APPROACHING CULTURAL SENSITIVITY IN CAIRO: A PRAGMATIC DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

by
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Cultural sensitivity is often discussed in prescriptive manner, whereas perhaps a more descriptive analysis is in order for a truer and more meaningful understanding of the interaction between foreigners and locals. This paper is a pragmatic examination of interactions between Cairene street hucksters (shoe-shiners, tissue sellers, and cab drivers) and foreign residents: it is a quasi-replication of Paul B. Stevens's 'The pragmatics of street hustlers' English in Egypt' (1994). The idea here is for cultural sensitivity, by way of looking at the intention behind the utterance.

Introduction

This paper is a quasi-replication of Paul B. Stevens's 'The pragmatics of street hustlers' English in Egypt', in *World Englishes* (1994). Stevens tells in his introduction that there has been remarkable study of cross-cultural pragmatic failure: specifically, this research has been published by Thomas (1983, 1984), Tannen (1984), House and Kasper (1981), White (1993), et al. And studies of cross-cultural pragmatic failure are a dynamic which is rife for linguistic exploration – is the situation at hand due to sociopragmatic issues? (a taboo subject in another culture; e.g., jokes about death in Egypt are forms of humour which are generally considered out of social register) – is the communicative failure a pragmalinguistic matter? (an equivocation which can occur between L1 speakers: e.g., Question: Could I have a banana? [pragmatic force: could you pass me a banana?] Answer: Sure. [then walks away]) – or is the instance merely a linguistic issue, where the interlocutor is restricted by language-level competency (choosing the wrong word and resultantly being misunderstood as vulgar; e.g., 'that sweater fits you', [read: 'suits'])?

There is no fast answer to the question of where the blame lays in cross-cultural pragmatic failures. More than likely, there are combinations of these linguistic issues, operating contiguously, and exacerbating any other problematic communicative elements within the verbal exchanges between cross-cultural interlocutors. By pragmatic

analysis of the situation in these three areas, one could presumably triangulate the intention behind the utterance.

Like Stevens's paper, this one explores the pragmatic strategies of Cairene street hucksters, specifically: peasant children selling tissue packets, shoe shine guys, and the occasional taxi ride. And too, this exploration is of 1) the huckster's attempt to communicate with, engage in discourse with, or establish an acknowledgement from, the foreigners, along with 2) the foreigner's reactions to the sales pitch.

Object and Scope of Study

Stevens states that though the prevailing pragmatic strategies used by the Cairene street hucksters are out of register with western socio-pragmatic traditions in selling sundry wares, that the intentions behind these utterances are not in fact insincere, unfriendly, or aggressive – as could be inferred by the visiting tourist. In Paul Theroux's 2002 book, *Dark Star Safari*, in which he chronicles his travels down Africa, he presents a rather cranky, and cynical narrative of Cairene hucksters – who are, factually, peasants merely trying to generate survival money:

> In pharaonic times Egyptians made a habit of repelling or subverting or enslaving anyone who ventured into their kingdom. But ever since Herodotus they have been welcoming foreigners, with a mixture of banter, hearty browbeating, teasing humour, effusiveness, and the sort of insincere familiarity I associate with people trying to become intimate enough with me to pick my pocket.
>
> 'Meesta, meesta! My fren'. What country you come from? America Number One! My fren', you come with me… my house. You come. Meesta!'
>
> In Cairo, there was a thin line between pestering and hospitality – indeed they often amounted to the same thing, and although there were plenty of beggars there was little thievery. (p. 7)

This unwillingness in Theroux to understand the hucksters' intentions behind their utterances may lend itself nicely to whiney, superficial, prosaic analysis, though it does not make for serious study of the pragmatics lurking within these interactions. Why is the quote from Theroux then relevant? Because these same reactions to the hucksters are frequently expressed by tourists and expatriates alike: here in Cairo, the local pragmatic strategies for interaction are very often perceived as an encumbrance, or as a particularly invasive tactics designed to initiate language interaction. An educated mature Egyptian man told me that he does not enjoy the pestering of the street hucksters; though if they are not pestering aggressively, then they are not doing their job.

