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СОДРЖИНА / TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 11** ПРЕДГОВОР
Проф. д-р Виолета Димова, прв декан на Филолошкиот факултет во Штип
FOREWORD
Prof. Violeta Dimova, the first Dean of the Faculty of Philology in Stip

ЈАЗИК / LANGUAGE

- 15** **Marija Kusevska**
DESCRIBING SPEECH ACTS FROM CROSS-CULTURAL
AND INTERLANGUAGE PERSPECTIVE
- 27** **Costanza Geddes da Filicaia**
“TIRINNANZI” O “TYRYNNANZY”? IL *GIORNALINO DI GIAN
BURRASCA* E LA GRAFFIANTE IRONIA ONOMASTICA DI LUIGI
BERTELLI
Costanza Geddes da Filicaia
“TIRINNANZI” OR “TYRYNNANZY”? THE *GIORNALINO DI GIAN
BURRASCA* AND LUIGI BERTELLI’S MORDANT IRONY ON NAMES
- 37** **Paolo Orrù**
STRATEGIE DISCORATIVE DELL’INFORMAZIONE TELEVISIVA NEL
DISCORSO SULLE MIGRAZIONI, ALCUNI APPUNTI LINGUISTICI
SUL CASO ITALIANO
Paolo Orrù
DISCOURSIIVE STRATEGIES OF THE TV INFORMATION IN THE
DISCOURSE ABOUT MIGRATIONS, SOME LINGUISTIC POINTS
REGARDING THE ITALIAN CASE
- 53** **Марија Гркова**
ОСВРТ КОН УСВОЈУВАЊЕТО НА ГРАМАТИЧКИТЕ КАТЕГОРИИ
КАЈ ИМЕНКИТЕ ВО МАКЕДОНСКИОТ ЈАЗИК КАКО СТРАНСКИ
Marija Grkova
REVIEW OF THE ACQUISITION OF THE GRAMMATICAL CATEGORIES
OF NOUNS IN MACEDONIAN AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

КНИЖЕВНОСТ / LITERATURE

- 67** **Марија Ѓорѓиева-Димова**
ИНТЕРПРЕТАТИВНИ ОСЦИЛАЦИИ МЕЃУ ТЕКСТОТ И КОНТЕКСТОТ
Marija Gjorgjieva Dimova
INTERPRETATIVE OSCILLATIONS BETWEEN TEXT AND CONTEXT

- 81 Весна Мојсова-Чепишевска**
 КУЛТУРНАТА ДРУГОСТ НИЗ „ТЕЧНИОТ ГОВОР“ НА ПОЕТСКИОТ
 ЗБОР И ФОТОГРАФИЈАТА
 Vesna Mojsova Chepishevskа
 THE CULTURAL DIFFERENCE THROUGH “THE FLUENT SPEECH” OF
 THE POETIC WORD AND PHOTOGRAPHY
- 93 Ивица Максимовски**
 СЕМАНТИКАТА И СИМБОЛИКАТА
 ВО „ЛОША ТЕТКА И ДРУГИ РАСКАЗИ“ ОД КОВИЛОСКИ
 Ivica Maksimovski
 SEMANTICS AND SYMBOLISM
 IN “BAD AUNT AND OTHER SHORT STORIES” BY KOVILOSKI
- 101 Nazlı Rânâ Gürel**
 NECİP FAZIL KISAKÜREK’İN BİR ADAM YARATMA
 ADLI PİYESİNDE ELEŞTİREL YAKLAŞIMLAR
 Nazlı Rana Gurel
 CRITICAL APPROACH FOR ‘TO CREATE A MAN’ BY NECİP FAZIL
- 109 Ivona Stojanovska**
 BAHRÎ VE DİVANI
 Ivona Stojanovska
 BAHRI AND HIS DIVAN
- 119 Славчо Ковилоски**
 ЗАПИСИТЕ НА КУЗМАН ШАПКАРЕВ ЗА МАШКО-ЖЕНСКИТЕ
 ОДНОСИ И МАКЕДОНСКОТО ОБИЧАЈНО ПРАВО
 Slavcho Koviloski
 KUZMAN SHAPKAREV’S RECORDS OF MALE-FEMALE RELATIONS
 AND MACEDONIAN CUSTOMARY LAW
- 127 Луси Караниколова-Чочоровска**
 СУДБИНСКАТА ЕНЕРГИЈА НА ПОЕТСКАТА РЕЧ (ЗА ПОЕТСКАТА
 СУДБИНА НА ГАНЕ ТОДОРОВСКИ, АТАНАС ВАНГЕЛОВ И ТОДОР
 ЧАЛОВСКИ)
 Lusi Karanikolova-Chochorovska
 THE DESTINAL ENERGY OF THE POETIC WORD (FOR THE POETIC
 DESTINY OF GANE TODOROVSKI, ATANAS VANGELOV AND TODOR
 CHALOVSKI)
- 135 Miruna Craciunescu**
 RÉACTIVATION D’UN IMAGINAIRE DU XVIII^E SIÈCLE DANS LES
ILLUSIONS PERDUES D’HONORÉ DE BALZAC
 Miruna Craciunescu
 IN SEARCH OF A COLLECTIVE IMAGINARY OF THE 18TH CENTURY IN
 BALZAC’S *LOST ILLUSIONS*

