ON THE TENABILITY OF THE NOTION 'PRAGMATIC EQUIVALENCE' IN CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS

KAROL JANICKI

Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań

I would like to address myself to the notion of pragmatic equivalence (PE) in contrastive analysis, which has recently been invoked more and more often (cf. e.g., Krzeszowski 1984, Oleksy 1984). Also Fillmore (1984) takes up the domain of contrastive pragmatics. Krzeszowski (1984: 7) suggests that PE be posited as Tertium Comparationis (TC), and simultaneously admits that:

"Contrastive studies based on functional (pragmatic) equivalence require a separate extensive treatment as the number and the nature of elements which can be compared is as yet undetermined"

Oleksy (1984) says explicitly that PE is a crucial notion to be utilized in contrastive studies of language in use.[1] He further claims that the goal of contrastive analyses of language use is to establish whether or not linguistic expressions, one pertaining to L_1 and another to L_2, are pragmatically equivalent. Quoting Oleksy on this essential issue one gets the following:

"A linguistic expression X_1L_1 is pragmatically equivalent to a linguistic expression X_2L_2 if both X_1 and X_2 can be used to perform the same speech act (SA) in L_1 and L_2" (1984:360).

An important aspect of Oleksy's definition is the singular of Speech *ACT*, as, making *act* plural — acts — would, in my opinion, totally change my present considerations. In this way, returning to Oleksy's formulated definition, I am ready to admit that such a formulation is defendable. That is, it seems fairly easy to claim that two linguistic expressions X_1L_1 and X_2L_2 potentially func-

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[1] I would not like to be criticized at this point for talking about 'language use' as implying the dichotomy of 'language' and 'language use'. I think that distinguishing between the two is unnecessary. I only use the term 'language use' when I refer to Oleksy's ideas.

tion as "the same"[2] SA, for instance 'request'. Thus, if one hypothesizes that

    "The lights are out" (X_1L_1) and

    "Światło się nie świeci" (X_2L_2)

may, within the pragmatic sphere, serve as 'requests', a number of verifying techniques (e.g., intuition, introspection, report, questionnaire) will confirm the hypothesis. This manner of looking at pragmatic equivalence would seem justifiable were it not for at least two problems to which I will now turn.

Firstly, the question arises of where this kind of analysis leads us, or, of what purposes it serves. As I understand it, Oleksy's rendition of pragmatic equivalence across languages, may serve basically practical purposes very well. Naturally, Oleksy has got the right to nominally define pragmatic equivalence the way he does, for example for pedagogical purposes. What may create problems, however, is the usefulness of the notion of PE (again, according to Oleksy's interpretation) in linguistic analyses carried out with epistemological purposes in mind.

In connection with this I would like to claim that contrastive pragmatics as an approach toward language study, and, by extention, the notion of pragmatic equivalence, should be tackled relative to the goals defined by the researcher. Thus, practical goals (e.g., language teaching, translation, interpretation — as practical activities) ought to be clearly juxtaposed to theoretical goals, the latter implying the expounding of language. With reference to the former, Oleksy's rendition of PE seems tenable. That rendition allows for compiling lists of linguistic expressions in L_1 and L_2 which would typically correspond to each other in terms of their contextually conditioned pragmatic meaning. It follows that the English 'Shall we go?' in many contexts appears to correspond most often to the Polish 'No to chodzmy', the English 'Can you close the window' in many contexts corresponds to the German 'Du solltest das Fenster zumachen', etc. This kind of finding is no doubt valuable and useful for pedagogical and translational purposes. When, however, theoretical goals come to the fore reservations pertinent to PE become salient. Most of the rest of this paper will therefore be devoted to the notion of PE in analyses of a linguistic theoretical nature.

With the nominal definition of pragmatically equivalent linguistic expressions suggested by Oleksy (cf. p. 19), one will be led to conclude the following: Two linguistic expressions X_1L_1 and X_2L_2 are pragmatically equivalent to each other of they can perform a corresponding speech act, e.g., complain. Fair enough. But what about other acts? In other words, it seems to me that one has to raise the question of what other acts (in addition to the one corresponding) X_1L_1 and X_2L_2 can function as. No doubt X_1L_1 and X_2L_2 can be involved

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[2] Oleksy has recently changed the formulation of "the same" into "the corresponding speech act" (personal communication).

in performing a number of *other* acts. Which of the *other* acts are still corresponding, and which are non-corresponding? What are the non-corresponding acts? How many speech acts do X_1L_1 and X_2L_2 have to potentially perform in order to be *really* pragmatically equivalent? If the answer to the last question is *all*, then the question should be posed of whether hypotheses such as "ALL the speech acts that X_1L_1 and X_2L_2 can perform are corresponding" are falsifiable. If the answer to the last question is *not all*, then obviously, what follows is the question of 'how many?'. If questions like those raised above are shunned, then I would claim, the notion of PE helps only a bit in describing *a very small fragment* of the linguistic universe, an extensively *larger* part of which *should be* attended to if language is to be expounded.

