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Survey on Some Speech-Acts in Slovakia

Abstract

With the help of 47 informants of a semi-expert interview on communicative strategies (SICS) it can be shown that Slovaks pursue the conversational maxim “Say something only, if it can be interpreted literally. Violate this maxim only if it otherwise meant a big face loss to your interlocutor”. This is reflected in Slovaks’ rare use of small talk, avoidance of personal small talk topics, the brief, but literally meant strategy “I don’t have time” to turn down invitations/offers and the short, but literally meant expressions for disagreement, “I see what you mean, but I think that...” and “I have a different opinion.” Furthermore, Slovaks give their opinion and then give reasons related to the issue (not because of certain persons). In addressing the informal pronoun is used only after a lengthy period of time (except with intensive relationships like with parents and with colleagues). We can thus also state that, in Brown and Levinson’s terms, Slovaks favor negative politeness and bald on-record strategies and that, in Grice’s terms, Slovaks concentrate on the maxim “Be brief” (manner) and hardly violate the maxim “Be truthful.” (quality).

Sommaire

Avec l’aide de 47 personnes dans un “semi-expert interview on communicative strategies” (SICS) on peut montrer que les Slovaques respectent la maxime “Dis quelque chose seulement si l’interlocuteur peut le prendre littéralement. Ne faillie à cette maxime que si autrement cela signifiait que ton interlocuteur perdrait sa face.” Ceci se reflète dans le rare usage du small talk, dans l’évitement de thèmes personnels dans le small talk, dans la stratégie brève, mais littéralement interprétable “Je n’ai pas le temps” pour refuser à des invitations/offres, dans les stratégies brèves, mais littéralement interprétables “Je comprends ce que tu veux dire, mais je pense que...” et “Je suis d’autre avis.” De plus, les Slovaques disent leur opinion et puis donnent des arguments relatifs au sujet (et non à des personnes). Pour s’adresser à quelqu’un, les Slovaques n’utilisent le pronom impersonnel qu’après une assez longue période (sauf dans les relations intenses comme avec les parents et les collègues). On peut donc dire que, suivant la terminologie de Brown/Levinson, les Slovaques préfèrent les stratégies de “negative politeness” et de “bald on-record” et que, suivant la terminologie de Grice, ils se concentrent sur la maxime “Sois bref” (manière) et ne faillie guère à la maxime “Sois fidèle à la vérité” (qualité).

Zusammenfassung

Mit Hilfe von 47 Informanten eines “semi-expert interview on communicative strategies” (SICS) kann gezeigt werden, dass Slovaken der Konversationsmaxime folgen “Sag etwas nur, wenn man es wörtlich interpretieren kann. Verletze diese Maxime nur, wenn sie sonst zu einem großen Gesichtsverlust deines Gesprächspartners führte.” Dies spiegelt sich darin wider, dass Slovaken folgende Strategien fahren: selten Small Talk, keine persönlichen Themen im Small Talk, die kurze, aber wörtlich zu interpretierende Strategie “Ich habe keine Zeit”, um Einladungen/Angebote abzulehnen und die kurzen, aber wörtliche zu interpretierenden Strategien “Ich verstehe, was du meinst, aber ich denke...” und “Ich bin anderer Meinung”, um auszudrücken, dass man nicht einer Meinung ist. Darüber hinaus sagen Slovaken ihre Meinung und geben dann sachbezogene Gründe (keine personenbezogenen). In der Anrede wird das informelle Pronomen erst nach einer längeren Zeitspanne verwendet (außer bei intensiven Beziehungen wie Eltern und Arbeitskollegen). Wir können somit sagen, dass Slovaken, nach der Terminologie von Brown/Levinson, Strategien der “negative politeness” und des “bald on-record” verwenden und sich, nach der Terminologie von Grice, auf die Maxime “Sei kurz” (Art und Weise) konzentrieren und kaum die Maxime “Sei wahrheitsgemäß” (Qualität) verletzen.