149 Eva Gjorgjievska
MARCEL PROUST ET LES PERSONNAGES JUIFS DANS *ALA RECHERCHE DU TEMPS PERDU*
Eva Gjorgjievska
MARCEL PROUST AND THE CHARACTERS OF JEWS IN THE NOVEL *IN SEARCH OF LOST TIME*

161 Искра Тасевска Хаџи-Бошкова
БИОГРАФИЈАТА НА КУЗМАН ШАПКАРЕВ ВО СВЕТЛИНАТА НА БИОГРАФСКИТЕ ДИСКУРСИ
Iskra Tasevska Hadji Boshkova
KUZMAN SHAPKAREV'S BIOGRAPHY IN THE CONTEXT OF BIOGRAPHICAL DISCOURSES

КУЛТУРА / CULTURE

173 Diego Poli
MATTHEW RICCI - LI MADOU: A DIALOGUE ACROSS CULTURES

185 Петар Намичев, Екатерина Намичева
ТРАНСФОРМАЦИЈА НА КУЛТУРНАТА МЕМОРИЈА ПРЕКУ ТРАДИЦИОНАЛНАТА АРХИТЕКТУРА ВО МАКЕДОНИЈА
Petar Namicev, Ekaterina Namiceva
THE TRANSFORMATION OF CULTURAL MEMORY THROUGH THE TRADITIONAL ARCHITECTURE IN MACEDONIA

199 Стојанче Костов
ВЛИЈАНИЕТО НА ШКОЛАТА НА ИГОР АЛЕКСАНДРОВИЧ МОЈСЕЕВ ВО МАКЕДОНСКИТЕ ФОЛКЛОРНИ АНСАМБЛИ
Stojance Kostov
THE INFLUENCE OF THE SCHOOL OF IGOR ALEXANDROVICH MOJSEYEV IN THE MACEDONIAN FOLK DANCE ENSEMBLE

207 Јане Јованов, Катерина Ромашевска
АЗБУКА НА ЧЕШКИТЕ РЕАЛИИ
Jane Jovanov, Katerina Romashevaska
ALPHABET OF CZECH REALITIES

МЕТОДИКА НА НАСТАВАТА / TEACHING METHODOLOGY

213 Igor Rižnar
BLENDED LANGUAGE LEARNING AND FLIPBOARD IN HIGHER EDUCATION

225 Mahmut Çelik, Ümit Süleymani
MAKEDONYA'DA 'TÜRK YAZI DİLİ TARİHİ' KONUSUNU ÜNİVERSİTE TÜRK DİLİ VE EDEBİYATI BÖLÜMLERİNDE "ROL OYNAMA (DRAMATİZASYON) YÖNTEMİYLE ÖĞRETİMİ"

