The Migration of Pragmatic Principles on Language Teaching

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ABSTRACT: This paper deals with language education, field constantly evolving, sometimes by simple adjustments, while at other times by much more radical ones. It is a fact that we live in an accelerated world, our lives being punctuated by thousand daily activities, which requires language education to be rethought and reconcile methodological principles and pragmatism in order to offer instruction that is modern, efficient and in accordance with students' expectations, needs and learning habits. The first part of this analysis will expound some theories that have served as foundation for the migration of some pragmatic principles to language teaching. The second part will consider the idea that constant evolution is not subjective or random, but based both on societal changes and feedback from previous trends. A last objective consists of the investigation of those benchmarks that have formed a pragmatic framework describing in detail a more modern approach to teaching. KEY WORDS: pragmatism, foreign language, education, autonomous learners, semiotics.

Current research seems to validate the view that learning a foreign language must be done primarily through direct practical situations. There seems to be no compelling reason to argue that the initiative to orient educational efforts towards a major final communicative purpose has produced a radical change within language teaching.

This pragmatic approach to teaching foreign languages has been implemented following the profitable interaction of sociolinguistics with didactics. This is the time when the main characteristics defining the communicative perspective were established: the communicative context and acts of enunciating developed in close connection with the type of speech produced, the utterer's linguistic performance that is also reported to his or her social status, the types and levels of speech used according to social categories, the speakers' attitude towards their own statements, normative judgments of the language, language planning; everything that serves as a substrate to the language, which determines its own existence.[1]

Therefore, everything, starting from the reflection on the techniques to be used, on how much space to allot to the oral and written aspects, on the type of units to be taught, on the diversification of situation registers and studying topics to more attractive and diversified course books, has been redesigned in order to respond most effectively to the utilitarian purpose of the current methodology and didactics of foreign languages.

As noted before, these changes in the philosophy of education[2] are mainly due to the interaction of didactics with sociolinguistics which shows a great deal of interest in the pragmatic manipulation of language. Pragmatics together with syntax and semantics constitute the three dimensions of semiotics. Charles Morris, the founder of pragmatic linguistics defines this discipline as follows: "La syntaxe est l'étude des relations formelles des signes entre eux. La sémantique est l'étude des relations des signes aux objets auxquels ils sont applicables. La pragmatique est l'étude des signes à leur interprètes"[3] (Syntax is the study of formal relations of signs among themselves. Semantics is the study of relationships of signs to the objects to which they apply. Pragmatics is the study of signs to their interpreters).[4] Therefore, pragmatics treats signs by relating them to their users and refers directly to circumstances in which linguistic communication is performed. It involves an analysis of conditions related to the situational context, which is extra-linguistic in nature. Anything that can intervene at the moment of communication: personality, age, knowledge of the speakers, etc.

With regard to this new dimension of language teaching, it is worth mentioning the main theories that served as foundation for the migration of a series of pragmatic principles towards to above-mentioned field. First, we must evoke J. L. Austin with his theory of speech or language acts. He classifies speech acts into constatives (e.g. "*The weather is bad*") and performatives ("*He promised to come*").[1] According to him, "*saying is doing*," but not always under the same form. Sometimes our role is according to the purpose of speech i.e. to inform, question or ask our interlocutor to do something, etc. According to Searle, another linguist, "parler une langue, c'est poser, réaliser des actes de langage, des actes comme : poser des affirmations, donner des ordres, poser des questions, faire des promesses et ainsi de suite" (Speaking a language means performing speech acts such as: making statements, giving orders, asking questions, making promises, etc.") Hence, the theory of speech acts resulted in envisaging linguistic communication as a set of relationships between interlocutors.

In the last years, educational research that has also provided ample support for this new pragmatic approach to language teaching is that of H. P. Grice. According to him, interlocutors must cooperate, "parler avec sincérité, pertinence et clarté, tout en donnant l'information nécessaire mais seulement l'information nécessaire"[5] (speak with sincerity, relevance and clarity, while giving the necessary information, but only the necessary one), in order to establish a successful conversation. For this to happen, four conversational rules or "maxims" need to be present:

- the maxim of quality (the content of the communicative exchange must be true therefore avoid false statements);
- the maxim of quantity (the conversation should be limited to what is really necessary);
- the maxim of relation (the conversation must be relevant);
- the maxim of manner (the interlocutors must express themselves in a clear, concise manner and without any ambiguity).