1. Background

Based on a diverse set of existing qualitative and quantitative works, Grzega (2006: 193-254) drew a first cross-cultural picture of communicative strategies, or speech-act realization

patterns, in Europe and other civilizations. This also encompassed some notes on the communicative customs in Slovakia. This year, 2008, is the European Year of Intercultural Dialog. This seems an ideal occasion to start to fill a gap, as empirical studies on Slovak speech acts are nearly inexistent (there are the studies on directives by Nizníková 1992, on salutations by Ferencík 1992 and on talk show strategies by Ferencík 2002, but Slovakia was not included in the politeness volume edited by Hickey/Stewart 2005 either¹). This contribution is part of a larger project whose goal is to compose a European “language guide”, illustrating a number of communicative situations that would enable readers to see differences and similarities within Europe. The communicative tasks or speech acts that we deal with are addressing, answering the phone, small talk, giving arguments, making and turning down an offer, expressing disagreement and ending a conversation.

In (western) linguistics two methods have become common in collecting empirical data for speech-act analysis, one is called *discourse completion task*, or *discourse completion test*, (DCT) and was developed by the group that worked on the *Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project* (CCSARP) (cf. Blum-Kulka et al. 1989), the other one is termed metapragmatic judgement task/test (MPJT) and was designed as a supplement to a DCT by Olshtain/Blum-Kulka (1984), Hinkel (1997), and others.

However, for this special issue of the *Journal for EuroLinguistiX* and for the larger project *European Communicative Strategies* (ECSTRA), the editors have designed a method they call *semi-expert interview on communicative strategies* (SICS). Such an interview, presented as a questionnaire, does not aim at getting informants’ own communicative behavior and judgement, but at getting the typical linguistic behavior in the informants’ nation. Informants are viewed as semi-experts due to their experience within, and observation of, the speech community. This will particularly be valid for people who deal with language on a professional level (such as students of language, linguists, journalists); they are therefore preferred as informants. Whereas a DCT presents a situation and asks for one’s typical behavior, a SICS presents typical situations and asks for typical and untypical behavior. The informant can select from a list of communicative patterns as well as provide additional patterns. This way a SICS resembles more a metapragmatic judgement task (MPJT), but the informants need to reflect on a more abstract and general level.

2. Data Collection

A sample of the SICS questionnaire can be found in the introductory article to this special issue of *JELiX* (Grzega/Schöner 2008). The questionnaire (in its English version) was distributed to instructors and students at the English Department of the University of Košice, Slovakia’s second-largest city. 47 questionnaires were returned (by 16 instructors and 31 students). They were filled out by 41 women and 6 men; they come from various regions, mostly from eastern Slovakia, predominantly Košice and Prešov; the informants’ average age is 24.1 years (31.4 years for the instructors, 20.3 years for the students).

3. Results

When a certain strategy is seen as typical by at least 90 percent, this allows to present the

¹ Hickey/Stewart (2005) do include a study on Czech though, but, as the authors, Nekvapil and Neustupný (2005), realize themselves, things cannot be automatically transferred to Slovak. They cite Berger (1995), e.g., that “Czech differs from neighbouring languages, including Slovak, in requiring with the polite *vy* ‘you_{pl.}’ a singular past participle [or past tense] (when the referent is singular), while other languages (apart from Upper Sorbian) require the plural, whether the referent is singular or plural.” (Nekvapil/Neustupný 2005: 251). However, in colloquial speech many Slovak speakers also use the singular past tense form with *vy* as a formal pronoun to address one person.

respective strategy indeed as (proto)typical for the entire nation. In other cases, there seem to be group-related restrictions.

3.1. Addressing

Like most other European languages, Slovak has an informal and a formal address pronoun, namely *ty* and *vy* (a T-form and a V-form in Brown and Gilman's 1960 terminology). So, like in many other European languages, the formal pronoun is the pronoun of the 2nd person plural. The use of the 3rd plural *oni* as a formal address strategy is now outdated or restricted to rural areas. What does the distribution of these pronouns look like²?

1. Except for some very traditional families, T is normally used by children to address their father or mother.
2. To address older relatives, the use of *vy* (or in some cases *oni*) is much more prominent; a slight majority of the informants thought that the most typical address pronoun for addressing older relatives is *vy*, but a large number wrote that both could be used and that the choice of pronoun would depend on whether the family is traditional, on how big the age difference is and on how close the relationship is.
3. In contrast to older relatives, colleagues at work more typically use a T form at work, but the majority of informants wrote that both pronouns are common.
4. Unless personally agreed on otherwise, employees and employers address each other (reciprocally) by V.
5. V is also the most typical first choice when you address administration officials, among business partners (unless you are already close), and between customer and clerk (always unless you already know these people as close friends). V is also typical when you meet strangers in the street; but according to 9 informants you also find T, particularly, according to 6 of these 9 informants, among young people.
6. Informants almost unanimously noted that pupils address their teachers by V. Teachers, however, according to 61.7 percent of our informants, would use both T and V. 9 informants said that teachers would start addressing learners by V at high-school level, 2 informants wrote that this starts at university level, and 1 informant wrote that at high-school level there is individual choice between T and V.