Secondly, PE as TC for contrastive analyses of language use will, I am afraid, be guilty of definitional circularity (Krzeszowski 1984).[3] That is, PE cannot serve as an independent criterion or reason (i.e., TC) for comparison if one seeks to establish whether or not two linguistic expressions are pragmatically equivalent, i.e., corresponding with reference to language use. Otherwise we deal with definitional circularity. What one needs for analyses at the pragmatic level are TCs standing outside pragmatic equivalence.[4] Consequently, pragmatic equivalence would not *motivate* but *result* from such analyses. One might want to ask at this point whether PE could be considered as a TC for non-pragmatic (formal, sematic) contrastive analyses. If so, definitional circularity would not be an issue. Such a state of affairs would require, however, that first of all, PE between X_1L_1 and X_2L_2 be established. With reference to this point, I will try to show how the PE in question can be established, in what follows.

I now want to return to some of the questions posed earlier. The definition of PE as a potential attributed to linguistic expressions for performing a corresponding speech act does not satisfy me, i.e., such a way of conceiving PE does not seem to contribute much to the understanding of linguistic phenomena. When we turn speech act (SA) into speech acts (SAs), which one would welcome, the definition itself becomes seemingly much more forceful.[5] According to the adjusted definition

    "The lights are out" (X_1L_1) and

    "Światło się nie świeci" (X_2L_2)

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[3] "We compare in order to see what is similar and what is different in the compared materials. We can only compare items which are in some respect similar, but we cannot use similarity as an independent criterion for deciding how to match items for comparison, since similarity (or difference) is to result from the comparison and not to motivate it" (Krzeszowski 1984).

[4] I address myself to the more general question of Tertium Comparationis in contrastive sociolinguistics in a separate paper, Janicki (in press).

[5] The definiton in question would run as follows: A linguistic expression $X_1 L_1$ is pragmatically equivalent to a linguistic expression $X_2 L_2$ if both X_1 and X_2 can be used to perform corresponding speech *acts* in L_1 and L_2.

would be declared pragmatically equivalent if they can both be used to perform corresponding speech acts in L_1 and L_2. Logically, for X_1L_1 and X_2L_2 to be declared pragmatically equivalent, no identifiable speech act attributable to X_1L_1 could be found to be nonattributable to X_2L_2, and vice versa. What we are brought to consider now is the question of how and who declares two linguistic expressions to be utterances (tokens) exemplifying the same speech act (type). In other words we are finally led to wonder if and how the hypothesis that two linguistic expressions are pragmatically equivalent (not in Oleksy's sense) is falsifiable.

It is not unreasonable to contend that *any* linguistic expression can function as *any* SA, such as request, complaint, reprimand, etc. This is because speech act identification is a function of both verbal and non-verbal behavior. Also, as the highly intricate ways in which the verbal and the non-verbal channels interact to generate intended and interpreted meanings are only partly shared by current interlocutors, a lot of freedom remains for the encoding and decoding of pragmatic meaning. This claim will, I think, gain a significant amount of support from the prototype theory of the concept (Rosch 1977) and its semantic offspring.[6]

If one accepts the view that concepts are prototypes, and that meanings are concepts, what follows is that utterances, for the producing and understanding of which concepts are resorted to, involve prototype-related psycholinguistic activities. What I am trying to say is that the encoder and the decoder bring into interaction their own sets of concepts, relating to whatever they are talking about. Obviously, there is a great deal of similarity in the way the speaker and the hearer conceive the world, i.e., typically define concepts. However, one does not have to juxtapose speakers or hearers from very distant cultures in order to conclude also that, in addition to the similarity in question, a great deal of discrepancy is also present between the speaker and the hearer. This is so particularly because concepts (and thus meanings) get continually redefined thoughout the lifetime of the individual, and upon individual encounters.

What seems to corroborate the existence if concept discrepancies even among people who are culturally very close is the phenomenon of misunderstanding. I believe that we misunderstand close associates and relatives because we differ permanently or temporarily in our typical images (definitions) of even such basic concepts as friendship, argument, excursion, etc. The fact that we often misunderstand each other (being aware of it or not) can also be

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[6] The prototype theory of the concept claims that concepts are typical images typical descriptions — prototypes of whatever they refer to (Rosch 1977). The theory (as opposed to the checklist theories) allows for speakers to judge the *degree* of membership of an object (material or immaterial) in a concept category. Hudson (1980) claims that meanings are concepts. The claim seems to be very well corroborated by Coleman and Kay's (1981) analysis of the English word 'lie'.

explained by the prototype theory of the concept, as the theory allows a great deal of freedom in assigning border-line cases to concept categories.[7]

Let me now bring it all back into line with my previous discussion of PE. The reader is reminded that lists of speech acts differentiated by numerous authors vary in length and speech act categories included. This, I think is at least partly because SA identification as a psycholinguistic activity involves taking recourse to an enormous number of concepts, which, being prototypes, allow a lot of freedom in interpretation. In connection with this, one should remember that no matter how much background information the outside observer (linguistic researcher) will have, he will never have access to all the relevant prototypes involved in encoding and decoding language upon interaction between others. Those prototypes, some of which get continually redefined, are, to an extent, endemic to the individual, as they are learned throughout the unique lifetime of the individual.