However, it is true that it is quite difficult sometimes to meet all these maxims when we find ourselves involved in the context of a real communicative situation. Despite a certain number of difficulties in learning and teaching how to make conversation, we can always try to implement teaching strategies that will make it seem as close as possible to the real one.

The evidence suggests, therefore that pragmatics has put forward a series of benchmarks functioning as a rich source of inspiration for the development of new language teaching techniques. These benchmarks have formed a pragmatic "framework"[6] that describes in detail the current communicative, notional and functional approach. The most obvious development in the didactics of foreign languages due to the contact with pragmatics has resulted in the following characteristics:

A. The Division of Roles

We are currently witnessing a change of roles of the actors involved in the learning process. The traditional pattern, in which the teacher as holder of knowledge transfers it towards the learner who receives it passively, should no longer be valid today. The teaching process reverses somehow these roles by becoming a mediation attempt organized between the object of learning and learner. It is this mediation that can be called *guidance*. This happens in order to make the learner autonomous in his efforts to develop his or her communicative competence in the foreign language he is studying. In a more general sense, this autonomy aims to gradually eliminate guidance and hence the progressive diminution of the teacher's role in favor of the learning process.

Teaching the student how to learn is an essential aspect in the pedagogy of language learning because the ability to study autonomously is not innate, it must be acquired, either in a natural manner, or, and this is the most common case, in the context of a formal systematic and well-organized learning process. We speak indeed of ability—that is the power to do something, and not behavior, a way to act. Autonomy is thus a term that describes a

potential skill in a given situation, that of learning, in this case, and not the real behavior of an individual in this situation. It goes without saying that the teacher is the one who has the very important role to educate learners in teaching them how to study.

It is clear from the above that the success of this mediation and empowerment are strongly related to the importance that the two sides allocate to establishing a few ground rules that will direct their joint project. In the language class, the joint project between the guiding part and the guided part is called didactic contract. The term *contract* refers to the idea of two partners bound by a commitment which was negotiated and, in the end, was fully accepted by both parties, while the term *didactic* let us know precisely what the negotiation will bring: the learning process. This contract or the rules of the game is developed from the outset and states that the learning process involves two people, on an almost equal level.

As already stated, the purpose of the learning agreement is not to eliminate or reverse teacher/learner hierarchical relations but to express them, "de les dire pour que les différents rôles qu'assument les acteurs de la relation didactique ne se dissimulent pas les uns les autres"[7] (to describe them so that the different roles assumed by each actor involved in the educational relationship do not dissimulate one another). Consequently, this implies the necessity of an explanation of how the educational process functions, of the presentation of the didactical and pedagogical objectives of this approach, as well as the rights and obligations of the actors involved in the learning process.

This change of roles asks the teacher to give up its pedestal and intervene as a thinker, motivator, model, mediator and trainer[8] in order to determine them to successfully complete their learning project. On the part of the learner, a global involvement in the learning process is expected. S/he is no longer the passive actor supposed to receive and store information, but an active player who builds his or her own knowledge.

My personal experience and detailed research conducted on the teaching of foreign languages in France and Romania have shown that this distribution of roles has already taken place in this domain. Both a learner and later a teacher in France, I had the opportunity to experience this change and its consequences. Most learning

activities were designed to allow the possibility for teachers to guide learners towards their empowerment and active participation to their learning process.

The same theoretical tendency is observed in Romania, but transposing it into practice is a lot less obvious than in France. A former communist country, Romania has long envisaged learning foreign languages in a traditional way which makes it more difficult for some people to overcome this traditionalism. In general what this indicates, on the one hand, is that asking teachers to no longer perceive themselves as knowledge-holding "masters" means asking them to forget about a reality that had been existed for quite a very long time. It is clear from the above why this can be really destabilizing and time demanding. On the other hand, teachers are not the only ones who can find themselves in a distressed situation. Learners can also be destabilized by their new role. The former *student* now becomes an *active learner* for several reasons:

- the individual is thus considered as an actor of the class;
- a symmetry to that of the teacher is created, which clearly highlights the interactive conception of acquiring knowledge during the language class;
- this actor is considered to be a didactic concept, different from the social role that is traditionally referred to by the term *student*.

