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Introduction

Japanese psychiatrist Takeo Doi, in his account of his first visit to America, recalls receiving some small favor from his American supervisor: "Feeling the need to say something, I produced not 'thank you,' as one might expect, but 'I'm sorry.' 'What are you sorry for?' he replied promptly, giving me an odd look. I was highly embarrassed." (Doi, 1973, p. 12) The learning of a language entails of course mastering the many functional speech acts of that language. As the form and significance of speech acts vary across cultures, language teachers are required to do more than simply supply their students with grammar and vocabulary. Language teachers must teach not only how to do things with words, but also, when, where, and why. Although the heyday of the "notional-functional" syllabus has passed, ESL/EFL textbooks are still structured, to some extent, around the teaching of particular, socially necessary speech acts, such as: introducing oneself, making a request, declining an invitation, and so forth (see e.g., Richards, et al., 1990). In our thinking, in our textbooks, and in our
teaching, we all employ, at least implicitly, a theory of speech acts. Consequently, a critique of Speech Act Theory may supply some insight into our own assumptions, which in turn may help us understand some of the differences that exist between different communicative contexts. Anna Wierzbicka asserts that: "from the outset, studies in speech acts have suffered from an astonishing ethnocentrism and, to a considerable degree, they continue to do so" (1985, p.145). Therefore, I think best to begin at the "outset" with the work of language philosopher J.L. Austin, the founder of speech act theory.

**Austin and Derrida**

Austin (1975) initiates the project in *How to Do Things With Words* with the observation that not all utterances are statements which can be deemed either true or false. Some utterances, he notes, are used to "get things done." These utterances, such as promises, requests, apologies, and the like, Austin calls "performatives" (and John Searle will later call them "speech acts"), and, rather than being true or false, such utterances are successful or defective, or, to use Austin's terms, "felicitous" or "infelicitous." A performative, according to Austin, has been successfully executed to the extent that it conforms to certain established conventions, and, Austin is quick to point out,
regardless of how it may correspond to an "inward and spiritual act" (1975, p.9). If in the appropriate circumstances I say "I promise to pay you five dollars," I have made a promise, regardless of what was running through my mind at the time. In Austin's classic phrasing: "Accuracy and morality alike are on the side of the plain saying that our word is our bond." (p.10). However, in order to pursue this analysis, based solely on convention, Austin finds it necessary to exclude utterances, such as jokes and poems, which might prevent "I promise to pay you five dollars" from being an effective promise. Austin insists that "the words must be spoken 'seriously'"(p.9), thus he covertly reintroduces the principle of intention. It is precisely on this point that French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1977) takes issue with Austin (see also Culler, 1982, pp.110-125; and Fish, 1989).

Convention and intention are logically incompatible, as the two models can offer conflicting explanations for the same utterance. But in his "deconstruction" of speech act theory, Derrida's argument is not that Austin's appeal to intention is inappropriate, or "wrong," but rather that, in a rigorous philosophical system, such an appeal is unavoidable. Wierzbicka states this dilemma quite succinctly: "It is quite obvious that speech acts differ from one another in terms of the speakers' subjective attitudes, that is, in
terms of their assumptions, intentions, and so on. However, other people’s assumptions, intentions, and so on, cannot be observed and ultimately remain unknown to outsiders” (1991, p.164). Thus, if we begin by basing our theory of speech acts on intention, we will inevitably refer to sociolinguistic conventions, because intentions are ultimately unknowable. But if we begin (as Austin does) by basing our theory of speech acts on sociolinguistic conventions, we will inevitably refer to intentions. It is because, despite the fact that speakers' intentions remain unknowable to us, we are compelled to postulate their existence in order to make sense of speech acts. As Rosaldo (1982) observes, "we cannot conjure a linguistic world where utterances bear no relation to assumptions of truth," and "conversation is untenable if speakers prove entirely insincere" (p.212). Even a speech act as perfunctory and mundane as thanking is difficult to conceive of without the existence of an intentional state known as "gratitude" (Ibid.) In short, our determinations of meaning oscillate continually between the perspectives of intention and convention, as any theory based on one of these models must inevitably have recourse to the other. And in the lives of ordinary people (that is to say, non-philosophers) involved in the daily negotiation of meaning, the model which is employed will vary from context to context, and from culture to culture.
Searle and the Ideology of Sincerity

