

Foreigner Talk and Communication Strategies: A Socio-linguistic Study of Interactions with Foreigners in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract—The study of language is as much a part of linguistics as it is of sociolinguistics. After all, language is a social phenomenon and operates within the paradigm of society and culture. Taking off from here, we observed in the course of our informal interviews and interactions with the native and the foreign populations of Saudi Arabia that communication was at a grave loss as neither of the two could arrive at a language that acted as a facilitator rather than a barrier to communication. More specifically, we undertook the study of a new register, ‘Foreigner Talk’ in order to highlight the problem areas in this type of communication set up. Direct empirical data went on to prove our hypotheses correct: Natives who are in constant contact of ‘foreigners’ needed training in linguistics in order to communicate well with the latter and contribute constructively towards building the image of KSA. In the current situation, there is an atmosphere of suspicion and mis-communication leading to loss of image and, at times, finances to the Kingdom of Saudi Arab. We have ventured into making certain recommendations for optimum correction of the imbalance. The researcher is convinced that sustained effort as recommended will positively influence the situation.

Index Terms—foreigner talk, communication strategies, socio-linguistic, register, social interactions, Saudi Arabia

I. INTRODUCTION

Language with its numerous varieties and users forms the core of Sociolinguistics: ‘The study of varied linguistic realizations of socio cultural meanings which, in a sense, are both familiar and unfamiliar and the occurrence of everyday social interactions which are nevertheless relative to particular cultures, societies, social groups, speech communities, languages, dialects, varieties, styles’ (Varshney 1995, pp.296). Thus language variations may occur in two types of spaces: Geographical and Social. Language variability in a social dimension is known as Sociolectics and is an area of study that has escaped the attention of many linguists and sociologists. Narrowing down to a phenomenon within this is ‘Foreigners’ Talk’: One of the registers that sociolinguists talk about with great enchantment. “The term Foreigner Talk was first used by Ferguson (1971) to describe speech used with foreigners who are perceived to be deficient in proficiency in the target language” (Kitao, 1990, p.150).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Definition

Foreigner or Foreigners’ Talk has been defined by a number of authors. All of these definitions converge to defining it as a register “used by speakers of a language to outsiders who are felt to have limited command of a language or no knowledge of it” (Lattey 1981 p.2). Wenk (1978) is more direct when he says, “Foreigner Talk is the register used by native speakers to make themselves understood by foreigners whose competence in the language is limited” (p. 2).

Registers are ‘stylistic-functional varieties of a dialect or language’. Their subject matter can be used to define them: they are situationally conditioned field-of-discourse oriented varieties of a language. Two of the definitions cited by Varshney can be quoted here to illustrate this.

1. Registers are those “varieties of language which correspond to different situations, different speakers and listeners, or readers and writers, and so on”. R.M.W. Dixon, “On Formal and Contextual Meaning,” A LH (Budapest), XIV, p.38.

2. “By register, itself a linguistic, not situational category, is meant a division of idiolect, or what is common to dialects, distinguished by formal (and possibly substantial features and correlated with types of situations of utterance”.

J. Ellis, “On Contextual Meaning,” *In Memory of J.R. Firth*, Longmans, p. 83.

A look at the Background

1) Foreigner Talk and other Variations

Pidgin: Pidgin is a mixture of elements from different natural languages. It is characterized by restricted use within certain groups. According to Fasold (1990), pidgins do not have grammatical gender in the noun system and do not have noun-verb agreement endings. Tense and aspect are expressed, if at all, with separate words rather than by endings. Pronunciations tend towards a pattern of consonant followed by vowel and clusters of more than one consonant tend to be avoided... speakers and listeners have to rely on extra-linguistic aspects of the immediate speech situation to a

considerable degree (p.180-181). He concludes that "A pidgin language is generally understood to be a simplified language with a vocabulary that comes mostly from another language, but whose grammar is very effective. Pidgins, in the stereotypical case, are formed when speakers of one language engage in trade with speakers of another". (p.180)

Romaine (1990) says, "Pidgins are nobody's first language. They come into existence in contact situations, where they are used by speakers with different language backgrounds to fulfill certain restricted communicative purposes, typically trade" (p.163).

