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Developing successful and unsuccessful social relations in a second language

Abstract

Second-language (L2) users frequently demonstrate a strong interest in developing, establishing and maintaining social relations with other L2 users through the medium of the second language and I argue in this plenary that this is often achieved through a variety of supportive and creative ways as interactants jointly construct interpersonal talk. My main aim in this paper is to explore the workings of L2-L2 interpersonal language use and, as a secondary aim, to propose pedagogic intervention that will help the L2 learner to interact supportively and creatively in the target language.

To develop this argument, I will build on the work on Aston (1988a, 1988b, 1988c, 1989, 1993) and his description of how successful social relations in the target language are negotiated through supportiveness and solidarity and his use of the terms *some* and *any* (taken from Sacks, 1970 - 1971, and Schenkein, 1978) to examine how the L2 user can participate as a distinct individual in second-language talk as opposed to interacting as an anonymous language user.

Second-language interpersonal talk is problematic because the language user seeks to conform with others but, at the same time, wants to interact in creative ways. In discussing creative language use, I build on the work of Mead (1934) and his distinction between the creative *I* and the socially-conforming *me* and argue that second-language creative language use is jointly constructed between second-language users as they seek to develop successful social relations.

I aim to analyse the problematic nature of L2 interpersonal language by examining data collected on second-language users engaged in L2-L2 small talk in a target-language context and through interviews with such users. While building on Aston's description of solidarity and supportiveness in L2 interpersonal discourse, I also explore how creative language use allows the second-language user to achieve successful social relations and, at the same time, helps her to interact in her own distinctive way.

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1. Introduction

I think few teachers would dispute the fact that we want our students to be successful, independent and communicative second language users. We want them to be able to interact effectively with other target language users. We want them to be able to express themselves fluently and accurately. We want them to be able to achieve their own communicative objectives and goals. However, how do we know as language teachers that our students will be able interact effectively and successfully on an interpersonal level? The short answer is that we don't. We may provide our students with the necessary grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation and practise reading, writing, listening and speaking skills. At the same time, we may adopt or add on a communicative language methodology, offer a glossy textbook, and a whole range of supplementary material from workbooks to perhaps videos and interactive CD-ROMs. And out comes ... well … a student who may know about language rules and structures, can pass examinations such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the Cambridge First Certificate (FCE). But can the second-language user engage in successful social relations? Perhaps, as Phillipson (1992) notes, one of the unanswered questions of the communicative approach is why, at the end of the day, so many students actually cannot communicate. In the English-language classroom, there is an emphasis on communicative language teaching, along with an assortment of interactive classroom techniques and methods but less is said about communicative language learning. However, my purpose here is not to evaluate the achievements and limitations of the communicative approach but to ask how second-language users can be helped to achieve successful social relations in the target language.

2. Defining second-language social relations

First of all, what do I mean by successful second-language social relations?
I define successful L2 interpersonal language use as the joint achievement of the desired degree of involvement, concern and engagement between two (or more) target-language users.

Let me pull this working definition to pieces a little:

1. The term *success* must be defined by the interactants themselves (in terms of what they want out of an interaction – civility, familiarity, understanding, closeness, intimacy, etc.). Success cannot be defined, depicted and evaluated by classroom teachers, or through internationally recognised examinations or textbook exercises.

2. The term *joint* means participants need to work together. Speaker(s) cannot do all the interpersonal work. Interpersonal language use is by definition exploratory, tentative and changeable as relations are established, developed, maintained, and even lost.

3. The term *desired* means that interactants need to determine the type of relations they want to undertake or achieve in a given interaction. Do they want to interact impersonally, sympathetically, supportively or achieve something more solidary? The state of a relationship may change from interaction to interaction or within interactions themselves.

4. The terms *involvement, concern* and *engagement* reflect degrees of commitment that participants are willing to invest in a social relationship. Investment may be a more helpful concept than motivation as it reflects the amount of effort expended by participants as measured against the rewards achieved. Furthermore, in different circumstances, contexts and situations, and perhaps with the same interactants, participants may want to express different degrees of interest, responsiveness and concern in other participants.

So as teachers we want to develop students who are successful at interacting in the target language. But students are not products. We can prepare students for success but, at the end of the day, only the individual second-language user interacting in a given social context knows whether she has been successful – and even she might not know whether the interaction was successful. Is this an impossible situation for the language teacher?

3. ELT & interactional language use

Let us look at the current situation in the ELT classroom regarding interactional language use.