If a passive spectator in the past, he must now become actively involved, fact which requires more effort and capacity on his part.

B. Focus on the Learner

Didactics has shown a great deal of interest in one of the actors involved in the learning process namely learners, but it has done so without having really defined their new status and what they often do. They are now placed in the front of the educational stage and one of their main duties would be to get involved and participate actively in the construction of knowledge.

Whatever its limitations, the focus on learners has resulted in the significant attention paid by the field of didactics to educational needs and goals. Indeed, according to Henri Holec, "l'apprenant intervient toujours pour déterminer l'objectif de l'activité dans laquelle il s'engage:

- lorsque l'objet n'est pas explicité par l'enseignement ou que l'explicitation fournie n'est pas 'entendue, l'apprenant l'"invente', le construit à partir de sa perception de la situation d'apprentissage ;
- lorsque l'objectif est explicité, l'apprenant intègre, internalise l'explicitation fournie et reconstruit l'objectif à partir de l'interprétation qu'il fait de l'explicitation : par cette opération, il transforme l'information qu'il reçoit en connaissance opératoire susceptible d'orienter son activité, c'est une opération nécessaire : sans elle, l'information reçue reste à l'état de connaissance 'intellectuelle' externe, et n'a aucune incidence sur le comportements d'apprentissage.
- Mais le concept d'objectif, comme celui de besoin, sont difficile à cerner, d'autant plus qu'ils appartiennent au langage courant."[9] (The learner always intervenes in order to determine the objective of the activity in which he is involved:
- whenever the object is not explicited by the education process or that the explicitation provided is not clear enough, learners must invent and built it starting from their perception of the learning situation;
- when the objective is explicit, learners integrate, internalize the explicitation provided and rebuild this goal based on their interpretation of that explicitation: through this operation, they transform the received information into operative knowledge susceptible to influence their activity, it is a necessary process: without it, the information received remains under the form of external intellectual knowledge, and does not affect in any way the learning behaviors.

But the concept of objective, as well as the one of need, is difficult to identify, especially since they belong to the everyday language.) These concepts are intertwined: the needs stand for the question, the objectives are the answer, which must be adequate."

The phrase "besoins langagiers fait immédiatement référence à ce qui est directement nécessaire à un individu dans l'usage d'une langue étrangère pour communiquer dans les situations qui lui sont particulières ainsi qu'à ce qui lui manque à un moment donnée pour cet usage et qu'il va combler par l'apprentissage."[10] (Language needs refers immediately to what individuals need directly in the use of a foreign language in order to communicate in situations which are peculiar to them, as well as what they lack at a certain moment for this use and that they will fill by learning).

One must also "être conscient des attentes et des attitudes des étudiants pour pouvoir comprendre leur résistance ou leur participation et adapter son comportement pédagogique à la classe"[11] (be aware of the students' expectations and attitudes in order to understand their resistance or participation and adapt one's pedagogical behavior to the class).

Therefore, learning contents must meet a key condition: comply with learners' language needs in different areas of experience. We are dealing with language teaching based on specific objectives, the first one consisting of selecting and structuring speech acts and statements in an accessible and effective manner for classroom practice. It is necessary to highlight the following points:

- the functions of language as a means of communication;
- the actions that we perform via language provided that communication is generally considered as an essential way of acting on the others;
- the rules speakers have to obey to when they are involved in verbal exchanges;
- the extra-linguistic characteristics that determine the use of language.[12]

In order to better exemplify the above theoretical notions, we will refer to the case of FFL (French foreign language) taught in France and Romania. As already stated, in France, the approach in the teaching of foreign languages is more learner-centered than in Romania. A needs assessment allows the teacher to identify those specific needs and correlate them with the corresponding objectives.

The type of students studying FFL in France have most of them specific needs that demand a quick and effective learning process, supposed to ensure their integration into the new society or the improvement of their foreign language skills.

Governed by integrative motivation i.e. issued from a general interest in the language, the country and the French people, learners make in most cases the deliberate choice to undertake this learning. The teacher should take advantage of this positive attitude he will try to keep throughout this process.

