can you close the door?
- Are you able by any chance to close the door?
- Would you close the door?
- Won't you close the door?
- Would you mind closing the door?
- You ought to close the door.
- Did you forget the door?
- How about a little less breeze?
- Now Johnny, what do big people do when they come in?
- Do us a favour with the door, love.

Levinson (1983: 264-265)

New situations arise, new objects have to be described so language users manipulate their linguistic resources to produce new expressions and sentences. Creativity is a salient feature of human language, but, conventions and regulations should also be known and applied by the users of a language if a similar meaning is to be created by all interlocutors in a verbal activity. So,

however innovative or idiosyncratic a user may want to be, the basic objectives of communication, that is, transmitting the intention of the speaker, must not be compromised. Communication does not occur unless the same codes and signs are understood similarly by the users of a language, whether they are first or second language users. To achieve this degree of uniformity, certain formulaic rituals are carried out in the construction of the utterances. For example, to assert a fact or opinion one may use constructions which are declarative, negative or positive with a finite verb, while to request information or action, speakers may begin their utterances with an interrogative or invert the auxiliary with the subject. Users of the language usually adhere to these conventions to achieve a match between the form of their utterances and the function they hope to achieve. Where language users lack proficiency in a target language (such as is the case with the sample group of Tshivenda mother-tongue speakers in this study) some language conventions pose problems for such non-native users. These problems, in turn, may become barriers to communication.

The Tshivendas originate from Venda, an area situated in the Limpopo Province of South Africa. Tshivenda is one of the eleven official languages of South Africa. The people are known as Vhavenda (singular: Muvenda) and their language as Tshivenda or Luvenda. The term 'Tshivenda' is also used to refer to their culture. Historical accounts state that the Vhavenda immigrated into the area that later became known as Vendaland from Zimbabwe (Van Warmelo, 1932; Miti, 2004).

For this study, the term 'Tshivenda' will be used for both the language and the people.

The region has a population of post-high school graduates whose English utterances are locale specific. Samples of these utterances are:

1. Stu: Please I have come for you for some assistance
Lect: Oh?
Stu: Yes, I need some pamphlets on Wuthering Heights
2. Lect: Is our appointment still on for Monday?
Stu: I am seeing you.
3. Stu: What did she want? What happened when the lecturer called you.
Stu: The lecturer said I was late but I refused/denied.
4. Lect: Would your group be able to help him (a newcomer to the class) with the work?
Stu: I cannot do nothing for him.
5. Stu: He treats him like his own bloody child.

These non-sequential utterances merit some examination in terms of the relation between form and function of utterances, as is discussed in Speech Act Theory, (Austin, 1962). An analysis of samples 1-5 indicates that blemishes, both syntactic and semantic, may impact on the functions intended by the speakers of these utterances. In example 1, the phrase 'come for you' in the student's

utterance would normally not be the chosen expression for a speaker seeking a favour, hence the juxtaposition of the two propositions, plus the courtesy subjunct 'please' may confuse a hearer, as is testified by the lecturer's response. The student's initial statement exhibits the structural features of a 'threat'. However, the shared experience and background information surrounding the interaction negates this interpretation, permitting the lecturer's uncharacteristic response to what may be seen as a 'threat'. It is obvious that an insertion of 'to' to replace the incorrect preposition 'for' would affect the structural status of the utterance and the interpretation by the hearer. Utterance 2 has the potential for multiple interpretation. Whether the student was confirming the appointment for a later date or for the immediate present, is not clear. In this instance, the inaccurate classification and semantic inappropriateness of the verb 'to see' have resulted in the blemished utterance. The function of this utterance, if it has a future reference, would be a promise, whereas if the student intends to see the lecturer immediately after the completion of the interaction then the statement is a mere assertion. The correct interpretation would only be possible if the lecturer seeks clarification with another question like: 'When?'