Mahmut Çelik, Ümit Süleymani
THE HISTORY OF TURKISH WRITTEN LANGUAGE TAUGHT AT
UNIVERSITY DEPARTMENT OF TURKISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE
IN MACEDONIA WITH ROLEPLAYING (DRAMATIZATION) METHOD

237 Fausto Maria Greco
UN PERCORSO DIDATTICO DI INTERCULTURALITÀ ATTRAVERSO LA
NARRATIVA DI FABIO GEDA
Fausto Maria Greco
A DIDACTIC ITINERARY TOWARDS INTERCULTURALITY THROUGH
THE NARRATIVE OF FABIO GEDA

251 Snezana Petrova, Sevda Lazarevska
L'IDENTITE CULTURELLE ET LES APPROCHES ET PRATIQUES
INTERCULTURELLES DANS L'EDUCATION
Snezana Petrova, Sevda Lazarevska
CULTURAL IDENTITY AND INTERCULTURAL APPROACHES IN
EDUCATION

259 Brikena Xhaferi, Gezim Xhaferi
THE ROLE OF CALL IN FOSTERING LEARNER AUTONOMY – A STUDY
CONDUCTED AT SOUTH EAST EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY IN TETOVO

ПРИКАЗИ / BOOK REVIEWS

269 François Schmitt
COMPTE-RENDU : «FANTASTIKA (NIELEN) V TALIANESKEJ LITERATURE»
(« LE FANTASTIQUE DANS LA LITTÉRATURE ITALIENNE ET AILLEURS),
PAR EVA MESAROVA
François Schmitt
REVIEW: » «FANTASTIKA (NIELEN) V TALIANESKEJ LITERATURE»
(FANTASTIC IN ITALIAN LITERATURE AND ELSEWHERE), BY EVA
MESAROVÁ

ДОДАТОК / APPENDIX

275 ПОВИК ЗА ОБЈАВУВАЊЕ ТРУДОВИ
ВО МЕЃУНАРОДНОТО НАУЧНО СПИСАНИЕ „ПАЛИМПСЕСТ“
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LANGUAGE

Marija Kusevska

DESCRIBING SPEECH ACTS FROM CROSS-CULTURAL AND INTERLANGUAGE PERSPECTIVE

Abstract: Ever since the appearance of Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* (1962) and Searle's *Speech Acts* (1969), speech acts have attracted great attention and have been subject to research from different perspectives. In this paper we refer to research of speech acts from cross-cultural and interlanguage perspective. First, we discuss some aspects that speech act research is based on, including: 1. variability (power of the speaker and hearer, social distance, degree of imposition, gender, etc.), and 2. communicative principles, focusing on the politeness principle which determines the type of strategy that interlocutors apply to realize speech acts. Then we refer to how culture influences speech act realization. In particular, we focus on perception of the situations in which speech acts are realized, perception of social factors, as well as the cultural understanding of face and politeness. We will also focus on the challenges that speech acts impose on learners of English as a foreign language. The above discussion is illustrated with examples from empirical research of speech acts in the Republic of Macedonia.

Keywords: *cross-cultural pragmatics, interlanguage pragmatics, pragmatolinguistic knowledge, sociopragmatics, speech acts.*

Introduction

Speech acts¹ have been a subject of lively discussion ever since John L. Austin's book *How to Do Things with Words* first came out in 1962. Austin's thinking was further developed by John R. Searle. According to them language is activity which produces speech acts, defined as "the basic or minimal units of linguistic communication" (Searle, 1969, p. 16).

In communication, we choose what we say and how we express our intentions, giving specific form to the discourse that we create. Everything we say is the result of choices that we do consciously or unconsciously. The process of what we say sometimes seems automatic. Often when we meet someone we barely know, we say "How are you?", and the other person says "Fine," "not really intending to accomplish anything in particular, but simply because 'fine'

¹ This article was first presented at 2nd International Conference on English Language, British and American Studies, International Balkan University, Skopje, in 2015.

is the obvious thing to say, and silence may seem rude.” (Johnstone, 2008, p. 229).