Creole: According to Varshney (1995), when a pidgin becomes a lingua franca, it is called a creole. It acquires a standardized grammar, vocabulary and sound system; and it may be spoken by an increasing number of people as their first language.

Dialect: The Dictionary of Linguistics defines dialect as "a specific form of a given language, spoken in a certain locality or geographic area, showing sufficient differences from the standard of literary form of that language, as to pronunciation, grammatical construction and idiomatic use of words..."

Idiolect: Peculiarities of pronunciation, vocabulary etc. which characterize the language used by one person fall under the category of idiolect.

Diglossia: Ferguson says when we find two or more dialects or languages in regular use in a community we have a situation called diglossia. He further says that in diglossic communities, the tendency is to give a higher status to one of the dialects or languages.

Baby Talk: It is the way we, adults, talk to babies. We omit, sometimes article, or propositions, or inflectional endings, attempting to make the language easier for children (Ferguson 1968).

Of all these variations, Baby Talk is the closest to Foreigners' Talk as they both aim for simplification of language for the purpose of communication. However, the characteristics of the latter set it apart from all the others in the set. The native speakers simplify the code (or language) employing one of the two ways: Positive or Negative. When they do not break the rules of the language system, it is called positive simplification; when the converse of this occurs, it is called negative simplification. Language is a means of communication. This can be of two types: Verbal (language based) and Non Verbal. Kinesics, proxemics and para linguistics are the indispensable components of nonverbal communication. For the native speakers, it is important to know about the non verbal aspects of communication as are prevalent in the native land of the foreigners they interact with.

Here are the brief definitions of these:

Kinesics: It is the study of messages conveyed by body movements; just as language uses symbols to convey messages, our head, face, eyes, gestures and posture are also media of communication. In the Arab context under study, whereas the Westerners are comfortable with direct eye contact, the former are rather uncomfortable with it.

Proxemics: It encompasses the way people use the space around them during communication. Illustrating from a comparison with the Arab culture once again, while the Westerners like more personal space, the former are comfortable with less interpersonal space.

Para linguistics: This is the field of non verbal communication and studies *haptics* (touch communication), *chronemics* (use of time for communication), voice, pitch and stress among other features of verbal communication.

The current study proposes to analyze both of these aspects of communication viz. verbal and non verbal as are prevalent in KSA with respect to the foreigners the Arabs interact with.

2) Foreigners and Foreigner Talk

The research question in this interesting interdisciplinary study was, do foreigners like native speakers to use the Foreigner Talk? We extensively interviewed a large number of NNSs, some of them friends and coworkers, on this. The interesting finding has been: Eleven students, all freshmen, say that they prefer the NSs to use the Foreigner Talk in their interactions. Eight of these students say that NSs should use the FT when talking to foreigners. However, nine of them who are proficient in English say that they do not really care whether NSs use the FT or not. But, two of these say that they like NSs to use the FT.

When Dr. Hartwell (1996) was asked whether foreigners like NSs to use the FT or not, he states, "It could be yes, and it could be no. He advises that one investigate this matter in the concerned study. From the responses of our subjects in this study, the answer is what Dr. Hartwell (1996) expected. That is, beginners like NSs to use the FT, and this is where Dr. Hartwell says, "it could be yes". But, foreigners with proficiency in the language do not need NSs to use the FT, and this is what he means by "it could be no"!

III. LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF DATA

The following observations were made by the researcher about the verbal English utterances of the Arab subjects:

A. Negative Linguistic Characteristics

Here are some examples:

1. Absence of the BE verb: Some NSs think that when they delete the "BE" verb, this helps the NNSs understand them. Contrary to this, NNSs get all the more confused in such a situation. The reason is that the NS is producing a new form of language that the NNS has never even heard before. For example, it is seen that the NS will say "the weather nice!" instead of saying "the weather is nice!"

