

Cultural Context and Speech Act Theory: A Socio-pragmatic Analysis of Bargaining Exchanges in Morocco

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1. Introduction

When examined through the lens of Speech Act Theory (SAT), most work on context has focused on its conventional elements, in particular, felicity conditions, which help the speaker attain a successful performance of speech utterances. However, a major criticism leveled against the theoretical premise of SAT lies in its failure to consider variation in 'cultural context' as a determining factor in assuring successful communication vis a vis performance and reception (Leech, 1983). Using Moroccan bargaining data, this paper investigates the importance of cultural context in the determination of the illocutionary force of speech utterances in the bargaining exchange. The theoretical premise of this paper is to show that marketers' ability to perform an act and determine its illocutionary reading is achieved not solely by meeting and fulfilling the felicity conditions, but is, in fact, also attained by creatively invoking and mobilizing aspects of the Moroccan cultural context. This paper shows how interactants in a bargaining exchange manipulate salient, shared cultural concepts and strategically organize and analyze each other's locutions, while indexing the different social roles and relationships in which they enter.

Bargaining interactions necessitate knowing the ethno-pragmatic mechanics governing the bargaining exchange, which requires not only access to local cultural norms, which regulate interpersonal relationships, but also knowledge of which locutions are intrinsically compatible with the local norms of a proper interactional exchange. Bargaining interactants are frequently observed to strategically encode and decode their local belief systems and salient cultural notions in constructing their speech utterances. In light of this observation, a main claim of this paper is that SAT can be made more empirically rigorous if it incorporates in the analysis of speech utterances, elements of cultural context. This paper will, therefore, attempt to answer the following research questions: What are the linguistic elements that are necessary in understanding speech utterances in general and bargaining speech acts in particular? How important is the element of context in delivering the meaning of utterances? Which component(s) of context, if any, help us unpack the illocutionary reading of a given speech act? And how does the notion of context manifest itself in the language of bargaining?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Background

Much of the preoccupation of linguistic analysis revolves around the speaker's (S), as well as the hearer's (H), ability to process, construct, and decipher the meaning of communicative utterances (Searle, 1996). One of the powerful theoretical paradigms that impacted the course of linguistic inquiry in this regard is Speech Act Theory (SAT) (Austin, 1955, Searle, 1969). In fact, according to Nuyts, the appeal that SAT had on linguistics could be primarily attributed to the fact that it did not consider language as a mere "isolated structural phenomenon", but rather, presented it as performing action within contexts (Nuyts, 1993, p. 3). SAT shifted the focus rather, towards the achievement of these actions by virtue of its socially conventionalized context. Despite the introduction of context in analyzing speech utterances, the driving force behind this theoretical conceptualization of SAT was geared toward essentially "mapping utterances into speech act categories" (Levinson, 1983, p. 278). Levinson (1983) further argues that in order for a speech act to conventionally perform a given illocutionary act, it must specify the nature of its context in the form of felicity conditions. These felicity conditions are divided into three subcategories, namely, the preparatory conditions, which check the speaker's ability to perform A, the sincerity conditions, which are the conditions that the speaker wants in order to perform A (Green, 1996), and the executive condition, which checks the adequate execution of the speech act (Allan, 2001). However, the pressing question facing SAT, and pragmatic theory in general, is "to describe how, for any given utterance, the hearer finds a context which enables him to understand it adequately" (Sperber and Wilson, 1986, p. 16). According to Leech (1983), SAT has failed to consider cultural context as a determining factor, even in the performative nature of verbs. Leech asserts that the utterance "I divorce you" constitutes an action in the Islamic world, which shows that context (Levinson 1981) determines what reading an utterance should take.

A long standing issue, for those interested in the intersection of language and culture, is defining the notion of context. Although Goodwin and Duranti (1992) recognize the impossibility of delineating a consensual definition of context, they do argue that the latter is the "background" in light of which verbal and nonverbal acts alike, as the "focal event", derive their interpretations. However, Goodwin does acknowledge that what constitutes as background and focus does alternate as the interaction unfolds. Context is described as, as a frame (Goffman, 1974), that surrounds the event being examined and provides sources for its appropriate interpretation" (Goodwin and Duranti, 1992, p. 3). In her study of Italian subjects, George (1993) showed how the utterance, "Are there any tickets for the show tonight?", could be interpreted either as a request for information when uttered by northern employees, or as a request for a favor if uttered by their southern counterparts, as a result of two divergent cultural contexts. In fact, we can posit three interlacing dimensions of context that are at play. The primary element is the cultural context, which encompasses our understanding of social norms of behavior and speech and incorporates the moral code, laws (Morgan, 1977), cultural norms, and behavioral expectations governing interpersonal relations. The cultural component of context is relatively more stable, and is referenced by speakers, as well as hearers, in encoding and decoding the linguistic meaning conveyed during a bartering exchange. Of secondary importance to the analysis of bargaining interactions is the situational context which encompasses the features such as socioeconomic background, social status, age, and interactants' knowledge of the market, and so forth. Of tertiary importance to this paper is co-text, which addresses how the utterance itself becomes a context for the next utterance.

