

General Introduction

1. Background of the Study

Speech acts are a cultural-rooted property of language. Though they are a universal phenomenon, their realisation in actual communication settings differs across languages and cultures. The interest in this area has led to the introduction of many disciplines and theories. One of them is cross-cultural communication which deals with speech acts in two or more languages/cultures to uncover differences and similarities regarding the favoured patterns (see Chapter II for further details). Moreover, politeness has been given much attention. Researchers aim at providing taxonomy of politeness strategies employed in face-to-face encounters and the conditions under which they are used, namely when speech acts are performed. Many theories have been introduced to conceptualise speakers' behaviour in a comprehensive way. Dealing with politeness in speech acts research is indispensable (see Chapter II for details). Taking the second and foreign language learner into consideration, another discipline has come to light i.e. interlanguage pragmatics. In interlanguage pragmatics, the interest has always been the production, perception and the learning of speech acts by non-native speakers. Numerous interlanguage studies have investigated the extent to which learners are able to emulate the native behaviour (e.g. Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, 1986; Bergman and Kasper, 1993; Cenoz and Valencia, 1996; Jung, 2004; Al-Zumor, 2011). Additionally, such type of studies attempts to show how learners are likely to fail in face-to-face communication with their native counterparts in the so-called gate-keeping encounters. The aforementioned disciplines also shed light on miscommunication which is the result of the failure to convey and perceive the intended meaning.

The production of speech acts necessitates a tactful choice and combination of linguistic elements that could best convey the utterances' illocutionary force. These strategies mirror cultural-rooted assumptions about the situational variations of a certain speech event

given the age of the participants, their status, their relationship, the formality of the situation and the aim of the speech event, whether interactional or transactional or else. Even among native speakers of a particular language, miscommunication might occur. Any misjudgement of the interlocutors' expectations as regards what is said and how it is said may lead to effects that range from extremely serious to hilarious. For instance, in the Anglo-Saxon culture, a disagreement with a suggestion without modification, whether deliberate or accidental, might sound impolite or insulting. Furthermore, if someone receives a compliment and accepts it, he/she then violates the unwritten rule stating that one should disagree with the complimenter and avoid self-praise and, thus, this person might be perceived as arrogant. As such, miscommunication might happen in encounters among native speakers, who have a complete command on their language and are fully aware of the unwritten rules of their culture, let alone when learners of a given language are a part of the scene.

2. Statement of the Problem

The realisation and perception of speech acts have been proven to differ cross-culturally as shown by the research literature as well as the intercultural experience of individuals. As an example, a direct request in one language/culture may be palatable, but may not be as such in another. In a similar vein, in one language/culture a receiver of a compliment may respond by a non-verbal action like offering the complimented object to the complimenter, in the case of Arabic culture. In a culture like the English one, the receiver of the compliment sees it sufficient to disagree with the complimenter in respect to the modesty value. Such cross-cultural diversity makes the task of the second and foreign language learners a really challenging one. Here, communicative competence becomes essential. In its late versions, interactional skills needed in the production of speech acts and speech act sets along with cross-cultural awareness have been emphasised by many scholars (e.g. Celce-Murcia et al., 1995; Celce-Murcia, 2007). Learners' development and production of the

different aspects of the target language is what came to be known in the history of language acquisition research as *interlanguage*.

In the present research, the area of speech acts is selected since speech acts occupy a considerable place in the pragmatic theory. Additionally, the potential for realising and perceiving speech act has been enormously stressed in the late models of communicative competence. Precedence has been given to requests and apologies based on their frequency in the target language. Though the linguistic materials used for performing requests and apologies may be predictable to a certain degree (*can you...? Could I...? Would you ...? I'm sorry, excuse me* etc.), their employment in a context remains a tall order. The reason is that learners cannot easily avoid *transferring* the mother language/culture's values, communication style, expectations and perceptions to their interlanguage.