First of all, we can throw in the towel and focus on transactional language use – the language of getting things done e.g. ordering a meal, booking into a hotel or deciding on going to the cinema. A pedagogical emphasis on transactional language use often reflects current teaching methodology and materials where transactional language is often presented to second language learners through situations and functions where an anticipated, clear-cut and definable objective is to be reached (e.g. buying a sweater, asking for directions or changing traveller's cheques). The emphasis is mainly on successfully completing transactional objectives (through employing appropriate grammatical and functional structures) rather than on establishing, developing or maintaining relationships (phatic communication). In this approach social relations do not need to be taught or at best are a means to achieving transactional objectives.

Transactional language is the language of textbook writers as units are often divided into such transactional topics as ordering meals and dining out, going on holiday, going shopping, etc. At the same time, in all fairness textbook writers have tried to tackle the problem of social talk. This is often approached in some of the following ways.

1. **Topics:** a topic approach often examines small talk topics e.g. latest news, how one is feeling, the weather, work, leisure activities, latest films, personal news, etc.

2. **Formulaic Expressions:** L2 learners are often given a list of formulaic expressions with which to start conversations such as 'What's up?', 'Terrible weather!', 'How's work?', 'Long time, no see!', 'How's tricks?', 'How's the family?'

3. **Communicative Functions:** A popular textbook way to teach interactional language use is through communicative functions such as beginning a conversation, presenting oneself, presenting somebody, responding to an introduction, getting someone's attention, saying hello to someone, etc.

What are the problems / limitations with these approaches?

1. **Topics:** In conversation classes, teachers will sometimes nominate a topic but interpersonal talk outside the classroom does not necessarily have a 'topic'. The theme of conversation often changes rapidly. Interpersonal language use may need to focus not so much on conversational themes but rather on L1-L2 and L2-L2 interaction patterns:

    a. In L2-L1 interaction, participants can examine how to establish common ground or safe topics. What are safe topics to talk about? We all know that politics and religion tend to get us into trouble. So what can we focus on? In Mexico, the family and where people are from tend to be pretty safe. In Britain, the house, jobs and pets seem to be pretty safe.

    b. In L2-L2 interaction, participants can be helped to socialise with non-native speaking classmates, interact socially with other NNSs at business-related functions, talk to fellow passengers on a journey or mix with other tourists.

2. **Formulaic Expressions** restrict the personal dimension. They potentially take the interpersonal negotiatory and exploratory aspect out of social talk. They may fail to reflect the jointly constructed nature of social talk. Interpersonal language does not reflect a *message sent-message received model* of communication. Shannon and Weaver's "source-encoder-channel-decoder-destination" archetype (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 4) does not represent the process of interpersonal communication. A speaker-listener code model assumes that a sender encodes a message which is transmitted and decoded by the receiver: message sent – message understood. Communication, in an *encode-decode model*, involves the comprehension of thoughts. There is little sense of negotiating meanings, coming to common understandings and engaging in creative language use.

3. **Communicative Functions** often fail to convey the negotiated dimension to social talk. The textbook treatment of functions offer sentence stems for giving advice, making suggestions or showing sympathy so that, for instance, offering advice involves producing sentences beginning with 'You should…' and 'If I were you'… whilst missing out on the negotiatory aspect of giving advice. When examining the negotiatory aspects of interpersonal language use, one needs to examine how interactants give advice. Directly or indirectly? Who is the advice being given to? A stranger, a friend, an acquaintance, a family member etc. Is it serious, friendly or just casual advice?

A second approach to dealing with interactional language in the ELT classroom is through conversation classes in order to practise their socialising skills. Therefore, we may have the classroom situation where one teacher, twenty students discuss a predetermined topic which is set and controlled by the teacher. Turns are limited so that as many students as possible can talk. Students may be corrected on their mistakes or evaluated for their accuracy and fluency. What is the problem with this approach? First of all, conversation by nature involves few participants and reflects relatively short turns. Secondly, it often reflects frequent changes in topic and there is normally with no predetermined purpose. Furthermore, talk emerges. It is not structured.

4. Is there another approach?

First of all we need to start off not by trying to give learners the language of socialisation but rather help students achieve interpersonal goals. The second language learner who wants to develop interpersonal relationships in the second language is unlikely to be interested in studying language for its own sake. She is interested in both what she can 'do' with language within a target language situation and how she 'comes across' and 'gets on' with other interactants. Widdowson (1978: 3) contrasts these learning objectives of producing "meaningful communicative behaviour", with purely demonstrating "instances of correct English usage". The *successful* second language user wants to go beyond just having the necessary language which will allow her to communicate: she is interested in how language can enable her to achieve communicative goals in the second language context – rather than being limited to what language allows her to do. Language

knowledge and ability, therefore, should be seen as tools to facilitate interpersonal communication rather than the second language defining the activities that can be carried out in the target language environment. This means putting programmes, syllabuses, and textbooks to one side and conducting an analysis of local and interpersonal needs and wants.