Taking into account the potential gap that exists between the speaker's intention (relating to one set of concepts) and the hearer's interpretation (relating to another set of concepts) we should be led to the conclusion that what hearer A will decode as a threat, hearer B may decode as a warning, hearer C as a command, hearer D will assign to the expression a partial membership in one of the three categories, and hearer E will remain utterly nonplussed and undecided.[8]

Even if one accepts the extreme view that, with the interpretational freedom available to interactants, any linguistic expression can function as any SA under felicitous pragmatic conditions, the linguist has to address himself to the question of how linguistic expressions[9] *differ* in respect to the pragmatic meaning that they come to express. In other words, although

a. "Can I talk to you now?"   and   b. "It's almost five"
(=It's almost five, you know I have to go at five, and you know I really need to talk to you; can I talk to you now?)

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[7] Some independent support for the present argument comes from Trudgill (1983).

[8] Let me reflect on the hearer E category; it often happens that under some circumstances we react to simple utterances such as 'It is going to rain tomorrow' in ways such as 'I have absolutely no idea what he really meant', 'Did he mean just to tell me?', 'Did he mean to warn me?', 'Did he mean to suggest something?', etc. In such cases the hearer is left to identify for himself the utterrance in functional terms as any speech act that he wishes.

[9] I adhere here to Oleksy's terminology — 'linguistic expressions' — which I realize could be criticized, but I find it innocuous from the point of view of the purposes of the present argument to retain the term.

may both function as 'requests', they clearly differ in at least two ways:

1. the frequency of occurrence whereupon either expresses a request, and

2. the pragmatic context[10] in which they appear to express 'request'. It follows that looking for pragmatic equivalence in merely qualitative terms (i.e., stating which linguistic expressions can function for example as 'request') does not make much sense. For PE to become meaningful 1 and 2 have to be attended to in a definite manner.

1. will lead to quantitative analyses for the carrying out of which, variable rules have to be resorted to. 2, though in conjunction with 1 will create the real problem. This is because, for the pragmatic context of both X_1L_1 and X_2L_2 to be defined, a theory of linguistic pragmatics has to be addressed. I want to claim then, that the existence of a pragmatic linguistic theory is a prerequisite for the meaningfulness of PE. Only such a theory can define the number and the nature of relevant elements to be compared (cf. Krzeszowski's quotation on p. 19). Thus, only then will it become possible to advance hypotheses concerning pragmatic meaning, i.e., only then could the pragmatic context for X_1L_1 and X_2L_2, expressing for example 'request', be meaningfully defined. It needs to be remembered at this point that any pragmalinguistic theory must incorporate the fact that meaning is generated on the basis of prototype-concepts some of which get continually redefined, and which allow for interpretational freedom.

Conclusions

A. The tenability of the notion of pragmatic equivalence in contrastive analysis should be viewed against the goals set forth by the researcher.

B. For practical purposes (e.g., foreign language teaching, translation) the notion is both defendable and useful. For PE to be tenable in analyses striving to account for the intricasies of language (=theoretical purposes), an explicitly formulated pragmalinguistic theory has to be resorted to. Such a theory, as yet nonexistent, would have to pertain not only to verbal behavior but also to what various researchers have referred to as paralanguage, kinesic behavior, proxemic behavior, haptic behavior, etc. Such a theory would also have to recognize the presence of fuzziness in pertinent phenomena.

C. If my reasoning expressed in B above is correct, then the existence if PE between X_1L_1 and X_2L_2 could be taken to mean that X_1L_1 and X_2L_2 can function as a corresponding speech act *in comparable contexts*. It is exactly for the defining of the comparable contexts that we need a pragmalinguistic theory.

D. The way PE is viewed in C above will hopefully allow us to go beyond what one can say about X_1L_1 and X_2L_2 now (if I am right in my conclusion), namely that any linguistic expression can function as any speech act, which I take to be an uninteresting finding.

E. PE cannot be used as TC for pragmatic contrastive analyses as then, definitional circularity would be involved.

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[10] Pragmatic context' should be undertsood here as including *any* pragmatic element relevant to the encoding and decoding of pragmatic meaning, The ultimate meaning of 'context' will have to be defined by a particular theory adopted.