

The language of hospitality. Crossing the threshold between speech act and linguistic form

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Goal and objectives of the dissertation

Goal

To address the overarching question of what hospitality is, it is studied from a pragmalinguistic perspective. Specific focus is on the issue of the gap between the pragmatic message of an utterance that is expressed by means of speech acts (Austin, Urmson, & Sbisà, 1975; Searle, 1969) and the linguistic forms involved in constructing these acts. In this regard, particular interest goes to the contribution of certain linguistic forms in Spanish, such as modes of address and verb moods, to the pragmatic message conveyed in daily life hospitality situations. In daily life, hospitality concerns the encounter between strangers, neighbours, and friends, that is to say, between “people who are not regular members of a household” (Telfer, 2001, p. 39). For example, in daily life, speakers say ‘Come in’, ‘Have a seat’, and ‘Make yourself at home’ in an attempt to be hospitable. Clearly, nobody is surprised or offended, although the verb mood used is the imperative – a mood that is traditionally related to giving orders, a rather hostile act.

Developing an understanding of how language contributes to the interpretation of hospitality is the central aim of the dissertation. It is hypothesized that hospitality is to be seen as a speaker’s strategy that aims at giving the interlocutor the feeling of being the beneficiary. Empirical support for this hypothesis is sought and found in order to finally define hospitality from a pragmalinguistic perspective.

Objectives

The objective of the dissertation is twofold. First, it aims to contribute to the development of hospitality studies as an academic field by examining how language transmits hospitality in daily life. Second, it aims to contribute to the field of pragmalinguistics, as it intends to provide some independent support for the relationship between speech acts, such as invitations, and the linguistic forms involved in constructing these acts, such as the imperative mood.

Methodology

In the dissertation, a pragmalinguistic approach is taken to study the concept of hospitality. This enables the study of a rather intangible concept (cf. hospitality) within a rather rigid theoretical framework (cf. pragmalinguistics). The interdisciplinary approach is also reflected in the methodology. Both qualitative and quantitative research techniques are used in the empirical chapters of the dissertation.

In these chapters, evidence for the proposed hypothesis of hospitality is provided based on the linguistic analyses of diverse contexts and situations.

In the selection of the data sources, specific and fairly unexpected hospitality situations taken from written as well as spoken sources are chosen. More specifically, the first written source that is selected consists of a 20th-century Colombian Spanish novel. The place in which the story is situated (Antioquia), the time in which the story takes place (19th century), and the language in which the story is written (Spanish), are remote.

The second written source concerns the discovery voyages of Christopher Columbus to what is nowadays known as the Central and South American coasts. It is a representation of the occurrences as seen through the eyes of the 18th-century author Washington Irving. Again, place, time, and scope are far from contemporaneous hospitality (business) situations.

The third – and spoken – source represents the most recent source used in the dissertation. It consists of Peninsular Spanish radio phone-in conversations that were held in the course of the dissertation's project. Callers telephonically 'visit' the host of the radio program to address certain issues that they either like or dislike about the program. As such, each radio phone-in represents a micro hospitality situation and is a metaphor for 'traditional' hospitality (business) situations.

Results

The findings of the empirical chapters in conjunction indicate that language indirectly – but persuasively – contributes to the interpretation of hospitality, namely, by giving the interlocutor the feeling of being the beneficiary of the speech act. This feeling is achieved when the linguistic forms that are used in the communication between host and guest express a certain degree of (im)politeness, hostility, or friendliness in accordance with the circumstances of the speech act. Hence, hospitality takes different forms in language usage. Since language affects an interlocutor's *positive* and *negative face* (cf. the need to feel appreciated by others, and the need to have one's actions be unimpeded by others respectively; Brown & Levinson 1987, p. 61), speakers 'play' with the enhancement of and the threat to either of the faces in order to be hospitable. And so, the linguistic forms that are used in hospitality situations can be seen as varying from very polite to apparently extremely impolite. Therefore, the ability of the interlocutor to infer the intended beneficiary of the utterance is a decisive aspect in deriving a pragmatic message from an utterance. Thus, in order to recognize an imperative utterance as an invitation, the interlocutor needs to derive that not the speaker, but the interlocutor himself is supposed to have an interest in the action.