Interestingly, when the American philosopher John Searle (1969, 1979) takes up Austin's project of developing a theory of speech acts, intention is precisely the area where critics find fault with him. Searle, like Austin before him, views intention not as an inner spiritual act, but rather as simply something one takes responsibility for when uttering this or that speech act. In Searle's words: "insincere promises are promises nonetheless" (1969, p.62). However, the very fact that Searle chooses promising as the paradigm for his theorizing reveals to some critics a peculiar bias. As anthropologist Michelle Rosaldo puts it, "the centrality of promising supports a theory where conditions on the happiness of a speech act look primarily not to context, but to beliefs and attitudes pertaining to the speaker's private self" (1982, p.212). "To think of promising," Rosaldo points out, "is to focus on the sincerity and integrity of the one who speaks. Unlike such things as greetings that we often speak because, it seems, 'one must,' a promise would appear to come, authentically, from inside out" (1982, p.211). In her study of the Phillipine Ilongots, Rosaldo argues that Searle's theory is ethnocentric and inadequate, because the Ilongots "lack 'our' interest in considerations like sincerity and truth; their lives lead them to concentrate, instead, on social bonds and interactive meanings" (1982, p.202).
Mary Louise Pratt (1986), in an essay entitled, "Ideology and Speech-Act Theory," extends this critique, adding that "speech act theory implicitly adopts one-to-one speech as the norm or unmarked case for language use," and in so doing contributes to an excessively privatized view of language. This view Pratt calls the "ideology of sincerity," which "supposes the existence behind every normal speech act of an authentic, self-consistent, essential subject, a 'true self" (p.62). Pratt points out "that people always speak from and in a socially constituted position" and that 'speaking 'for oneself,' 'from the heart' names only one position among the many from which a person might speak in the course of [his or] her everyday life"(1986, p. 63). However, the purpose of this paper is not simply to mount another critique of Speech Act Theory, but rather to demonstrate how the assumptions revealed by such a critique may help us recognize some of our own cultural assumptions. The ideology of sincerity gives us a biased view of other cultures. More importantly, it blinds us to certain aspects of our own culture.

**Sincerity and Makoto**

If we wish to identify a source of misunderstandings between Americans and Japanese, we might gain some insight by examining their differing notions of sincerity. As Barnlund (1989, p.113) points out, to Americans words like sincerity "are used to refer to
the consistency between what a person says and what he or she does; they imply that the public person is an accurate reflection of the private person." But in Japan sincerity, translated makoto, tends "to refer to the capacity of the person to subordinate his or her egoistic needs to the desires of others" (p.115). As Marsella (1985) notes: "For Japanese, sincerity is expressed in behavior which is in accord with one's role expectations, while for Americans, it is behaving in accord with one's inner feelings" (p.12). Hence, when we compare the two words, sincerity and makoto, we find not a simple equivalence but instead two concepts which, in the context of our discussion, seem diametrically opposed—with sincerity signifying adherence to personal convictions (or inner intentions) and makoto signifying adherence to social expectations (or external conventions).

**Compliments: Americans and Japanese**

In the case of Americans and Japanese, cross-cultural studies of particular speech acts suggest an ongoing conflict between politeness and sincerity, convention and intention. Studies of complimenting, for example, highlight questions of intentionality. The primary difference between a compliment and (mere) flattery lies in the concept of intention: a compliment is sincere praise, while flattery is insincere praise. And here sincerity implies that
one is expressing one's true feelings without manipulative intent. Thus, the distinction between compliments and flattery cannot be made without appealing to the notion of intention. Consequently, it is significant when Barnlund and Araki note that, in a series of interviews with American and Japanese subjects, "Americans tended to draw a sharper boundary between compliments and flattery" (Barnlund, Araki, 1985, p.12).