Data were collected over a five month period. The specific target areas were Tahrir Square (adjacent to The American University in Cairo), and Road 9 in El Maadi (a rather gentrified, and suburban settlement, some distance south of Cairo proper, that is a lodestone for foreign nationals and wealthy Egyptians). Utterances were recorded in a small note book – usually out of the sight of the huckster, in order to avoid aggravating the Observer's Paradox. The utterances were taken from interactions between myself and the subject.

The subjects were a consistent group, that is, they were the same people I spoke with almost daily (and still do) over the period of study. The study is partly of interest because it examines a progression in the relationship between the customer and the huckster over a five-month period (August to December, 2003) – and the progression in the relationship was due to the author's increased awareness of the understanding behind the utterances of the street hucksters. And that is what became the locus of this paper: cultural sensitivity, patience, and analysis of discourse in context, in order to elucidate the pragmatics behind the utterances of the Cairene street hucksters.

The Problem

As Stevens notes, any foreign-looking person in Egypt immediately finds a heavy degree of unsolicited, interactional discourse from Cairenes – and not just from those who are trying to earn money by selling trinkets, tissue, or personal services. It is common for school

children to seize the opportunity to practise their English, which later explained the uncharacteristically high frequency of being asked the following questions: 'What is your name?' 'Where are you from?' 'What time is it?' And while the first two questions may appear completely reasonable, the last one initially left a lingering stupefaction in this author as to why this culture is obsessively concerned over the time of day. But these are merely the conversational English questions the students had learnt in school, and they were trying out their language skills, though the same (or similar) approach is used by the street huckster. But the approach in conversation is generally considered outside of traditional, Western social norms and expectations for language interaction.

Sociopragmatic issues

The questions ('What's your name?' 'Where are you from?' 'What time is it?'), when directed at an interlocutor, sociopragmatically demand that there necessarily is a sort of agreement between the person asking the question, and the person being hailed. That is to say, the questions in the interaction must be examined under the following light: Is this question relevant to the circumstances? Also, does the questioner really have a right or need to ask? And of course, does the addressee have an obligation to respond? When this necessary agreement is not mutual, then comes the sociopragmatic failure.

These rules of social engagement can vary widely within North America. For example, it would be almost expected for somebody in Toronto to initiate a light conversation with a person whom they had never met, while waiting for a streetcar with that person. The dialogue would bounce back and forth until the time of departure came – at which point both interlocutors would step on to the same streetcar, effectively signalling the moment to discontinue their conversation. In Manhattan, and in a similar environment, one-way conversations prevail – one could likely hear a brief state-of-affairs address, a running narrative, or other sorts of announcements – like ritual complaining – and the addressee is not necessarily expected to respond. In Cleveland, Ohio, unsolicited bus stop conversations are generally viewed as an

unacceptable behaviour, and are customarily met with a salient, disconnected silence.

Irrespective of any of the above-mentioned behavioural patterns, in any of those given situations, one may recognise a peculiar accent – if the discourse seemed out of register for the particular city – and likely explain away the aberrant behaviour as non-native. But how does the foreigner visiting Cairo perceive the persistent, unsolicited interactions they get from the street hucksters? As Stevens points out with his now-called 'Boy on a Bicycle' example, where a passing boy called out, 'what's your name', the boy had no reason to ask his name, nor did Stevens suspect the boy surmisably would have waited for an answer while peddling by. But this is a common Cairene utterance, one which I have repeatedly heard – especially when exiting the train in the Metro station. As I head toward the exit, and the train pulls past me, I frequently hear young guys calling, 'what's your name', as the train pulls off – without any possibility of mine being able to answer in time, even if I wished to do so.

In this case, 'what's your name' becomes a sort of phatic expression. But not in the way one would say, 'how are you, Herold', to somebody with whom they work, without expecting to hear a detailed response from Herold. This, instead, is a simple case of the boy recognising an odd-looking person in his homeland. Maybe this person looks and dresses in a manner that the boy only regularly sees in American television and film; the boy wants to interact, on some level, and acknowledge this unusual-looking person – and in return, receive back some small amount of acknowledgement himself, albeit an internalised, non-verbal acknowledgment from within the foreigner. 'What's your name' is not a quite a rhetorical question. The utterance instead becomes the signifier; and *who are you, foreigner – hello*, is signified. For if the boy were to simply say 'hello', there would likely not be as much of an internal response in the foreigner – at least not to the same extent of being asked an expectantly-non-responsive, or phatic question (like 'how are you?') about himself. It would be easier to ignore/not process 'hello', then for someone to ignore/not process 'what's your name'. But perhaps the 'what's your name' will fade in its internal impact, and become as meaningless as, say 'hi'.