2. Absence of morphological markers:
absence of the past tense marker {ed}; for example, NS would say "He work here last month" instead of saying "He worked here last month".
3. Using the {ed} with irregular verbs; for example, "He sayed that to me last night".
4. Absence of the third person singular(-s); for example, NS would say "She go to school every day" instead of saying "She goes to school every day".
- Absence of the {-s} plural, or the possessive {s}. Our data revealed that some NSs think that dropping such an {s} makes the sentence easier to be understood by the NNSs. Again, this assumption is not true.
5. Selecting one form of pronouns; such as, NS would say "Me go there", "Me do this", "He is there; you saw he?"
6. Using one form of negation; for example, "you no do this".
7. Dropping the (aux) in the question; for example, "why you came here?" instead of saying "why did you come here?"
- Dropping the modal; for example, "I go there tomorrow"
Instead of "I will go there tomorrow".
- Dropping the {ing} form; for example, "I come to the party"
Instead of "I am coming to the party".

B. Possibly Positive Linguistic Characteristics

Here are some instances where the NSs engage in positive linguistic simplification by using:

1. full forms instead of contractions; for example, "I am a student" instead of saying "I'm a student",
2. short sentences instead of long ones, therefore, no relative clauses etc are used,
3. stress for some important words so the foreigner(s) would pay attention and understand what is being said to them,
4. the full grammatical sentences; thus, never drop:
 - a. modals b) Be verb c){s} plural d)auxe e){d}past f){s} 3rd personal singular g){ing}h){ed}past participle,
5. the correct pronouns,
6. the correct form of negation,
7. words at the level of the foreigner; for example, develop instead of foster,
8. expressions at the level of the foreigner,
9. elimination the use of slang.

C. Negative Para-linguistic Characteristics

1. Awareness of proxemics is important in interactions with foreigners. Gestures which are positive in one culture may be tabooed in the foreigners' context.
2. Haptic dynamics vary from one culture to another, such as, touching is viewed as a poor gesture among the Arabs and the Japanese but is acceptable to Americans.
3. Kinesics, such as, eye contact, crossing the legs etc. can act as barriers to communication with certain foreigners.
4. Space is also a feature of para language that plays a significant role in communication: NSs should make reasonable space when talking to foreigners.
5. Voice is the most important element of para language. Speaking speed, pitch variation, volume variation, tone and stress, all of these can have varying effects on foreigners. The Thai, for instance, hate it if someone talks to them loudly.
6. Saying stupid things: Hartwell (1996) warns against saying 'stupid things' to foreigners.

D. Positive Non-linguistic Characteristics

1. Speaking slowly. It is obvious that when native speakers speak quickly it is likely that the foreigners may not understand the sentence.
2. Using gestures whenever needed.
3. Increasing volume to a reasonable degree.
4. Repetition in order to make sure that the foreigner understands the utterance.
5. Paraphrasing. This technique is the best for foreigners for a number of reasons. The main one is that it increases the foreigner's vocabulary. Rephrasing may also be a technique: an extension of paraphrasing.
6. Drawing when it seems to be the only way.
7. Pointing out some objects.
8. Simulation and role playing considering different cultures.
9. Checking comprehension regularly to make sure that the Foreigner is able to follow. For example; NS can ask, "Do you understand what I mean?"

To sum up, I would like to emphasize a few points:

First; it is helpful to use the FT with NNSs who have limited proficiency in English. There is one condition for this: use the positive characteristics as discussed earlier.

Second, it is not helpful to use the negative FT with NNSs who have limited proficiency in English.

Third, it is not important to use the FT with foreigners who are proficient in the language.

E. Literature Review in Support of Findings

FT and ESL Teachers: Krashen's "Natural Approach"

The concern is whether ESL teachers ought to use the FT or not. When one looks at the ESL curriculum, one finds that it has the features of FT in general. ESL teachers should use the FT especially when teaching beginners and intermediate. It is almost a consensus that ESL teacher should use the FT when teaching ESL. I think that it is something natural; I mean something expected, to have ESL teachers use the FT in their classrooms. The reason is "Students need comprehensible input to acquire English" (Krashen 1984, p.76). The key concept here is "comprehensible input". Therefore, ESL teachers should use the FT in their classrooms in order to help their students acquire the language. Krashen and Terrell (1983) state that "Language acquisition can only take place when a message which is being transmitted is understood" (p.55). Hence, ESL teachers should, in general, "simplify communication" (i.e., speak in simpler terms). Great care must be taken to ensure that in simplifying communication, the meaning of the intended message is not changed or lost. The second thing is that they should talk about issues of immediate context or relevance (here and now). The third thing is to frequently repeat or paraphrase key words and ideas (Cochran, 1989, p.2).