In the conventionalist scheme, the distinction between compliments and flattery becomes irrelevant. And in Japan, it seems to be generally accepted that the subordinate praises his or her superior. As one of my Japanese colleagues astutely put it: "Flattery means you're worthy of being flattered." That is, nobody flatters an unimportant person. The fact that someone is praised—sincerely or insincerely—means that that person is in some way important. Thus we may infer, like Barnlund, that for Japanese compliments are conventional acts, "ritualized exchanges" (Barnlund, 1975, p.42), and sincerity is not an important consideration. However, we may also infer that Americans, focusing on intention, often have an idealized and therefore unrealistic view of their own speech behavior. Nessa Wolfson (1983; 1986; 1988) of the University of Pennsylvania has done several studies on compliments in American English. When Wolfson began her research, those involved in the project had
"intuitively" assumed that they would find substantial variability in the data they collected because they considered compliments to be "a spontaneous expression of admiration and/or approval" (Wolfson, 1983, p.85). They also expected the compliments somehow to reflect "originality" (Ibid). In fact, Wolfson's data shows rather that American compliments are extremely formulaic, being "remarkably similar both in syntax and in lexicon" (Ibid.) Three syntactic patterns accounted for 80 percent of the compliments analyzed. Wolfson concludes: "However sincere compliments may be, they represent a social strategy in that the speaker attempts to create or maintain rapport with the addressee by expressing admiration or approval" (Wolfson, 1983, p.86.)

However, Wolfson's initial assumption that compliments would be "spontaneous" and "original" is significant, and corroborates comments made by other writers regarding American speech behavior in general. Wierzbicka (1991), for example, notes that Americans "go to great trouble to sound sincere. To achieve this, they seek to express their feelings in a personalized way, in contrast to Japanese, who rely on standard forms and do not view 'clichés' or ready-made formulae in a negative way" (p. 120). "In Japanese culture, there is no room for this kind of attitude because the emphasis is very largely on saying what one thinks one should say, not on saying what one really feels. Hence, there is no perceived
need to use a personalized form 'to ring true' "(p.121). Wolfson's "native intuition" of course simply expresses the ideology of sincerity, which favors meaning over form, intention over convention, self over social system.

**The "Conventions" of Sincerity**

If, as Wolfson's research indicates, our compliments are not "spontaneous" and "original," how do we determine the sincerity of a compliment? Like any speech act, we make our determination by reference to certain established conventions.

1. **Intonation.** One established convention of sincerity can be found in intonation. As Katsuaki Togo (2001) tells us, "the improper use of intonation can lead to misunderstandings and embarrassment. For example, the phrase 'I'm sorry' may be said with a high falling intonation on 'sorry', which makes it sound sincerely apologetic, or with a high falling intonation on 'I'm' and a low rising one on 'sorry', which makes it sound casual and even businesslike. The same is true with other common expressions like 'Thank you,' 'Excuse me,' and even simple replies like 'Yes' and 'No'."

2. **Frequency.** Another variable we consider when determining the sincerity of any speech act is frequency. Obviously, if a person were continually apologizing to you, you might begin to question
his sincerity—and this is perhaps what happens when an American encounters Japanese who, it seems, apologizes more than is necessary. However, an interesting turn occurs when Americans, to whom sincerity is so important, find their own speech acts evaluated by the same criterion. As Barnlund and Araki note in their cross-cultural study of compliments, "Japanese are often troubled and overwhelmed by the frequency and excessive phrasing of American compliments" (Barnlund, Araki, 1985, p.25). The American compulsion to compliment people can impress outside observers as insincere (see Herbert, Straight, 1989, p.42).