3.2. Answering the Telephone

Viewing our informants' answers for openings telephone conversations³, we can state that there is no fixed nation-wide pattern, but the use of *Haló* 'Hello', *Prosím* 'please; lit.: I ask', and the last name or a combination of these is typical, or wide-spread, in private telephone conversations. In business telephone conversations, *Dobrý deň* 'lit. Good day', the company's name and a phrase expressing 'How can I help you?' are additional potential elements when picking up the receiver in Slovakia. But again, there are no clear preferences.

3.3. Small Talk

What is "small talk" or, as Malinowski (1923) put it, phatic communion? The relation between participants in phatic communication is normally not a close one, but one of maximal distance. According to Laver (1975) small talk can have three functions: (a) avoiding silence,

² The first in-depth study on the distribution of address terms was carried out by Ervin-Tripp (1974), who presented her results in the form of a "switchboard". In the following section we have tried to present the results of our study, which did not encompass all kinds of relationships, in the form of 6 summarizing observations, which seemed also more reader-friendly to us.

³ The two classical, frequently quoted studies on telephone openings are the ones by Hopper (1992) and Schegloff (1979). They shall be listed here for the sake of completion, but are of no direct relevance to this contribution.

(b) initiating the conversation (in order to come to the actually targeted topic at a later point of time), or (c) exploring (in order to be able to “categorize” one’s interlocutor). While friends can engage in small talk quite freely and deliberately, strangers have to respect certain constraints in order to be considered polite. Ventola (1979) distinguishes between topics that are direct/personal (e.g. health, looks) and those that are indirect/impersonal/situational (e.g. the weather, the latest news, the circumstances of the communicative situation). In sum, we could say that small talk is everything that is not part of the greeting phase, the leave-taking phase and the actual target topic of the conversation.

What is the situation like in Slovakia? The results are very diversified with regard to the first question: “In what situations is small talk common, or even required?”. Not a single situation was named by over 50 percent of the informants. The explanation for this is evident through several additional remarks. Six times informants wrote that small talk is nowhere required in Slovakia, six informants wrote that small talk is not common, four more wrote that small talk is not common with strangers, five people wrote that it is predominantly elderly people that use small talk and one said that it is rather used in rural areas. This makes it clear why there are no salient small talk situations. And this also explains why there are no salient answers for the next question: “In what situations is it not common to start small talk?”. In reference to Laver (1975) we could then say that if small talk is not common with strangers, the exploratory function is virtually absent in Slovak small talk. Even if no single answer to these two questions was named by more than half of the informants, it might nonetheless be interesting to list those situations that were given by more than a third of the informants:

1. According to at least one third of the informants, small talk is common in waiting rooms and during a meal.
2. According to at least one third of the informants, small talk is not common at the toilet.

The very diversified picture continues with the other questions on small talk. “What are common small talk topics in your nation if you’re not talking to a close friend or relative?” Only one topic was given by more than half of the informants (74.5%), namely the weather. Still more than one third of the informants gave recent political events and the general complaint about politics/politicians as widely acceptable topics for small talk. The only topic that was considered taboo for small talk by more than 50 percent of the informants (63.8%) is salary. At least one third claimed religion and politics to be tabooed in small talk. In Ventola’s terms, Slovak small talk topics are indirect.

The results of the Slovak informants do not draw a clear picture of the last question either, “Are people in your country, before they start to say what they really want (e.g. a request, an offer) expected to do more small talk in a private conversation than in business conversations or the other way around or dedicate about the same amount of time to each one?”

3.4. Giving Arguments

It has been an oft-repeated observation that different cultures pursue different argumentative styles⁴. The questionnaire gave a number of strategies that can be observed in different speech community for presenting one’s opinion. There is only one strategy that over 50 percent of the informants would regard as typical: first, you say your opinion, second, you give reasons related to the issue itself. All other strategies were ticked not even by a third of the informants.