5. Identifying Interpersonal Language Use

So how can we identify interpersonal language use? I propose here to build on the work of Aston (1988a, 1988b, 1988c, 1989, 1993). He argues that the interpersonal relations that L2 users often seek in the target language can be described in terms of either showing understanding concern, sympathy and appreciation of others (what he calls supportiveness), or sensing/experiencing the same feeling as other participants (what he calls solidarity). It is a joint construction as interactants work together to express their social relationship.

Let me give you some examples. Let us suppose that we go to the cinema and we see the latest Harry Potter film. I say 'Wonderful'. You reply with 'Wonderful' or even 'Fantastic'. You are showing agreement with me so you are backing me up, substantiating what I am saying i.e. you are showing supportiveness. But do you really think the same way as me? Are you just being polite? Or are you saying this because you need to say something? We don't really know. And maybe it doesn't matter because you are trying to maintain the social relationship. However, if you say 'And what an ending! I definitely wasn't expecting that!' you are building on what I have been saying you are expressing a much greater sense of convergence and association with other interactants. You are potentially enhancing the relationship. Let me give you another example. If I say: 'My dog died' and you say, 'You must be sad'. You were very fond of him, weren't you?' you are showing sympathy but you are not demonstrating that you necessarily feel the same way as I do. But supposing you said 'It's terrible when you lose a pet, I know'. You are showing solidarity – that you have, or have had, the same feelings. As an interactant chooses to express supportiveness and solidarity and engage in creative language use, she moves towards interacting as a *somebody* in the target language. She develops *a sense of community* with other interactants while reflecting the uniqueness of their relationship. The

somebody - *anybody* distinction is explored by Schenkein (1978) who says that a salesperson can interact with a prospective client on an impersonal transactional level or, alternatively, she can specifically orient herself personally towards the client. Schenkein argues that both the impersonal transactional and the personal interactional identities are present in business encounters as the interactants move between official identity personalities (e.g. salesperson-client) and unofficial identity personalities (e.g. participants sharing common interests and experiences). It is the unofficial identity personality that allows the salesperson to interact as a *somebody*.

6. Creative Language Use

Besides expressing supportiveness and solidarity, second-language users want to interact as individuals: they want to interact in their own individualistic ways. So they want to conform to others as they seek socialisation – what Mead (1934) calls the conforming *me*. But, at the same time, L2 users want to interact as themselves or through what Mead calls the creative *I*. The *me* reflects supportiveness and solidarity. The creative *I* seeks a much more individualistic dimension to interpersonal language. Perhaps our students do not want to interact as imitation or synthetic American English-language speakers but rather as fluent Mexican English-language users who show conformity to target-language norms but can also interact in their own way. Just like supportiveness and solidarity, creative language use is jointly constructed. This can be seen through language play, repetition and extending meaning. For instance, in the following example, Mariana, a Mexican PhD student, creates a parallel Spanish verb for the English verb *to chop*. She also code-switches by using the English word *onion* instead of the Spanish word *cebolla*:

Mariana: como yo de mi chopear las onions
like me with my chopping onions

She is playing with language and interacting as an individual who is combining her L1 with her L2.

7. Interpersonal Language in the ELT Classroom

Teachers are busy people. A teacher needs to successfully cover a programme, apply an end-of-course exam and perhaps 'finish' the book. Her lesson plan may have to reflect a balance between the four skills whilst also covering grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. She needs to take into consideration students' needs and wants and try to make her teaching interesting and stimulating by following an appropriate methodology perhaps adhering to a communicative approach. She has to worry about fluency and accuracy. She must make sure that she uses a range of teaching materials including videos, CDs etc. And now she has to take into account interpersonal language use? How is she supposed to do it all? I will argue that taking into consideration interpersonal language use does not involve a radical change in teaching methodology or classroom practices but rather involves using existing materials in slightly different pedagogic ways. I will look at two specific areas: role plays – a textbook exercise on 'giving advice' – and script writing.

7.1 Roleplays

Aston sees roleplays as a 'particularly appropriate as a means of engaging the learner in interactional speech in the classroom' (1988c: 326). Roleplays offer opportunities for learners to act out the interpersonal dimension to second-language use and, subsequently, examine and reflect on the implications of certain types of behaviour in real-life situations. Roleplays have the potential to offer both an interpersonal context and a personal history of the interactants. These two aspects are important in order to make L2 interpersonal language practice more meaningful and more related to specific individuals rather than portraying anonymous actors.