3. Direction. Still another variable we might consult to determine the sincerity of an utterance, especially a compliment, is its direction. For example, Wolfson observes that, among Americans, "the overwhelming majority of all compliments are given to people of the same age and status as the speaker" (1983, p. 91). And further, when compliments do occur between people of unequal status, it is usually the superior who compliments the subordinate (Ibid.; see also Herbert, Straight, 1989, p.44). This data raises the question of why so few subordinates compliment their superiors, and a plausible explanation immediately suggests itself. Obviously, subordinates fear that a compliment might be interpreted as flattery. Thus, one sure way to avoid charges of insincerity is to never compliment someone from whom you may have something to gain.
As already noted, intentions are unknowable; therefore, we must refer to certain established conventions (such as intonation, frequency and direction) in order to determine the sincerity of a compliment. In fact, even if Wolfson’s data had been "spontaneous" and "original," that would only mean that the appearance of spontaneity and originality were two conventional properties of compliments. For remember: Wierzbicka does not say that Americans go to great trouble to be sincere, but rather that they go to great trouble to sound sincere. We say it like we mean it. This situation brings to mind a piece of advice movie producer Sam Goldwyn once gave to his actors: "The most important thing in acting is honesty; once you learn to fake that, you're in" (quoted in Fish, 1989, p.37). Indeed, all of the phrasing, intonation, gestures, etc., which constitute what we consider a sincere utterance are all things which we have learned. In short, they are conventional. It is only the ideology of sincerity which would make us think otherwise.

**Ideology**

Now that we have examined the word sincerity, we might turn our attention to the word ideology. Ideology indicates a structure of values and beliefs which may influence reality but which is not identical to reality. It is what we preach, as opposed to what we
practice. It is what we think we should say, as opposed to what we actually do say. One place where we might find such a discrepancy is, of course, our textbooks. I take, as an example, *American Mentality*, by Masha Rozman and Kyoko Kato, an English reading textbook designed specifically for Japanese learners. In her (Japanese) preface to this text, Kato makes it clear that she hopes the book will teach Japanese students to be international people. And, among other things, she urges her readers to learn the difference between a "compliment" and "flattery," and to act accordingly.

In the chapter entitled "Flattery," we read that, to Americans: "Flattery is the opposite of a compliment, and it produces the opposite reaction in people. People enjoy receiving compliments, but dislike flattery." (Rozman & Kato, 1989, p.56.) Such pronouncements, while true to certain culturally held beliefs, simply do not describe reality. And while it is no doubt important to teach social expectations as well as social practices, I would maintain that it is also important that we know the difference. As she continues her discussion of flattery, Rozman offers some examples. Here is one: "A certain woman goes to a party dressed to the nines, but her dress is in bad taste and doesn't suit her. If you tell her, 'That's a beautiful dress,' that is only flattery because you are being insincere. If you want to make her feel good by paying
her a compliment, then you have to find something about her that you can praise with sincerity. For example, 'I love your hairstyle'" (p. 57). Of course, to many of us, it may be difficult to see what is so sincere about telling a woman in an ugly dress that you love her hairstyle. However, I would say the problem here lies not with the example but with its interpretation. For, as Wolfson points out, despite any conscious concern for "sincerity." in practice complimenting remains a social strategy. Therefore, it seems quite logical that it should be taught as such. Not surprisingly, if you ask a native speaker to describe his or her own culture, you are likely to be presented with a somewhat idealized picture. This tendency is by no means restricted to members of Western cultures. If, for example, you ask a Japanese to instruct you in the use of keigo, or honorifics, you are likely to find that what you are told doesn't really match what happens in the "real world"(cf. Tsuruta, 1992).

Wolfson notes that many researchers have demonstrated the inability of native speakers to give accurate accounts of their own speech behavior, because "sociolinguistic rules are largely below the level of conscious awareness" (Wolfson, 1983, p.83). Wolfson concludes that "if we are to incorporate sociolinguistic information within the ESL curriculum, there is a great need for careful empirical studies of the communicative behavior of native speakers of English" (Ibid.) I would add that, for teachers as well as
students, language learning necessarily entails recognition of the hypocrisies of the target culture. It entails overcoming our own cultural narcissism. It entails learning perhaps that Americans are not always as sincere as they like to think they are. It entails learning perhaps that Japanese are not always as polite as they like to think they are. As long as we have values, we will have ideals which represent those values. And as long as we have ideals, we will inevitably fall short of them. In closing, to Americans and like-minded Westerners, I would only remind you that sincerity, frankness, honesty, are just a few of the many masks we wear in the course of our daily interactions. And to learners of English, I can only offer these few words of advice: The most important thing in learning English is sincerity: once you learn to fake that, you're in.

References


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