

TENSE AND TENTATIVENESS

A brief description of the behaviour in English, Galician and Spanish

José M. ORO CABANAS

Colegio Universitario de Lugo

0. Introduction

What I would like to do in this paper is to suggest ways in which we might make use of the verbal interaction in relation to linguistic and sociolinguistic processes of gradual change through the speaker's behaviour. More specifically, I intend to consider the case of the production of *tentativeness* as a sociolinguistic criterion of semantic movement in English and the correspondent utterances in Galician and Spanish. This is to provoke discussion on what I consider a basic problem in achieving interactive meaning within the field of pragmatic interrelations in interlingual situations.

In recent years interest in «use» of the English Language has increased enormously. A detailed study of tentativeness, nevertheless, has not been carried out yet. One reason, obviously, is that tentativeness is more a sociolinguistic procedure in relation to individuals' socio-communicative behaviour rather than a merely linguistic one; another reason may be that it is not easy to show the pragmatic interrelations involved in the various forms a speaker combines lexical items to produce communicative interaction.

For almost any language most variables concerning sociolinguistic procedures are the most difficult to analyse, as the reactions given change constantly and this modifies, undoubtedly, any linguistic behaviour.

It seems to be the case that modals are considered the current linguistic structure which exhibits this kind of behaviour. Tentativeness, as a matter of fact, is not exclusive of modals. It can be expressed in various ways in different languages. For instance, choice of one tense or another, in many utterances, depends on the effect of tentativeness.

As Palmer (1986: 7) states

(...) different languages grammaticalize different parts of the overall semantic system. (...) they may organize the semantic field in different ways (...). (...) they use different grammatical devices (...).

1. Tentativeness

This term involves both «pragmatic interrelations» concerning politeness of meaning controlling the linguistic behaviour of the speaker towards the addressee, in order to create the proper atmosphere in human relationships in a broader sense and, to be tactful enough when requesting, commanding, etc, in more concrete situations.

Tentativeness, thus, must be analysed in detail as an important factor of pragmatic interaction in effective communication. Besides, it can rarely be translated literally from one language to another. In fact, there are no absolute rules.

It is quite clear that politeness, however, depends more on intonational patterns than on structural ones. Nevertheless, it is important not to forget the importance of the behaviour of structural tenses as they constitute the basic element over which the intonational patterns interact.

2. Modality and Tentativeness

It is obvious that modals in English are used in the majority of utterances to mark «correctness, and politeness» on the part of the speaker, as in 1 and 2,

- 1 May I smoke here?
- 2 Could /would you close the door?

and its correspondent forms in Galician and Spanish

- 1a ¿Podo fumar aqui?
- 1b ¿Puedo fumar aqui?
- 2a ¿Poderías pecha-la porta?
- 2b ¿Podrías cerrar la puerta?

What is less obvious is the characterisation of the semantic function of modality as the only grammatical procedure to show tentativeness, in terms of formal communicative behaviour, and within this semantic function of modality the selection of the most appropriate form.

3. Non-modality and tentativeness

A lot has been discussed about the words «time» and «tense» in linguistics. It seems evident, now, that there is no specific verbal form (tense) to perform an action, activity or state in a particular period of time, though some tenses are more appropriate than others in discourse. It also seems evident that there are different types of interaction between tenses and time.

Although tenses may indicate whether an action, activity or state is past, present or future, other linguistic features are to be included when analysing their behaviour from a communicative point of view, in order to understand the message on the one hand and on the other to compare or contrast a particular linguistic behaviour of one specific language with other languages.

Needless to say, cultural aspects integrated in different communities are to be expressed through linguistic connotations which, in a way, may condition the final act of speech in spite of nearness of meaning. It is also true that the patterns of linguistic or sociolinguistic behaviour vary from one community to another and this also affects the communicative interaction. Besides, in many occurrences, the choice of one tense or another depends on formal or informal patterns within the cultural behaviour that a particular community shows and the choice of the same tense in a different language to express a similar interactive meaning does not fulfil this purpose, as this may offer the same temporal aspect but not other connotations of meaning involved in the utterance by the influence of the internal or external connotations of the view of the world.

Linguists seem to agree that «time» and «tense» are to be considered «semantic» rather than «grammatical» terms. Thus, even though verbal tenses are used to indicate whether an action, activity or state is, was or will be complete, or whether it is, was or will be in progress over a period of time, in some cases specific connotations or denotations integrated in the language may condition the choice of the appropriate tense, especially when «marked» or «unmarked» times or aspects of tentativeness are involved in the act of speech. This becomes more complicated because of the capacity of two or more tenses to indicate one specific period of time under different semantic connotations. This can be seen in the analysis of utterances 3, 4, 5 and 6 and its corresponding way of expressing a similar meaning in Galician and Spanish.