Roleplays often reflect transactional language use but they can be given an interpersonal dimension. For instance, in David Nunan's *Atlas 2* (1995), students are presented with a communication activity where there are two roles: the prospective new member of a health club and the trainer at the health club. The prospective new member wants to get into shape and goes to the trainer for advice. After the prospective member fills in a health profile (e.g. on eating habits, smoking habits, etc.), students are then asked to discuss with a partner how they should work on getting into shape and are encouraged to use sentences beginning with *you should…* or *you shouldn't…* . Instead of solely concentrating on the use of the modal verb *should*, students could also be encouraged to develop an interpersonal

dimension to the activity. Losing weight, exercising or giving up smoking are familiar and common problems which few people seem to be able to solve easily. Therefore, the conversation can be given an interpersonal dimension as the interactants talk about and perhaps share these problems. Talk can be supportive (if the trainer understands the problems) or solidary (if she has experienced the same problems).

Roleplays allow the learner to explore levels of involvement as she may want to seek closeness or, alternatively, maintain some sense of distance. Close involvement, for instance, may be reflected through personal topics and stories and through a high level of supportive overlaps (Tannen 1984). Interpersonal talk gives the learner an opportunity to examine how pragmatic resources such as directness / indirectness and tentative use of language can help achieve closeness or maintain distance when giving advice. Such activities can take the language learner well beyond the apparent purpose of the exercise to practise the use of *should* / *shouldn't*.

Giving advice

Here is a possible textbook exercise:

Work with a partner and give advice on:

- ► giving up smoking
- ► how to lose weight
- ► how to invite someone out
- ► trying to ask for a pay raise

Try to use the following structures.....

In this exercise we have a topic, a list of possible formulaic sentences but we are missing the interpersonal dimension. How could we achieve this? The first step, as suggested by Aston (1988b, 1988c, 1989), is for learners to try to add more biographical details to interactants in a given situation. Such information can be taken from personal experience, from people the learners actually know or, at least, from people about whom they have a lot of personal information (Aston 1988c: 337 – 338, 1989: 338 - 339). In the exercise I just mentioned, the meeting with a person with wants to lose weight can be modified to a meeting between two friends. As learners build up the biographical details of the

interactants, the more restricted the interpersonal language becomes. As a consequence, talk that develops is more likely to reflect the interaction of *somebodies* rather than *anybodies* – although this will depend on the context. The next step is to decide whether, in the case of the giving up weight scenario, for instance, the friend only identifies with the other friend who wants to lose weight (i.e. feels *for* the other and expresses supportiveness) or has actually experienced the same situation (feels *as* the other and expresses solidarity). By deciding which stance to take, there is an issue of achieving successful interpersonal language use as interactants try to achieve positive rapport through engaging in supportiveness or solidarity.

7.2 Script Writing

Here, in Mexico, soap operas and sitcoms are extremely popular. ELT textbooks in Mexico seem to have picked up on this interest by providing a story line which runs through the textbook. Soap and sitcoms may be the subject of a complete unit. For instance, the textbook *Inside Out Intermediate* (Kay and Jones 2003) devotes unit nine to soap operas while the textbook *Cutting Edge Intermediate* (Cunningham and Moor 1999) asks students in module 12 to write a soap-opera script.

Soap operas and sitcoms have the advantage of projecting a context and the biographical details of the interactants. Practising L2 interpersonal language use needs to reflect both an interpersonal language context and the personal history of the interactants. These two aspects are important in order to make L2 interpersonal language practice more meaningful and more related to specific individuals rather than portraying anonymous actors in any context.

One of the problems with learners writing their own scripts is that not all interactants in a given role-play may have access to the same biographical details (Aston 1988c, 1989). One solution would be to take a sitcom or soap opera where learners have the same access to biographical information (or could easily make themselves familiar with such information). In using a popular sitcom, learners can share the same knowledge of the characters – their history, attitudes, values, including their likes and dislikes. Students can then be asked to develop the story line in a certain direction that calls for achieving

successful interpersonal language use. A popular choice in Mexico, for instance, would be a television series such as *Friends*. At the same time, Scollon (1999) argues that by analysing and comparing television sitcoms in different languages, L2 learners can study contrasting patterns and practices of social interaction and try to put them into 'the context of daily usage' (p. 195).

8. Conclusion

I have argued that second-language (L2) users frequently demonstrate a strong interest in developing, establishing and maintaining social relations with other L2 users through the medium of the second language and I have argued in this paper that this is often achieved through a variety of supportive and creative ways as interactants jointly construct interpersonal talk.

I have built on the work on Aston (1988a, 1988b, 1988c, 1989, 1993) and his description of how successful social relations in the target language are negotiated through supportiveness and solidarity. I have also argued that second-language interpersonal talk is problematic because the language user seeks to conform with others but, at the same time, wants to interact in creative ways.

Finally I have argued that teachers can help in developing L2 interpersonal language use by adapting or modifying existing activities which allow second-language learners to explore different ways of interacting in the second language.

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Biodata

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