The semantic flaw in sample 3 arises because of the student's belief that the verbs 'to deny' and 'to refuse' are synonymous. Although these two words do share some semantic properties (for example, from a componential analysis of meaning) their syntactic-distribution patterns indicate otherwise. In addition, the student has also ignored the transitive nature of the verb 'to refuse', hence

omitting the direct object, an indication that the verb poses some problem for the student. The verb 'to refute' would have captured the student's intention more appropriately. The one advantage with this utterance, despite these blemishes, is that the function (a representative asserting a negative state) has not been compromised, hence the opportunities for misinterpretation are minimal. In sample 4, the student's intention was that the group 'could not' assist as it already had the maximum number of members and not that they were 'unwilling' to do so. Part of the deviancy in this sample is due to the inclusion of two negative phrases next to each other. Although this type of sentence construction is colloquial, quite acceptable and unambiguous in certain linguistic circles, the context of its utterance does not permit such a clear-cut interpretation. Whether it was an emphatic negative assertion or a positive one is not clear without more interaction. Sample 5 was contributed by a student who wanted to describe the extremely humane treatment of Heathcliff in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*. Despite demonstrating some awareness of English morphological processes (which has given us adjectives, such as 'skinny', 'dirty', 'touchy') the writer is unaware that the adjective from the noun 'blood' does not retain the same non-connotative meaning, hence its inappropriateness in this context. Without the benefit of more exchange, the interpretations of this statement may vary: one may have a student offering a positive evaluation or praise of a character in a literary work or a student exasperated and critical of a character: two totally different speech acts; or worse still, seeing this as a criticism of the lecturer.

Some of these utterances, therefore, are deviant with regard to their internal arrangements (their structure) as well as their inability to convey the speaker's intention accurately (their pragmatic domain), or with regard to both aspects. It is features such as these that make a closer study of utterances by English second language Tshivenda learners both interesting and urgent.

1.2.1 HYPOTHESIS

In this thesis, the proposition is 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.

1.3 OBJECTIVE

The aim is to investigate the communicative competence of selected Tshivenda speakers, at tertiary level, by describing the form and function of a sample of their English utterances.

1.4 THEORETICAL STRATEGIES

In linguistics there are, as mentioned earlier, many approaches to the description of discourse, these being united by the shared conviction that language is more than a sentence level phenomenon. Hence it is inaccurate for a language description to limit its scope to the properties of individual sentences. Analysis of discourse can be undertaken in various paradigms - interactional, ethnographic, pragmatic, and so on. This study, as noted earlier, combines two very similar approaches, namely, a Speech Act analysis within a pragmatic framework.

1.4.1 SPEECH ACT ANALYSES AND PRAGMATICS

A Speech Act analysis is based on the premise that utterances are made for specific functions and that a certain structural arrangement of constituents is necessary to articulate these functions. Just what constitutes pragmatics is an open question, but there seems to be some agreement that pragmatics is a system of rules which defines the relationship of meaning to the context in which it occurs, that is, it matches functions with particular language choices in a particular context. A pragmatic investigation is a combination of a syntactic/semantic examination and the study of meaning in relation to speech situations. Pragmatic analysis deals with utterance meaning rather than sentence

meaning. A practical example of the differences in sentence and utterance meaning will serve to make the point.

A mother who received no reaction from her TV-addicted children when she came home loaded with groceries could say:

6. Oh don't mind me. Don't go to any bother on my account. I am just the person who slaves in this house!

And the average child would accurately interpret that utterance as a chastisement and not an invitation to continue sitting in front of the TV! Hence the combined meaning of the physical lexical constituents does not equal the utterance meaning. Other types of discourse analysis would not be able to capture this specialised use of language, except a functional-biased one, that is, a pragmatic one.

Brown and Yule (1983: 1) note that

The analysis of discourse is, necessarily, the analysis of language in use. As such, it cannot be restricted to the description of linguistic forms independent of the purpose or function which these forms are designed to serve in human affairs.