In Romania, the learning process of FFL is rather 'programmed',[13] taking place in an institutionalized environment. Learners do not necessarily always choose to be there. Some believe that the language classroom is often discouraging because it is a place where one "speaks to say nothing." As the class situation is often "unreal", students, especially the young ones, do not even realize why it is sometimes necessary to learn a foreign language. It is especially in these cases that the teacher has the role of initiating and maintaining motivation for the study of FFL.

This appears to be even more important given that in Romania the teaching of FFL can start from a very early age and last for a long time. General education in this country involves eight years and is divided into two cycles:

- the primary one (grades I to IV)
- secondary (grades V to VIII)

Teaching FFL can begin in kindergarten or the first primary year if French is the first foreign language studied. Nevertheless, the first option as foreign language seems to be English since 90% of Romanian students are studying it, while 66% study French as a second foreign language. Its study continues until the end of high school and may be extended depending on the learner's choice of university.

It is therefore essential to remind students regularly what the purpose of such learning is, to what extent it can meet their current and future social, professional, cultural, tourist needs, etc., which will have a positive effect on their learning motivation and success

of this process. This concern is the result of the learner-centered approach, non-existent under the previous totalitarian regime, but more and more evident today.

Learners' motivation and needs are coupled, combination that is closely related to the objectives. We are more motivated when we know or we want to succeed. In the case of most Romanian learners of FFL, we may have to do with an integrative, but also instrumental motivation resulting from the need to learn a language for practical reasons: travel, consult bibliography, pass an exam, work in a field requiring knowledge of the French language, etc.

C. The Consideration of all Factors of Pragmatic Communication When Developing Educational Strategies

When developing educational strategies, the following factors related to pragmatic communication must be considered:

- the situation;
- the interlocutors' intentions;
- the roles they assume;
- the anticipation of actions;
- students' previous experience.

D. Activities Reconciling Morphological and Syntactic Aspects with the Pragmatic Vision

It is advisable to choose exercises and texts that promote authentic language communication.

This new situation reflects the complementarity that can be established between semiotics which incorporates pragmatics as one of its three branches and education. Transmission of knowledge is almost exclusively done through signs, especially linguistic ones; the acquisition of know-how occurs most often through the manipulation of signs. Mastering the pedagogical act thus merges well with the rational and controlled production of signs and

with good knowledge of their interpretation process. Learning as information-treating process refers to semiotics in the sense that when we learn, we create structures of meanings in our brains.

The evidence suggests, therefore that the methodology and didactics of foreign languages has benefited a great deal from various interactions with several other areas, the greatest change being brought about by the insertion of the pragmatic component.

NOTES

[1] Robert Galisson. et Daniel Coste D, *Dictionnaire de didactique de langues*, (Hachette : 1976), 507–508.

[2] Ioan–Gheorghe Rotaru, "Educaţia–prin prisma ideilor unor filosofii moderne," in *Educaţie. Educaţie specială*, Baia Mare: Editura „Maria Montessori", 1 (2011), 5–10.

[3] Charles W. Morris, *Signs, Language and Behavior* (New York: Prentice–Hall, 1946), 73–397.

[4] Throughout this paper, the quotations in French are followed by their translation into English made by the author of this article.

[5] Paul Grice, "Presupposition and Conversational Implicature", in *Radical Pragmatics*, New York: Academic Press, (1981), 183–197.

[6] Council of Europe *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment*, (2011), Council of Europe.

[7] Marc Weisser, *Pour une pédagogie de l'ouverture*", (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997), 23–45.

[8] Paul Cyr, *Les stratégies d'apprentissage*, (Paris : CLE International, 1998), 118–120.

[9] Henry Holec, "Apprendre à apprendre et apprentissage hétéro–dirigé", *Le français dans le dans monde,* numéro spécial*, Les autoapprentissages*, (1992), 49–50.

[10] René Richterich, *Besoins langagiers et objectifs d'apprentissage*, (Paris: Hachette, 1985), 92.

[11] Janine Courtillon, *Elaborer un cours de FLE*, (Paris: Hachette, 2003), 35–46.

[12] René Richterich, *Besoins langagiers et objectifs d'apprentissage*, (Paris: Hachette, 1985), 96.

[13] Jean–Paul Calvet, *Pour une écologie des langues du monde,* (Paris: Plon : DL 1999), 78.