Theoretical conclusions

Findings from this study suggest that hospitality is a strategy that aims to give the interlocutor the feeling of being the beneficiary. Acting as the catalyst between speech act, linguistic form, and the intended communicative message, it explains how it is possible that, in daily life, utterances constructed in imperative mood may be interpreted as hospitable and not as offensive. Hence, it is concluded that hospitality is a strategy with great pragmatic impact.

Practical application of the dissertation

The pragmalinguistic approach to hospitality provides opportunities to both current hospitality professionals and the education of future hospitality professionals, both in and outside the hospitality business industry. The hospitality business industry, such as the hotel and catering sector, as well as other travel and hospitality institutions, such as the ones in charge of the reception of asylum seekers, are pre-eminently sectors that are increasingly characterized by cultural and linguistic diversity due to growing internationalization and migration (cf. Hooghe, Trappers, Meuleman, & Reeskens, 2008, pp. 483-484). Knowledge of different languages and cultures may therefore be vital to the satisfactory performance of hospitality professionals. In order to be well prepared for the field, (future) hospitality professionals should gain and maintain linguistic and cultural knowledge and skills.

Content of the dissertation

Abstract of Chapter 1

As a first step, an attempt is made to define hospitality in linguistic terms in Chapter 1. More specifically, it is argued whether hospitality is a speech act, a meaning or a message. Since this initial inquiry does not result in a satisfactory outcome, hospitality is hypothesized as a speaker's strategy that aims at giving the interlocutor the feeling of being the beneficiary. Moreover, it is proposed to look for hospitality through an analysis of the linguistic forms that are used in the communication between hosts and guests.

Abstract of Chapter 2

In Chapter 2, language usage in hospitality situations is explored. To this end, a corpus of utterances taken from a Colombian Spanish novel (Carrasquilla, 1928 (1974)) is analysed in two steps. In the first step, two of the most salient dialogues in hospitality situations are qualitatively analysed to acquire an initial impression of which language is used in hospitality situations in the novel. The linguistic forms that constitute the speech acts within this kind of situation, as well as the meanings of the forms and the circumstances within which the speech acts are performed, are identified. Departing from existing work on speech acts (Austin et al., 1975; Searle, 1969, 1975, 1978, 1979), and complementing this with theoretical insights from politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987), two particular components that are used in hospitality situations are derived, since they affect an interlocutor's positive and negative face. In the second step, the entire corpus is explored to obtain a complete overview of the linguistic forms used in hospitality situations in the novel.

Abstract of Chapter 3

While Chapter 2 aims to provide an empirical overview of the linguistic forms used in hospitality situations, Chapter 3 aims to give a theoretical explanation of the patterns found in Chapter 2. To this end, specific attention goes to the problematic relationship between the speech acts of ordering and inviting and the imperative mood. The imperative mood is iconically related to orders but is also used to perform invitations. It is argued that, although both acts are clearly different, this difference has not been made clear to date. On the contrary: both acts are categorized as directive speech acts, and, as such, are an intrusion in the behaviour of the interlocutor. The apparent interchangeability of orders and invitations is illustrated with an extract taken from the description of the discovery voyages of Christopher Columbus (Irving & MacElroy, 1981). Furthermore, to address this issue, the meaning of 'to order' and 'to invite' (Wierzbicka, 1987) is analysed using a qualitative approach.

Abstract of Chapter 4

Subsequently, in Chapter 4 empirical support for the hypothesis related to hospitality is sought and found. To this end, a corpus of conversations between host and callers from a Peninsular Spanish radio show is analysed. It is argued that callers are the beneficiary in the opening, whereas the host is the beneficiary in the closing of the conversations. Moreover, it is hypothesized that this shift in beneficiary is reflected in the use of different linguistic strategies applied by the host. Thus, similar to Chapter 2, corpus analysis is used. To this end, first, one radio phone-in conversation that is considered typical for the conversations in the entire corpus is qualitatively analysed. This enables the identification of the different parts of the conversation and reveals the common linguistic strategies used in each part. Second, the hypotheses are statistically tested using the entire corpus.

Abstract of Chapter 5

Finally, in Chapter 5 the research findings presented in Chapters 2 to 4 are examined in conjunction in order to show how language contributes to the interpretation of hospitality. In doing so, the earlier proposed definition of hospitality is established, provided that it is studied from a pragmalinguistic perspective. The theoretical and practical implications of this dissertation are also reflected on. Furthermore, the main strengths and weaknesses of the investigation are identified, and suggestions for how future research may build upon the findings are provided.

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