- 3 I hope you will stay with us.
- 4 I am hoping you will stay with us.
- 5 Will you give us a hand this afternoon?
- 6 Will you be giving us a hand this afternoon?

Whereas, apparently, 3 and 4 carry over a similar meaning, the choice of one or the other is neither a question of time selection nor of temporariness or continuous discourse but a question of being or not more «tentative» to the addressee. While 3 seems a neutral offer where feelings are not apparent, 4 shows the expectations of the speaker's feelings towards the addressee, contrasting, thus, the inside and outside point of view within the language act of speech.

In a very similar situation stands 5 in relation to 6, though the semantic implications are to be expressed with other terms. The main difference, however, becomes again that of «tentativeness», as this aspect of behaviour

is marked more in using progressive tenses in the act of speech where the addition of «please» seems not to be necessary. Sentence 6, is, then, to be considered more tentative than 5 as the addressee is given a chance in the choice of performing the actual action, or not. In fact, in 4 the speaker is enquiring the addressee as regards his afternoon whereabouts. Thus, there is a significant interaction of time intention and the speaker's tentative inside view in terms both of pragmatic interrelation and of conceptual grammar. In this way, the communicative effect appears to be more vivid and, no doubt, more tactful. It seems, then, easier for the addressee to give an excuse in 4 and 6 than in 3 and 5, as the possibility for excuse is greater.

Thus, whereas 5 would be a request about somebody's willingness, influenced by the outside view of the world, 6, being more tentative, is influenced by the inside view.

There is great evidence of the relationship expressed by different tenses indicating future in relation to the psychological emphasis of a view of the world, considered from both the inside and the outside point of view. This state of affairs is sometimes focused more in terms of «use» rather than in terms of usage.

Whereas the choice of any of the verbal forms in terms of grammar shows the «nearness» in time between future and present, pragmatic interaction through «use» reveals different semantic connotations of the speaker's thoughts. Thus, the selection of one or another tense to express a definite time is conditioned by abstract concepts of the type of «definiteness», «arrangement», «brevity», «near facts», «current plans», «reference to future events», etc.

In fact, in some utterances the «use» of the language plays a very important role and the resulting implications may not be easy to explain through normal «usage». Thus, where the «use» of a language has established basic or other types of semantic connotations which do not follow the normal patterns of meaning settled in «usage», a new line of interpretation has to be considered in order to explain the meaning of such utterances. It seems, then, interesting to notice that according to «usage» 6 does not say much more than 5, but according to «use» it should be understood that apart from the essential part of the message (i.e. asking for help), different connotative appreciations appear to be implicit in the overall realization (i.e. where he will actually be in the afternoon), implying, then, a significant interaction of time intention and the speaker's tentative inside view in terms of both pragmatic interaction and conceptual grammar. Needless to say that the communicative effect in 6 is more tactful and more vivid than the communicative effect in 5, to which the addressee couldn't easily give an excuse.

Not all languages, however, reflect «tentativeness» in the same way and this shows even more the socio-linguistic relevance in the interrelations between different tenses and tense equivalents. In spite of these assumptions,

everything in grammar can, perhaps, be explained through the contrastive and descriptive analysis of the inside and outside view of the world.

In analysing corresponding utterances to 3-6 in Spanish and Galician this socio-linguistic relevance can be seen more clearly, c.f. 3a/b, 4a/b, 5a/b and 6a/b.

- 3a Espero que te quedas con nosotros.
- 3b Espero que quedes con nós.
- 4a Nos gustaría que te quedaras /ses con nosotros.
- 4b Gustaríanos que quedases con nós
- 5a ¿Nos echarás una mano esta tarde?
- 5b ¿Botararnos unha man esta tarde?
- 6a ¿Puedes (vas a) echarnos una mano esta tarde?
- 7b ¿Podes (vasnos) botar unha man esta tarde?

As can be seen in the correspondence of 1 to 1a/b, 2 to 2a/b, 3 to 3a/b, 4 to 4a/b, 5 to 5a/b and 6 to 6a/b in a contrastive use of all three languages, whereas 1, 2, 3 and 5 use the same modal or non-modal (simple present tense and future simple) verbal tense form in English, Galician and Spanish, the other utterances are expressed in English with different forms to the ones used by Galician and Spanish, in order to maintain «nearness» of meaning in all three languages, as following «usage» patterns would make the overall meaning rather redundant and imprecise in L2 and L3 and would not show the aspect of tentativeness included in the English utterances. This entails that the effect of tentativeness is often marked by choosing different tenses in concrete realisations due to social and linguistic behaviour.

Needless to say, there is great evidence of the relationship expressed by proper tenses and tense equivalents indicating present and future time, concerning the psychological emphasis of the individual's view of the world, either from the inside or the outside point of view. But, this has sometimes to be focused more in terms of «use» than in terms of «usage».