At this point, Stevens remarks, the conversational openers that the street merchants use, effectively masquerading as genuine questions about the visitor (with a few 'welcome to Egypt' clauses peppering the exchange), will soon lose their charm once the visitor notices that these conversational openers are, in fact, mere preambles to offers of selling them papyrus, perfume essences, and sawdust-filled toy camels. And the common response by the now-in-the-know foreigner is not to acknowledge these attempts at engage-ment. After all, there is no obligation (conversational) to a random person on the street; but this decision to ignore is not made without foreknowledge, or at least supposition, of the intentions behind the street huckster's utterances. Until you know better, maybe strolling up to somebody on the street and talking in such a manner is entirely common behaviour for native interlocutors in Cairo.

But that is not the case. Nor is the street merchant's motivation necessarily the same as the Boy on the Bicycle's. And though it, too, is common for a non-mercantile Cairene to blurt a genuine 'welcome to Egypt' statement when one is out walking along the Corniche – and in some cases this is not a preamble to a sales pitch, like in the Boy on the Bicycle example.

But the sociopragmatic elements in both examples approach each other, in kind – if even in some rather grey areas. Further, becoming attuned to the outcome of these interactions will in no way release the foreigner from continued verbal battery. How the foreigner chooses to compartmentalise and contemplate the interactions will depend entirely on their ability and willingness to search for the force behind the utterances.

Pragmalinguistic issues

As Stevens points out that Thomas (1983) points out, so shall Willows point out that pragmatic failure stemming from pragmalinguistic issues (*cf.* sociopragmatic failure) are due to features of grammar, lexicon, and phonology (including suprasegmentals like stress, rising/falling intonation, prosody, loudness, pitch, *et cetera*). These linguistic features are devices used to intimate varying degrees of urgency to the

foreigner, to get their attention, as well as to express their own frustration in a transaction that is perhaps not going the way the street huckster had hoped.

Of particular note are the shoe-shine guys who work on the busy Tahrir Square, just in front of the Ismailia House Hotel. There is heavy foot traffic through this square: tourists, Egyptian businessmen, students and faculty from AUC, and sundry other potential shoe-shine customers amble by the shoe-shine guys. These guys are long-tenured in the trade of shining shoes; and they sit in groupings of three to five against the concrete wall of the Metro station entrance.

> '*'Aywah,* mister, *hinaa*, one pound' [yes, … , here, one Egyptian pound]

Now as I approach the shoe-shine guys, I may intentionally make eye contact with them, prompting a playfully demanding increase in their volume and firmness: 'One pound! One pound!'

And then, as I pass, his tone shifts to exasperation, with a certain elongated whininess in the vowel, as he vents his frustration at not winning a sale: 'One poooound! One POOOUND!'

I've passed this gauntlet of shoe-shine guys, on scores of occasions, over five months, and I do occasionally stop for a shine from time to time. Sometimes the shine-guys will be preoccupied in conversation as I pass by unnoticed, and they only call-out as an afterthought, with falling intonation: '*'Aywah*, one pound'. They see I have all but passed, though, they know (or hope) I will recognise their tone and pitch. In this case the pragmatics putatively shift back to the Boy on the Bicycle scenario – leaving me with the same, and rather impressionistic, feeling of hearing the voices from a leaving Metro train calling out: 'What's your name?' In this case, it would seem, the utterance, 'one pound', instead becomes a sort of cross between sociopragmatics, and pragmalinguistics – or a last ditch effort at a shoe-shine sale conflated with a hello.

The second example involves a peasant girl who sells tissue on Road 9, in El Maadi. Bassama is perhaps eight to ten years old. And when she sees me approaching, she comes skipping up along side of me, gently tugs on my sleeve and offers to sell me tissue packets, and

sometimes card-sized calendars with smiling baby-head pictures on the back. Though the peasant girl's facial expressions and body language have shifted over the five month study period, to demonstrate a modicum of trust – coupled with a hopeful expectation that she will likely get the sale – her linguistic strategy has remained exactly the same.