Thus, the Natural Approach that Krashen and Terrell (1983) propagate is, in my opinion, the best to be mentioned here. The Natural Approach is based on the idea that to acquire a language one needs to receive comprehensible input. Though it is beyond the scope of this paper to deal with the Natural Approach; however, one can refer to *Natural Approach: Language Acquisition in the Classroom*, by Krashen & Terrell.

Now, do ESL teachers who are foreigners use FT in a better/worse way than native speakers? This study indicates that it depends to how experienced that teacher(s) is/are and/or how poor they are. In other words, ESL teachers, in general, with good experience in teaching are expected to use the FT better than those with limited experience in the field of teaching ESL students. Anyhow,

Milk (1990) thinks those ESL teachers who are foreigners use the FT in their classroom in a better way than ESL teachers who are natives. This assumption is built on the idea that foreign teachers know what is easy/difficult for ESL students. In addition to this, the foreign teachers have/had come through this and they know how to deal with ESL students.

My theory is, as mentioned earlier, that it depends on how experienced the teacher is: whether a foreigner or a native. Milk's study needs to be investigated more to see whether it is true or not. Anyhow, one can see that experienced teachers play a crucial role in this.

Communication/interaction strategies that foreign students use when talking with native speakers:

Now, let us shift to the foreigners and see what the strategies they use when talking to native speakers. They could use positive strategies, and/or negative ones. What I mean by positive strategies are the techniques that are linguistically and non-linguistically accepted in the language. Here are some of the positive communication/interaction strategies that ESL students use when talking with native speakers:

A) The positive linguistic strategies

- No contractions: it is noticed that ESL students use the complete form, with no contractions in their speech, especially the beginners. This technique is accepted and also recommended to be used by ESL students, the beginners.

- Short sentences: The second positive linguistic technique that ESL students use when talking with NSs is framing short sentences. I think that this technique is very important for ESL students. Hence, ESL teachers should advise their students to use short sentences, especially at the beginning levels. This technique enables ESL students to convey their messages in a correct way.

- The third technique is that ESL students ask for help in producing words. In other words, they ask if they pronounced the words correctly. Or, sometimes ESL students ask native speakers if this situation can be expressed in that sentence; and so on.

B) Positive non-linguistics strategies

- Paraphrasing: it is a common phenomenon that ESL students use-paraphrasing when they miss the words that they want to say. This technique is very beneficial. It builds the students' vocabulary as well as makes their pronunciation better.

- Use of dictionary: It is not a bad idea that ESL students use a dictionary when addressing native speakers. However, this technique could become negative if the ESL student uses it frequently. This is because NSs, for most situations, will not wait for the ESL students to refer to the dictionary every now and then. But this could be positive when the ESL student uses it a few times in a conversation.

- Appeal to authority: It is also a positive strategy to appeal to authority, a friend or someone else, to ask for words, meaning, etc. Sometimes, when a foreigner is talking to a native, and then suddenly stops looking for a word, expression, or even trying to understand what the native has just said. In this case, the foreigner will turn his/her face to someone with him/her who speaks the language as the foreigner does, and will ask for help in giving words, expression, and/or asking what the native meant by what he/she said.