Whereas the choice of any of the verbal forms in terms of grammar shows the «nearness» in time concerning present, past or future, pragmatic interaction through «use» reveals different semantic connotations of the speaker's thoughts in well educated linguistic communities. Thus, the selection of any given tense to express a definite time is conditioned, as stated before, by abstract concepts of the type of «definiteness», arrangement, brevity, near facts, current plans, reference to the time of an event itself, etc., but socio-linguistic procedures may vary the interactive meaning not only in different communities or in a particular speaker but also in different languages.

Under these assumptions, whereas 5 would be a request about somebody's willingness and thus, consequently, influenced by the outside view of the communicative world in terms of established usage, 6, on the other hand, would be more tactful as it was performed in terms of an inside point of view, showing the tactful speaker's attitude towards the addressee.

Under these «time» and «tense» interrelations it is worthwhile to mention that the simple present tense is not very much used in a tentative way in English, in spite of intonation patterns.

Let's consider sentences 7 and 7 a/b

7 The term starts in September.

7a El trimestre empieza en septiembre.

7b O trimestre empeza en setembro.

Even though 7 and 7a/b would, perhaps, show the most definite type of future in all three languages (i.e. the future as a fact) not any aspect of tentativeness is included in the communicative interaction. Of course, the future is not a fact. Nevertheless, the use of the simple tense in the examples above constitutes, no doubt, the nearest we can get to refer to something very definite (i.e. nearness of fact) in terms of future time. Caution, however, would be implicit in progressive utterances in English (as in «the term is starting in September») whereas Spanish and Galician would make no use of them in this sense. Thus the interaction between semantic connotations expressed by the simple present tense and future time utterances focus a more specific and gradual pragmatic relationship from the speaker towards the addressee in a sociolinguistic temporal context. In connection to this, whereas «will» and «shall» focus on the event itself and in most occasions one should know that to be polite something close to the present must be emphasised, it is moreover contradictory that one cannot say

8* I'm sorry I can come but I'll take John to the cinema that evening.

as this is an outside use and, no doubt, a question of philosophical emphasis of a view of the world. It seems, then evident that the interaction between the semantic implications between utterances including present tense, semantic connotations and future time expressions may focus towards a more specific, though sometimes gradual, pragmatic relationship in the speaker's attitude in sociolinguistic contextualised utterances.

Examples such as these show that speakers can convey either similar meanings or quite different ones by using structural identical patterns in different languages. However, even within the same language there might be different interpretations if the social and conversational uses have not been properly acquired. And although these sentences are in fact informative and interrogative, the social relationships in use may be made tentative in usage through the speaker's meaning.

Thus, both formally and semantically, «nearness of meaning» can be extended from 3 to 3a/b and from 5 to 5a/b, but in sentences expressing duration it cannot, as in Galician and Spanish languages the progressive aspect has not socially acquired the sense of tentativeness yet. It is then

clear that even though a formal analogy can formally be made in the representation of these utterances in all three languages, semantic analogy is not acceptable in all cases.

Logic exemplification for describing interrelated meanings at the level of sentence in different languages must contain notations which represent propositions within the whole system of the languages involved in the analysing process, in order to build up a comprehensive account of all logical reasoning.

The following are useful points for interlingual analysis. They will show that the correspondance between the three languages may or may not be interactive.

In most occasions, where M is involved in English, there is a correspondance in Galician and Spanish.

If STs are uttered there is also a conceptual correspondance in Galician and Spanish unless the semantic rule of conversion operated at any time on the verb and has changed its linguistic behaviour in any of the languages (for example, through the conversion of its conceptual meaning). This, of course, does not entail the change in all utterances and in all contextualisations.

If PTT is involved in English there is no semantic correspondance in Galician and Spanish as the formal use in the last two languages implies duration in most cases or may give reiterative emphasis.

Such assumptions are appropriate in a description of performative and questioning utterances. In commands, however, there might be similarity in all three languages, with the progressive aspect attenuating the message, but the English speaker is, perhaps, more conscious of the choice.

Conclusion

On account of the comments asserted throughout this paper, «tentativeness» is not exclusive of modality. Within this interactive process, however, there may be forms whose meanings are made to be more tentative by the addition of attenuating forms to impervious utterances through the semantic rule of conversion.

Yet this is important in grammatical reasoning, for it indicates areas of meaning that are clearly handled by some languages as an alternative to modality. Because of this, some structural patterns may seem to be quoted more frequently by well educated classes than by uneducated mass.

Thus, the most important assumption in this paper, is that between these two ways of asserting «tentativeness» in the exemplification of the 3 languages analysed here, only in English is it conceived in terms of aspect. However, there is no formal grammatical distinction in pure formal grammatical constructions of this type in these 3 languages.

Abbreviations

- M- Modality
- ST- Simple tenses
- PTT- Progressive tense and tentativeness

References

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