She repeats, with falling intonation, and in the same soothing tone that one would associate with consoling a wounded animal: '*'anta koway-ys… 'anta koway-ys … 'anta koway-ys … 'anta koway-ys …*' [you (m.) (are) good] Then, when she gets the sale, she goes skipping off to the next person.

Other peasant children are seldom so patient and soft in their sales approach, and instead repeat the same phrase, '*'anta koway-ys*', only with a hurried and impatient urgency in their tone. And some still, use the same building volume and tone of irritation and exasperation as the shoe-shine guys on Tahrir Square '*'anta koway-ys … 'anta KOWAY-YS… 'ANTA KOWAY-YS…*'

This data differs from Stevens's in that the subjects appear to possess less L2 ability than the hucksters offering to sell papyrus, perfume essence, and sawdust-filled toy camels. And there is no verbal red herring here, first-offered, to draw in the tourist or foreigner for ulterior motive. But the reaction of the tourist is really the point of the study here, and mostly how their reaction to unsolicited verbal interaction is based on their respective expectations. Perhaps the tourist comes to Cairo with expectations of being pestered to buy trinkets, or of haggling with shop owners, or even being chased by peasant children selling tissues and card-sized calendars with smiling baby-head pictures on the back – if that is the case, the tourist may soon find they are unable to turn-off this constant mercantile badgering, along with, too, finding that they are also going to be verbally engaged by sundry other people, in varying degrees and capacities.

Linguistics? – the pragmatics of giving directions to an Egyptian taxi driver

This third example caused me quite some consternation, in that it still is difficult to derive the source from which the pragmatic failure came. Perhaps the best way to analyse the occurrence is to place the reader in the order of events, and then examine the outcome:

The task:

To get from the Sakanat El Maadi Metro station to El Gzar Street, in order to visit a classmate for a study session, on the night before a pragmatics mid-term.

Linguistic barriers:

The passenger has only a smattering of colloquial Egyptian Arabic, and the taxi drivers in the greater Cairo area are likely to have little or no English at all, though occasionally one will find themselves in a cab with a driver who is quite fluent in English.

The verbal exchange:

A small amount of background: when hailing a cab in Cairo, one must firstly tell the driver where it is they wish to go. The driver then either agrees, and one is taken to their destination, or the driver decides that they have no interest in heading in the direction indicated, and one simply tries again with another driver. This is a cultural difference from every other country in which the author has hailed cabs, including, but not limited to: New Zealand and Australia, The United Kingdom, North America, and a healthy slice of Western Europe.

The cab was hailed; the destination agreed upon; inside the cab, the usual phatics were exchanged between the cab driver and myself: '*Isayyak? koway-ys? el-hamdul-lah*' [approx.: how are you? Good? praise be to God].

The driver responded with '*el-hamdul-lah … el-hamdul-lah*' [praise be to God].

In order to get to Al Gzar street, the name of which I did not know at the time, I would then generally announce to the driver the name of a nearby landmark (like the Maadi Grand Mall), and then navigate myself to Al Gzar from said landmark, through a series of gestures to indicate direction, accompanied by a few rudimentary, colloquial Egyptian Arabic phrases: '*'aywah, hinaa, min faatlak*' [lit.: yes, here, with your (m.) preference].

Now on this occasion, I thought I would save myself some rather exhausting hand-gesturing by giving a landmark closer to Al Gzar street than the Maadi Grand Mall – in this case, I told the driver I wished to go to El Nasr street, which runs perpendicular to Al Gzar.

When the cab approached El Nasr, the driver stopped and picked up another fare – which is a common occurrence in Cairo. The other fare was a young woman. When I arrived at my destination, an address on Al Gzar street, the cab driver informed me through broken English that the young woman, 'her, she for you. You can do with her, she go with you now here', effectively making it clear that the woman was a prostitute whom he had procured on my behalf. This was most considerate of the taxi driver. But it was complete pragmatic failure when I realised what was really happening: I turned around to see the young woman watching me with a rather searching look in her eyes.

Analysis:

Before trying to classify this as sociopragmatic, linguistic, or pragmalinguistic failure, perhaps a further amount of background is required here. El Nasr street is a known locus for those who practise the world's oldest profession. Now by my telling the taxi driver that I wished to go to El Nasr street, he must have reckoned that I was looking for a prostitute – but why? At no point in the cab ride did I utter words to indicate such an intention. And this was not the only cab ride in which this specific pragmatic failure occurred. After this occasion other taxi drivers, when told that I was headed to El Nasr, have inferred that I were looking for a prostitute. And they have since even asked me so, 'you want girl?' But the above taxi scenario was the very first time I had learnt of this, and I was completely unprepared to

understand exactly what was going on when the driver stopped and picked up the second fare.