⁴ The first to contrast argumentative writing styles—in connection with language teaching—was Kaplan (1966). Although his observations consisted in the juxtaposition of merely one written argumentative paragraph for each language comparison, his scheme was later reproduced in many textbooks on cross-cultural communication.

3.5. Making and Turning Down an Offer

Since Isaacs/Clark (1990) utterances whose locutionary force is an invitation, but whose illocutionary force is just an expression of friendliness, are known as “ostensible invitations”. Item #8 of the SICS questionnaire aimed at finding out whether such invitations and, on a more general level, offers exist in Slovakia. Although not totally excluded, the more typical assumption that you can make is that the offer is to be taken literal—this is the opinion of over two thirds of the informants (32 people). Interestingly, one informant noted down that formerly such an offer was honest, but that now people are becoming more polite and less honest in Slovakia.

Item #9 in the SICS asked for what kinds of strategies people use if they want to turn down an offer or an invitation in a polite way. Many informants commented their selection of strategies with the labels “very frequent/very common”, “frequent/common” (or unmarked), “sometimes/not too frequent” (only marked as restricted to certain contexts only, e.g. informally, formally, younger people) and “rare”. If we convert these labels into points from 4 to 1 (with uncommented ticks treated equal to the label “frequent/common”) and multiply them with the corresponding number of ticks, the highest possible amount of points a strategy could get is 188. Only one strategy received clearly over 50 percent of possible points, viz. the strategy “a vague excuse like ‘No, I don’t have time’ or ‘No, I have something else to do’”; 31 informants, i.e. nearly two thirds, considered this strategy frequent or very frequent. (It may also be noteworthy to say that the second most prominent strategy was “a phrase like ‘(I don’t know yet) I’ll let you know’ though you will surely not contact the person again”; this strategy received 73 points and was classified as frequent or very frequent by 26 informants, i.e. 51.1 percent).

3.6. Expressing Disagreement

The next item in the SICS was about shedding light on strategies to express the following face-threatening act: “If people disagree with somebody else’s opinion, what kinds of linguistic (and non-linguistic) means are used to say ‘no’ in a polite way in your nation?” Again, we are lucky that informants added a lot of comments on frequency and contexts, which allows us to convert the labels “very frequent/very common”, “frequent/common” (or unmarked), “sometimes/not too frequent” (only marked as restricted to certain contexts only, e.g. informally, formally, younger people) and “rarely” into points from 4 to 1 again and multiply them with the corresponding number of ticks. The highest results were achieved for phrases of the type “Yes, I see what you mean, but I think that...” (110 points; considered frequent or very frequent by 32 informants, i.e. over two thirds of the informants) and for phrases of the type “(No), I disagree./ (No), I have a different opinion” (90 points; considered frequent or very frequent by 26 informants, i.e. a little more than half of the informants).

3.7. Closing a Conversation

Since there are no relevant cross-cultural studies on closing a conversation⁵, the SICS questionnaire had consciously encompassed this part of a conversation—if people do not know how to end a conversation, this could also lead to embarrassment for one of the interlocutors, or even both. Therefore the SICS asked “what do people say to show that they want to end a conversation?”. The most salient strategy seems to be a phrase meaning ‘I have to go now, I have something else to do’. After the conversion of labels from “rare” to “very

⁵ Unfortunately the book by Otterstedt (1993) abounds with factual mistakes. The first study to dwell on closing strategies was carried out by Schegloff/Sacks (1973).

frequently” into points from 1 to 4, this strategy receives 91 points from our informants; 37 of informants, i.e. 78.7 percent, regarded this strategy as frequent or very frequent.

4. Summary

If we want to wrap our observations in Brown and Levinson’s terminology, then Slovaks can be said to favor negative politeness and bald on-record strategies. In Gricean terms, Slovaks focus very much on the maxim of manner (“Be brief.”) and hardly violate the maxim of quality (“Be truthful.”). In other words: Slovaks seem to follow the maxim “Say something only, if it can be interpreted literally. Violate this maxim only if it otherwise meant a big face loss to your interlocutor”.

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version received 25 July 2008