Speech acts have multiple layers, and so does the question “How are you?” Referring to its literal meaning, the locutionary act, it is a question that we ask about someone’s health or mood. However, it would be inappropriate to ask people about their health or mood if we do not know them well, especially not if we meet them on the stairs or walking out of the elevator. And because it certainly is inappropriate in these situations, we assume that by uttering it the speaker intends to accomplish something else. Also, when someone says “It’s cold in here,” we may want to make a statement about the temperature in the room. However, it is more probable we want to do something else with our words, make a request or complain. This particular aspect of the speech act is its illocutionary force or point. And, if by uttering these words we achieve that a person we are addressing closes the window, or turns on the heater, we are talking about the perlocutionary effect of the utterance.

What has occupied most speech act theorists is the illocutionary force of speech acts. Being able to interpret the locutionary force does not necessarily mean that we understand the illocutionary force of the utterance. All of us who have studied foreign languages soon discovered this when we had to use our new language for the first time in real-life situations. Johnstone (2008) gives the example of how confusing:

“Drop over for dinner sometime” can be. Is it a request for immediate action or is it just a way to end a conversation, or an indication that the speaker would like your relationship with her to continue? ... If she never mentions the idea again, should you be offended? Will she be offended if you do not show up at her house some evening, or will she seem puzzled or annoyed if you do? (p. 231).

Speech Act Realization

The realization of each speech act can vary. What speech acts will be used and what language will be applied depends on the context in which the speech act is situated. We should have in mind:

1. the participants, especially the social distance between them (vertical and horizontal); age (different or same); gender (male or female);
2. speaker’s/hearer’s perception of the situation (i.e. degree of the imposition of the speaker on the hearer; urgency of the situation; etc.);
3. communicative principles (cooperative and politeness principles); and
4. cultural values that shape communication in the society in which it takes place.

Politeness is one of the most researched fields of contemporary pragmatics and it is crucial for how speech acts are formulated. A central concept to politeness theories (Goffman, 1967; Brown and Levinson, [1978] 1987; Watts, 2003; Mills, 2009; Sifianou, 2013; Kádár & Haugh, 2013; etc.) is the concept of face, i.e. the public image that the speaker/hearer has earned for himself/herself.

Both the speaker and the hearer tend to maintain this picture in conversation. The concept of face contains two aspects: *negative face* and *positive face*. The *negative face* depicts the need of every competent adult speaker that he or she is free of imposition; the positive face is a positive image that reflects the need of all members of the society to be appreciated and liked by the other members.

Because face can be damaged, “all reasonable speakers try to avoid those speech acts that threaten the face of the hearer/speaker, or apply strategies which would minimize the threat.” (Brown & Levinson, [1978] 1987, p. 68). Brown and Levinson ([1978] 1987) quote several strategies for the realization of face threatening acts. Namely, the speaker may decide to do or not to do the speech act. If he or she decides to do it, they may do it on record (directly), when the intention of the speaker is clear to the hearer or off record (indirectly). If the speaker opts for performing the speech act directly, he or she may decide to do it baldly without redressive action or baldly with redressive action.

As previously mentioned, the realization of speech acts can vary depending on the speech act content and the politeness strategies. If a mother asks her child to take the garbage out, she may just say “The garbage” with suitable intonation. A person may ask her roommate to perform the activity by saying “Could you take the garbage out?” or a company may write a note saying “Residents of this building are kindly requested to take their garbage out on Tuesdays.” (Johnstone, 2008) Thus, speakers can modify their speech acts by applying syntactic or lexical modification. Syntactic modification includes the use of questions, question tags, negation, tense, modal verbs, conditional clauses, imperatives, etc. Lexical modification includes use of downtoners, intensifiers, limiters, hedges, discourse markers, etc.

In formulating speech acts, we also need to take into consideration the culture that the interlocutors belong to. The culture determines interlocutors’ previous knowledge, their understanding of the world, their values, perceptions, beliefs, etc. In this paper we look at speech acts from two perspectives: cross-cultural and interlanguage perspective. The discussion is illustrated with examples from empirical research on speech acts in the Republic of Macedonia.

Speech Acts Research

Most comprehensive project within cross-cultural studies of speech acts certainly is the Project of cross-cultural realization of speech acts (CCSARP) of Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper (1989). The purpose of this project was to compare the realization of speech acts of requesting and apologizing in seven languages.