It would be difficult to say what exactly, if anything, other than the mere mention of the name El Nasr, evoked such a notion in cab driver's head in this example. One is often briefly interviewed by their cab driver – and this is common in all the other taxi cultures that I have experienced. In many cases, the drivers are generally interested in their fares; and in other cases, the driver is merely hoping to increase his tip by bantering with his fare. The point is that I never directly, nor indirectly, said to the driver that I was looking for a woman – so this was neither a straight linguistic issue, nor a pragmalinguistic issue.

So, was this a linguistic issue involving semantics? It really is hard to tell for sure. An extensive interview afterward with the driver would have been difficult, as there was no one on hand who was fluent in both colloquial Egyptian Arabic and English: these are the pitfalls of impromptu field research. In this example, the taxi driver did not approach me using conversational lures, as were the subjects of Stevens's study, though, by my stating 'El Nasr', as destination, he was left with only one possible pragmatic force behind my utterance (in his mind). The driver likely profiled me, based on previous experiences he had with other fares. And in all fairness, I did not give the driver a specific address on El Nasr to which he should take me – since I was planning to navigate my way to Al Gzar from there. To him, and anyone else listening, I had merely stated that I was going to Al Gzar street.

Now what are the cross-cultural ramifications here? What may have happened in the driver's black box was that in my utterance, 'El Nasr', there was a perceived pragma-semantic strategy on my behalf – and the driver could have thought he was being accommodating by understanding what he believed was my intention. The question is, did I inadvertently make a statement which issued a clear desire to the driver? If so, then the pragmatic failure was mine.

Conclusion

Whether a tourist, visitor, or resident expat, one's expectations are going to dictate the reaction in any of the above situations. The relevance and importance of a study in pragmatics is the resultant understanding of the intention behind the utterance. Cultural sensitivity is not as easy as declaring that the people with whom you are temporarily involved are just different from you. And partly because, so often in linguistics, one sees the projection of personal and social biases and stereotypes in another's language and language behaviour. Take, for example, someone who staunchly maintains that French is a more elegant-sounding and sensual language than German, or those who say that Black American English is bad English, or more frightfully, when some of the clicking African languages, like Khoisan, are said to be the most primitive of languages because they most closely mimic animal sounds. Trying to convince the layman that those sorts of language attitudes are simply wrong, can be unfeasible – now imagine the task of convincing someone that the pragmatic force behind the utterance X means, $X \neq Y$; rather, $X = Z$: the complexity increases.

Even a seasoned travel writer like Theroux failed when trying to capture the spirit of the people of Cairo: he missed the pragmatics. But perhaps – and like in so many places – one must firstly live in Cairo before they can truly begin to understand the dynamics of everyday socialisation, and the intention behind common speech acts. Even so, take for example the women in the Wieland (1991) study, who were so fluent in French as L2 that they were frequently mistaken as native speakers; yet, when they attempted to interact at an intimate social dinner with French L1s, they met with pragmatic failure. The French L2s were simply unaware of the conversational nuances they were missing – and one had lived there for over twenty years.

Thomas (1983:110) states in her conclusion that the adults she has seen coming to the UK, who are indeed fluent English speakers, never do quite grasp the pragmatic complexities of their adopted culture – and irrespective of a strong desire to accomplish such. Thomas keenly wonders if there may be a point past which language learners cannot

ever really acquire unfamiliar pragmatic forms: a sort of Second Pragmatics Acquisition Theory then emerges.

All very interesting. But what about Cairo? Thomas and Wieland talk about pragmatic failure in a high-competency L2 realm. The relevancy to Stevens's paper is, if pragmatic failure is so very complicated in situations where there is fluency, then the problem will likely be compounded in the relationships of interlocutors with only a smattering of language capacity – and especially between those who are only encountering each other in a tourist-mercantile relationship. Perhaps cultural sensitivity training sessions would do well to explore some of these areas in pragmatics – if only to bring attention to why a mutual understanding can sometimes be so difficult to achieve between peoples of different cultures.

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