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 Comparisonis (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. He further claims that the goal of contrastive analyses of language use is to establish whether or not linguistic expressions, one pertaining to L₁ and another to L₂, are pragmatically equivalent. Quoting Oleksy on this essential issue one gets the following:

"A linguistic expression X₁L₁ is pragmatically equivalent to a linguistic expression X₂L₂ if both X₁ and X₂ can be used to perform the same speech act (SA) in L₁ and L₂" (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 defensible. That is, it seems fairly easy to claim that two linguistic expressions X₁L₁ and X₂L₂ potentially func-
Tenability of the notion "pragmatic equivalence"

in performing a number of other acts. Which of the other acts are still corresponding, and which are not? What are the non-corresponding acts? How many speech acts do \( X_1 L_1 \) and \( X_1 L_4 \) have to potentially perform in order to be really pragmatically equivalent? If the answer to the last question is yes, then the question should be posed of whether hypotheses such as "ALL the speech acts that \( X_1 L_1 \) and \( X_1 L_4 \) can perform are corresponding" are falsifiable. If the answer to the last question is not yes, then obviously, what follows is the question of "how many?". If questions like those raised above are shunned, then 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 (Krzewska 1984). 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. Consequently, pragmatic equivalence would not motivate but result from such analyses. One might want to ask whether PE could be considered as a TC for non-pragmatic (formal, semantic) 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 \( X_1 L_1 \) and \( X_1 L_4 \) 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. According to the adjusted definition:

"The lights are out" \( (X_1 L_1) \) and

"Światło się nie świeci" \( (X_1 L_2) \)

...
Tenability of the notion "pragmatic equivalence"

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. 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. These 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.

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 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?)

1 Some independent support for the present argument comes from Trudgill (1988).
2 Let me reflect on the hearer E category; it often happens that under certain 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 utterance in functional terms as any speech act that he wishes.
3 I adhere here to Okeky'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.

would be declared pragmatically equivalent if they can both be used to perform corresponding speech acts in L₁ and L₂. Logically, for X₁L₁ and X₂L₂ to be declared pragmatically equivalent, no identifiable speech act attributable to X₁L₁ could be found to be nonattributable to X₂L₂, and vice versa. What we are brought to consider now is the question of how and why declarations of two linguistic expressions 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 Okeky'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.

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 throughout the lifetime of the individual, and upon individual encounters.

What seems to corroborate the existence of 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, excuse, etc. The fact that we often misunderstand each other (being aware of it or not) can also be
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 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 as for example '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, though in conjunction with 1 will create the real problem. This is because, for the pragmatic context of both \( X_1L_1 \) and \( X_1L_2 \) 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 \( X_1L_2 \), expressing for example 'request', be meaningfully defined. It needs to be remembered at this point that any pragmatic 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 intricacies of language (=theoretical purposes), an explicitly formulated pragmalinguistic theory has to be resorted to. Such a theory, as yet nonexistent, would have to pertain 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 \( X_1L_2 \) could be taken to mean that \( X_1L_1 \) and \( X_1L_2 \) 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 \( X_1L_2 \) 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.

REFERENCES