After this project other comparative studies of speech acts followed: expressing requests (Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper, 1989; Weizman, 1989), refusals (Beebe, Takahashi, & Uliss-Weltz, 1990), complaining (Olshtain & Wienbach, 1993; Boxer, 1993; Clyne, Ball, & Neil, 1991), inviting (Wolfson, D’Amico-Reisner, & Huber, 1983), apologizing (Olshtain, 1989; Blum-Kulka,

House and Kasper, 1989; Garcia, 1989), giving compliments (Wolfson, 1983; Manes, 1983), etc.

In relation to the Macedonian and English language, the speech act of disagreeing (Kusevska, 2012) as well as the speech acts of requesting, expressing gratitude, apologizing and complaining (Kusevska, Trajkova, Neshkovska and Smichkovska, 2014) have been studied. We are also aware that research of making compliments, requesting via emails and speech acts in business correspondence is underway. As for describing the pragmatic ability of Macedonian learners of English, we refer to Mitkovska, Kusevska and Buzharovska (2013) and Petkovska (2013).

Cross-cultural Perspective of Speech Acts

A significant contribution in terms of cross-cultural pragmatics was given by Anna Wierzbicka (Wierzbicka, 1985; 1997; 1999; 2008), who strongly opposes the English ethnocentrism. Wierzbicka compares speech acts in English, Polish, Russian and Japanese through the following cultural values: privacy, intimacy, distance, objectivism, cordiality and courtesy. The comparison supports her thesis that every culture has its own specific speech acts and those elements that are important for one culture need not be as important to another. English, for example, developed a system of cultural values that influence every individual to be constantly aware that there are other people, other opinions, to see themselves as just one individual among many others, all of whom are entitled to their own mental space, their autonomy, their peculiarities and eccentricities. However, Wierzbicka (2008) points out that it is pointless to argue that speech acts in English reflect certain cultural values while speech acts in other languages reflect the absence of such values. After all, every language reflects the values characteristic of its own culture.

The impact of culture on the choice of strategy for the realization of speech acts has often been subject of study. Below we elaborate on some factors observed in our research that affect the realization of speech acts.

Perception of the Situation

One reason for the differences in the formulation of speech acts may be the speaker's perception of the situation. Kusevska (2014b, p. 279) states that in a series of complaint situations which she investigated to study realization of the speech act of complaining, for Macedonian speakers the top three most serious offenses were unfair grading of an examination, a co-worker taking long lunch breaks during working hours and damaging a borrowed car. For the US speakers, however, the most severe offences included cutting the line, a colleague forgetting to return the notes and eating someone's food. This difference shows that the Macedonian speakers are mostly hurt when it comes to something which according to their perception is not fair, regardless of the distance between the interlocutors. For American speakers it is respect for the individual and the violation of personal property.

In this sense, Trajkova (2014, p. 127) connects the perception of the speaker of the situation and directness of expression. Thus, in some situations that she analyzed in terms of making requests, both members of the American and Macedonian culture used equally direct strategies. However, in other situations, the speakers used different strategies. Thus, in a situation where the speaker asks the interlocutor to change the pants that he bought, the Americans used even 61.9% more direct requests than the Macedonians. Under the US system the customer is entitled to seek for his pants to be replaced, and the seller is obliged to do so, which makes the imposition on him lower.

Perception of the Social Factors

Different perception of social factors can also lead to different formulation of speech acts. In this respect, Neshkovska (2014, p. 140), when analyzing the linguistic strategies for explicit-emotional thanking in English and Macedonian includes the following parameters: the status of the interlocutors, the social distance between them, the level of imposition, the initiator of the service, and the status of the service.

Thus, in task S4a (in which the respondent asks a stranger about the time) there is hesitation among respondents whether formal or informal thanking is more adequate, which could be explained by the fact that there are differences in the perception of the value of the social distance parameter by Macedonian and English respondents as members of different cultures. Namely, the Macedonian respondents showed willingness to quickly lower the level of formality in order to reduce distance and increase familiarity with their interlocutors. Most British respondents, however, chose formal explicit-emotional thanking that can be interpreted as a commitment to maintaining the current social distance with the other party, who is a stranger to the speaker or just an acquaintance.