3. Aim of the Study

Studies dealing with speech acts cross-culturally and in interlanguage production have been conducted for three decades or so. This study is approached on the assumption that, in Algeria, such studies are still in their infancy. That is to say, there is a dearth in publications tackling this issue in the reviews and journals of language and linguistics in comparison with other Arab countries. Interlanguage studies conducted in the context of the teaching/learning of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Algeria are still bound to the microlinguistic level i.e. dealing with language as a system in itself focusing on grammar, phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics. In the light of this statement, the present research aims, in the first place, to link research at the level of interlanguage pragmatics in Algeria to the wider research community. Besides, it allows us to spot areas of cross-cultural variation in the mother and target cultures and unveil the place of the mother language/culture in the learners' interlanguage system. Through the present conduct, we identify factors influencing learners' production which are not related to cross-linguistic/cultural differences. Additionally, the

study provides implications and suggests recommendations that would help in the pedagogy of speech acts as well as in intercultural communication, including translation studies.

5. Research Questions

The present study is an attempt to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the points of cross-cultural variability in Arabic and English requests and apologies regarding:
 - a. Linguistic materials used for realising them?
 - b. The sociocultural assumptions underlying their performance?
2. Does pragmatic transfer in the interlanguage of Algerian EFL learners occur at:
 - a. The pragmalinguistic level (linguistic materials)?
 - b. The sociopragmatic level (employment of strategies)?
3. If any, what are the other factors affecting the pragmatic competence of Algerian EFL learners?
4. Does language proficiency improve pragmatic performance or does it hinder it by encouraging the exhibition of more transfer?

4. Hypotheses

There are two hypotheses behind this investigation and both pertain to pragmatic transfer in using the two speech acts under question.

1. Pragmatic transfer correlates positively with language proficiency. That is, the high-proficient learners are likely to exhibit more pragmalinguistic transfer as they acquire the linguistic means necessary for that. The sociopragmatic one is unlikely to be influenced by language proficiency as it is related to learners' experiences instead.

2. Pragmatic transfer is unlikely to happen at the level of the core strategies in requests (head acts) and apologies (expressions of apology), as they are realised with seemingly predictable linguistic structures.

6. Research Tools

To answer the research questions and verify the hypotheses of the study, the requests and apologies produced by Algerian EFL learners are analysed. These learners which represent two proficiency levels: low-proficient (freshmen) and high-proficient (seniors) respond to a Discourse Completion Task/Test. This product-oriented study is meant to be an interlanguage study, in the first place, but it is developed from a cross-cultural perspective. That is to say, the learners' performance (interlanguage, henceforth IL) is compared and contrasted with the performance of two control groups. First, there is a group of Arabic native speakers (henceforth ANSs); data provided by them is labelled as first language (L1). Second, there is a group of Anglo-Americans, English native speakers (henceforth ENSs); data provided by them is referred to as target language (henceforth TL). Similar to interlanguage studies at the microlinguistic level, similarity between the three data sets evidences *positive* transfer, meanwhile the dissimilarity between L1 and TL with IL being similar to L1 and different from TL evidences *negative* transfer.

7. Structure of the Study

This thesis falls into six chapters:

The first chapter deals with general issues related to speech act production. These are the latest versions of communicative competence, speech act theory and how it emerged in the philosophy of language, and cross-cultural and intercultural communication, as a context where speech acts are used.

The second chapter is devoted to the research issues that are directly related to the theory of pragmatic transfer. This chapter consists of four sections. The first one sheds light on the disciplines of cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics. The second deals with the issue of politeness and face and how they are related to speech act production. The third deals with pragmatic transfer, a research sub-area under interlanguage studies which is the focal point in the present study. The chapter is concluded by reviewing early and recent studies on requests and apologies.

The third chapter discusses the methodological issues of the study. These are the different tools used for collecting speech act data, interpretation of statistics, instrument, participants and procedure.

The fourth and the fifth chapters are devoted to the practical side of the study whereby we describe the findings and discuss them. These two chapters include summary sections where we answer the research questions and check the hypotheses of the study.

The sixth and last chapter discusses the implications of the study and makes recommendations for some related practical areas. The implications are, on the whole, pedagogical in nature (the teaching/learning of requests and apologies) and could be extended to intercultural communication and translation studies.