C) Negative linguistic strategies:

1. Overgeneralization of the past tense {ed}: One of the negative linguistic features that foreign students use is the overgeneralization of the past tense {ed}. There are two ways that the {ed} has been over generalized. The first one I noticed is that the foreign students pronounce the suffix {ed} in the past tense verbs as / ^d/ no matter whether the verb ends with voiced or voiceless, /t/, or /d/ sound, though the {ed} past tense is only pronounced as / ^d/ when the verb ends with /t/ or /d/ sound (Finegan, 1994). I think it is the spelling that leads foreigners to pronounce the {ed} as / ^d/ in all situations. The second thing is that foreigners, especially the beginners, put {ed} for all the verbs, regulars and irregular, in

order to change the tense to past. Therefore, you may hear a foreigner saying "I goed there yesterday," instead of saying "I went there yesterday". Thus, this over generalization is a negative technique that some foreigner students use when talking with native speakers. Lastly, a foreigner may just drop the {ed} completely; for example, "I work here yesterday".

2. Overgeneralization of the {-s} plural: It is expected that foreigners would pronounce the {-s} plural as an /s/ in all positions, even if the nouns end with /s/, /z/, or a voiced sound. While in reality, the plural {-s} is pronounced as /s/ when the noun ends in a voiceless sound, and, it is pronounced as /z/ when it follows a voiced sound. Lastly, it is pronounced /z/ when the noun ends with /s/, /z/ (Parker and Riley, 1994). This over generalization of the plural {-s} can go further and be attached to irregular nouns. So, you might hear a foreigner saying "the sheeps are..." This is, of course, a negative feature, and it should be avoided at the intermediate levels. Foreigners, especially the beginners, may forget the plural {-s} completely, and never use it; for example, "we are student".

3. Dropping the "Be" verb: One may expect the Arab students to drop the Be verb and that is because it does not exist in Arabic, (Alkholi 1989). Therefore, you may hear Arab students saying "I here," instead of saying "I am here". This negative technique is because of the first language interference.

4. Dropping the {-ing}: Foreigners with limited English may drop the {-ing} from the present continuous verbs. As a result, one may hear a foreigner saying, "I am work now," instead of "I am working now".

D) Negative non-linguistic strategies

1. Shifting topics: Some foreigners use the technique of changing topics when they feel that they are stuck. For instance, the foreigner is talking about cars; then with no occasion, he/she starts talking about weather! This switching of topics is one of the negative non-linguistic techniques that some foreigners use when they cannot recall certain words, expressions etc.

2. Silence: Sometimes native speakers ask questions or state something that requires a response from the NNS; but the NNS does not respond; he/she keeps silence! The obvious reason is that the NNS did not understand the conversation/question. The other possibility is that he/she does not know the right vocabulary, and/or the right expression to reply; thus, the foreigner keeps silence. In this situation, the native speaker should be helpful by providing whatever response is expected; for example,

NS: It is chilly out there!

NNS: {keeps silence}

NS: Cold, right?

NNS: Yes, cold.

3. Escaping and ending the conversation: This is the last/worst negative non-linguistic technique that foreigners could use in their conversation with NSs. Some of the foreigners escape and end the conversation when they do not understand and this is because they feel embarrassed. The reason why I call this technique the worst is because the NNS does not give him/herself the chance to learn from others. For example,

NS: It is chilly out there! NNS: what?

NS: Isn't it chilly out there? NNS: I have to go. {then leaves}

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ESL/EFL TEACHERS

I hate to repeat the recommendations that were given in the section of "FT and ESL Teachers". However, Krashen's "Natural Approach" summarizes the whole idea. And, due to the communication/interaction strategies, the positive and the negative ones, ESL/EFL teachers should, in short, advise their students to use the positive ones as discussed in the previous section and eliminate the negative ones. In addition to this, as an ESL teacher, you should follow the following recommendations acquire the language:

1. Ask your students to read books etc., watch TV, and listen to the radio to gain new words. However, do not ask your students to memorize words without a context as they do in Saudi Arabia.

2. When you say a new word which is not familiar to your students, provide them with (a)lexical paraphrase, (b)synonyms, and (c)antonyms. And whenever they reach the meaning, encourage them to start using that word(s) in their conversation and in their writings.

3. Advise your students to look up new words in the dictionary and make sure that they arrive at the right meaning, or they ask the teacher, their peers etc. for the meaning. Again, encourage them to use that word(s) in their speech and in their writing, so that the new word(s) is entrenched in their memory and is not forgotten.

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