The Concept of Face and Different Types of Politeness

The concept of face is one of the leading factors for the organization of speech and therefore it determines whether the culture has positive or negative politeness. The Anglo-American culture respects the independence of the people and avoids imposition, thus showing preference for negative politeness. The individual is seen as free, entitled to his/her opinion, beliefs and so on. Macedonian culture values solidarity and friendship more than independence, thus showing preference for positive politeness. Hence, it developed strategies for involvement and closeness. This also showed in our research of speech acts.

One of the hypothesis (hypothesis 4) which Smichkovska (2014, p. 197) departs from in her analysis of the realization of the speech act of apology in English and Macedonian is that in Macedonian it is positive politeness that prevails while in English it is negative politeness. She gives several examples in support of her stance. Thus, in the sixth situation of her Discourse completion task (A driver slams his car into another car at traffic lights) Macedonian respondents used a lot of expressions to calm the interlocutor or to express

concern for the protection of the positive face of the interlocutor. Also, in the seventh position (A colleague borrows a laptop from another colleague and accidentally damages it), Macedonian speakers increasingly emphasized the lack of intention and used many more expressions of embarrassment, which is a characteristic of cultures with positive politeness. Generally, the speech act of apologizing reveals more facework in the direction of creating warmth, personal commitment etc. Smichkovska points out that expressing feelings falls under positive politeness and concludes that this is more typical for Macedonian than English culture.

The analysis of the speech act of disagreement (Kusevska, 2012) also indicates that Macedonian culture shows preference for positive while American culture for negative politeness. As a result, American speakers prefer to formulate their disagreement as direct disagreement with mitigation. Because of this, English has developed many linguistic means that are available to English language speakers to mitigate their speech acts. The increased use of weak modal verbs to express obligation and necessity (*can, may, might, could* and *be able to*) can also be explained as a result of this.

On the other hand, Macedonian speakers rarely mitigate their disagreement. The thing that Macedonian speakers resort to in this respect is the use of personal names and the particle *ōe*. By using these markers, speakers create a framework of closeness, involvement and friendship. Tannen & Kakava (1992) call them markers of solidarity.

Interlanguage Perspective of Speech Acts

In order to become proficient in their L2, language learners need to acquire both grammatical and pragmatic knowledge. In terms of pragmatic knowledge, we find Thomas's (1983) and Leech's (1983) distinction between sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic knowledge helpful in understanding the difficulty that learners may face. Sociopragmatic knowledge means knowledge of the context, recognition and production of illocutionary meaning, distribution of politeness strategies, the speaker-hearer relationship, formality of the situation, social values and cultural beliefs, etc. Pragmalinguistic knowledge, on the other hand, refers to particular linguistic resources which a given language provides for conveying particular illocutions. In this respect we also find useful Thomas's definition (Thomas, p. 1983) that "Pragmatic failure could occur when learners misunderstand what a speaker of a TL says, and/or when they produce inappropriate expressions that do not meet the TL pragmatics or cultural norms." Therefore, it is clear that L2 learners must be aware of L2 sociocultural constraints on speech acts in order to be pragmatically competent.

In order to acquire pragmatic knowledge, L2 learners have to acquire the ability to perform speech acts, to convey and interpret non-literal meanings, to perform politeness functions, to perform discourse functions and to use cultural knowledge. Issues often investigated in interlanguage pragmatics also include

reasons that cause misunderstanding between speakers, L1 pragmatic transfer and relationship between language proficiency and pragmatic competence.

Research on English interlanguage of Macedonian learners is scarce. Still, we will try to quote some examples that we believe will shed some light on its characteristics.