This suggests that an analysis of language output cannot be independent of its purpose and context. Central to this research, therefore, is an approach to

language that acknowledges the instrumentality as well as the autonomy of any language system or analysis (Halliday, 1978: 36). A pragmatic description of language relies on exploring the form and the function of an utterance within a given situation. The importance of context in any language setting can be demonstrated by using the same example as given above. In another situation these same words of the mother could have the function of an invitation to a hesitant visitor.

Although an utterance's formal or structural regularities may also be examined in such an exercise, a functional interpretation alerts an analyst to the way patterns of talk are put to use in certain purposes, in particular contexts. Pragmatics explains the communicative competence of the users of the language in terms of how they manoeuvre their linguistic competence and their linguistic needs in society.

1.4.2 ISSUES TO BE INVESTIGATED

The main issue to be investigated is:

- The status of Speech Act Theory and pragmatics in establishing communicative competence of second language users of English, such as the Tshivendas.

Questions to be asked include:

- What are the concepts of: semiotics, language, communication, and discourse analysis?
- How does a hearer decipher the intention or meaning of an utterance? In other words, what factors influence a hearer's interpretation of an utterance or the creation of meaning?
- What does linguistic well-formedness entail? Or, what is the difference between a meaningful string of words and a meaningless one?
- Can Speech Act Theory be used as an analytical tool for non-standard, but meaningful utterances?

1.4.3 DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

An empirical study was carried out to determine the English communicative competence of Tshivenda speakers by using the functional approach of Speech Act Theory to describe the form and function of these speakers' selected utterances. The process involved the collecting of sample utterances of directives and representatives from post-matriculation² learners; these sample utterances were then given to a control group (hearers) to see whether they could interpret the intentions of the speakers. The data obtained was then interpreted in accordance with Speech Act principles. A detailed account of the methodology,

² Matriculation level in the South African education system is the 12th year of formal schooling and is also the entry level qualification for tertiary education.

including the procedure for the selection of samples and respondents; the presentation of the results; the analysing framework and the interpretation of the results form the content of Chapter Four.

1.5 OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS

Chapter One articulates the central premise of the study, namely, that language is used to create meaning, that is, how conversation participants create meaning linguistically. The premise was researched through an investigation into the English communicative competence of the Tshivenda, by describing the form and function of their utterances. Included in this Chapter are brief operational comments on the recommended units for an investigation into language users' communicative competence; the rationale for and the articulation of the hypothesis; a description of the data collection procedure and the format for the rest of the thesis.

Chapters Two and Three provide a discussion of the theoretical support for the research. Chapter Two is organised around sub-topics or units suggested for the evaluation of communicative competence, namely, event (language and text), situation (context) and act (meaning). Once these components of communicative competence have been established, the thesis continues, in Chapter Three, to give an account of the Speech Act Theory and its role in classifying the functions of language. In Chapter Three the discussion also includes the origins of the theory, the classification and the components of direct and indirect speech acts

and the principles which enable meaningful conversation to take place. Rival theories on communicative competence, classification of speech acts and the creation of meaning are all accommodated in these two chapters.

Chapter Four reports on the application of the Speech Act theory in evaluating the communicative competence of selected Tshivenda speakers of English. In the introductory sections, details of the methodology such as cross-cultural discourse analysis, the selection of samples, the background of the respondents, the compilation of the questionnaire and the interpretation criteria are provided. The chapter continues by interpreting, in accordance with Speech Act principles, the results obtained in the analysis. The chapter concludes with an identification of the factors which had influenced the interlocutors in performing their roles in the communication process.

Chapter Five concludes the study by using the results to discuss the research questions articulated in Chapter One. The discussion, in addition to commenting on the ability of the Speech Act Theory to evaluate the communicative competence of a group of English second language users, like the Tshivendas, also examines the conclusions that can be drawn about the quality of the respondents and the samples. The chapter concludes with an overview of the results in relation to the hypothesis.

Chapter Six, the final chapter, offers some recommendations deemed appropriate from the results obtained. The suggestions are geared towards the Speech Act Theory in general and also the type of empirical study undertaken in this research. A section is also devoted to possible areas of further research, all aimed at obtaining a better understanding of meaning creation.