Choice of Strategies

Studying the expression of disagreement by Macedonian students at B2 level, Kusevska (2014a) found out that Macedonian learners of English would rather intensify than mitigate their disagreement. This is not in compliance with the target language norm, whose speakers tend to avoid or at least mitigate their disagreement. Contrary to the expectations, some linguistic means which may look like expressing agreement with reservation or giving space for other people's opinions, like *Sorry* and *I think* do not soften students' utterances. They are rather used to intensify them. The utterances sound very firm, and the speakers clearly distance themselves from the previous speaker's opinion, e.g. *I'm sorry, but I'm totally against it.*

Speech Act Modification

Kusevska (2014a) also found out that:

the learners are able to internally modify their disagreement. Yet the number of the lexical modifiers they used was quite limited. For strong disagreement it was the intensifying adverbs *completely*, *absolutely*, and *totally*. For weak disagreement it was mostly epistemic verbs, adjectives and adverbs, but their distribution was limited to individual cases. There was one example with *a little* (*It is. But maybe you should look around a little more*) and one example with *seem* (*don't seem important*). However, no other verbs of hesitation and uncertainty (*guess*, *suppose*, *assume*) or hedges (*just*, *sort of*, *kind of*) were used to formulate disagreement. (p. 104)

Her study showed that modals verbs are a significant characteristic of expressing disagreement by Macedonian learners of English. However, the results differ from previous research on speech acts of disagreement produced by native US speakers (Kusevska, 2012), in which

it was found out that *would* and *can* were the most frequent modal verbs expressing disagreement. They were followed by *could*, *may*, *might*, *will*, *need* and *should*, in this order, while *must* had only one occurrence. With Macedonian learners of English, the frequency rates of specific modal verbs were in the following order: *will*, *should*, *would*, *can*, *must*; *need to*, *could* and *might* had very low frequency, while *may* had zero occurrences. (p. 105)

Kusevska's research also revealed that Macedonian learners of English do not vary the exponents that they use in relation to their interlocutors. There was no difference in how they expressed their disagreement to a colleague and to a superior. (Kusevska, 2014a, p. 105).

The Politeness Principle

The empirical studies of speech acts (Mitkovska, Kusevska, & Buzharovska, 2013) point out that Macedonian learners of English are generally aware of the politeness principle. They consider the following linguistic means as polite: the modal verb *would*, past tense (*I wanted to ask you ...*) as well as some adverbs (*just, possibly*). However, they don't use many of the linguistic strategies and structures that native speakers use, like the strategy "be pessimistic" and question tags (*You don't happen to have any change, do you?*), consultive strategies (*Do you think ...*) as well as some conventional expressions.

Conventional Expressions

Petkovska (2013), who studied acquisition of conventional expressions concludes that Macedonian learners of English are confident with the use of those conventional expressions that they have been exposed to since the beginning of their study of the language, such as *Thanks, Thank you, I'm sorry*, etc. However, other conventional expressions, although recognized when heard, are rarely or never used.

Her explanation is that Macedonian learners of English do not use those conventional expressions because they do not have sociopragmatic or pragmalinguistic knowledge. For example, there were situations requiring conventional expressions for thanking while the students used conventional expressions for apologizing. Also, even when using grammatically correct structures, they were not conventional expressions and were not appropriate for the situation. Sometimes their conventional expressions look like the appropriate ones, but with structural mistakes.

Petkovska (2013) assigns most of the mistakes to negative language transfer and many of the expressions that learners use are a literal translation of Macedonian expressions.

Conclusion

The goal of this paper was to review speech act research from cross-cultural and interlanguage perspective in general as well as in the Republic of Macedonia. Although research in pragmatics in Macedonia is rare, there is a growing interest for it and we believe that our paper will contribute to it.

Finally, we would like to stress again the importance of further research in the field of speech act realization because it reflects the social organization and the pillars of the culture on which the society is founded. Jiang's (2000) metaphor effectively captures the nature of language and culture as a whole: "communication is like transportation: language is the vehicle and culture is the traffic light" (p. 329). All conversational exchanges between speakers of different languages are a form of intercultural communication and learning a second language is also learning a second culture. However, culture is deeply

subconscious and its system is not obvious even for native speakers. In order to help learners acquire L2 cultural knowledge we need to provide more precise description of L2 cultural rules. Contrastive studies of speech acts can make considerable contribution to this.

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