Co-text is a fragment of context that is created at the level of "the linguistic environment" (Quastoff, 1998, p. 158). The situational as well as co-text alike are two elements of context which have a more transient nature than the cultural element. Rather than limiting the notion of context to the speaker and the hearer (Goodwin, 1992) as in SAT, aspects of cultural context, here, will be analyzed with the following elements in mind:

- 1) The importance and relevance of each cultural concept to the Moroccan culture in general, the cultural meanings that it has acquired, and its linguistic manifestation in various discursive expressions in the language.
- 2) How such a cultural concept organizes the interpersonal dynamics between speakers in the Moroccan speech community.
- 3) How bargainers invoke and exploit such a cultural concept to reorganize and retool the bargaining interaction.

2.2. *Bargaining as an Instance of Cultural Context*

Shtaara means cleverness (Kapchan, 1996), in that interactants in a bargaining exchange try to outwit one another by convincing each other of the reasonableness of the price or lack thereof. The most celebrated aspect of bargaining is, however, its social aspect, where all participants engage in price-making, utilizing their social and linguistic skills to build and negotiate their identity, relationships, and even lasting relationships (Khuri, 1967). Participants, before even initiating the bargaining interchange, enter this bartering relationship with a mutual presupposition and expectation of social solidarity. In Morocco, the bargaining enterprise does not constitute a simple, straightforward economic transaction, but, according to Geertz, it represents an act of "exercising the instinct of sociability" (1979, p. 222).

The language of bargaining provides us with immediate access to cultural points of reference, such as hospitality and parental obedience, which allow us to outline the "salient systems of knowledge and beliefs: knowledge which is logically implied but not made explicit in the proposition, or knowledge of the world which is used in terms of expectations to process sentences" (Quastoff, 1998, p. 159). This invocation of cultural context becomes apparent when we compare the language local sellers use when they converse with local buyers, as opposed to the one they use with tourists, which is utterly stripped from any reference to such cultural norms. Since the bargaining discourse is socially constructed and culturally oriented, analysts of bargaining language should pay special attention to the cultural dynamics driving this interactional exchange. French's (2001) work on bargaining in Guatemala investigates bartering as a discursive genre between Ladino buyers (those of Spanish descent) and local, indigenous Maya sellers, who construct their bargaining utterances based on the notion of his/her preconceived social-constructed identities each of these two groups hold in the Guatemalan society.

3. This Study

3.1. *Data Collection*

In this paper, I analyze a corpus of bargaining exchanges of over sixty interactions totaling about 12 hours of recording time. In addition, I draw on other conversations between hundreds of subjects, which were recorded by hand. The recordings that I collected, with some assistance from research assistants, occurred during the winter of 2004 and summer of 2005 in the *medina* of one of Morocco's old cities. The *medina* is a very attractive social space for locals, as well as tourists, with its colorful shops and diverse bazaars. This author is intimately familiar with the different areas and markets

available in the *medina*, given the fact that he was raised in Morocco. The data is analyzed using the author's knowledge and native intuition about the bargaining language and the fact that the author was, as is the case for the majority of Moroccans, acculturated into the bargaining genre since his childhood, and therefore, has acquired native competence in utilizing different bargaining strategies and employing various bargaining skills.

Bargaining exchanges were recorded in a variety of settings, including an electronic shop, children's clothing store, coach bus station, produce market, *medina* open-air and flea markets, a shoe store, and fabric stores. The shopkeepers were informed that research on the language of the market was being conducted. In areas with the highest level of background noise, the author supplemented the data using an ethnographic approach, which, as a method of data collection used by French (2001) and Kharraki (2001), requires that conversations be written down immediately after they occur.

3.2. Data Analysis: Cultural Context and the Use of Formulaicity in Bargaining Exchanges

In this section, I will provide an overview of the bargaining genre. A considerable body of discursive expressions is used in constructing and strategically employing one's utterances. This is conventionally achieved through the repetitive use of these bargaining strategies. Formulaicity is not only typical of the bargaining discourse, but according to Fillmore, "an enormously large amount of natural language is formulaic, automatic and rehearsed, rather than propositional, creative or freely generated" (Kecskos, 2000, p. 24-25). The formulas in the analysis here should be construed as conventional expressions and "socially recognized formulas, in that they embody accepted ways of responding verbally to a variety of situations" (Coulmas, 2001, p. 234). Interactants draw on two levels of their cultural knowledge to interpret the situational meaning of these formulaic expressions. On the first level, a bargainer has to know the specific cultural connotations associated with the use of a given formulaic expression and the salient cultural resonance these expressions have when used in Moroccan society. Secondly, he/she needs to know what they mean when utilized in a bargaining exchange. In fact, the communicative role of these expressions is to provide a "pragmatic access route to each socio-cultural concepts" (Kecskos, 2000, p. 612)

3.2.1. Parental Obedience

Rrḍaa, attaining parental pleasure through obedience, is a core cultural notion that is often mobilized by the bargainers. The famous *hadith* (Prophetic saying), "the pleasure of the Lord is in the pleasure of a parent and the wrath of the Lord is in the wrath of a parent" (Al-Bukhari, 1997, p. 2) accentuates the centrality of parental obedience for organizing the family dynamic, where the attainment of the pleasure of God is believed to be partially achieved through the attainment of parental satisfaction. The broader cultural resonance of this notion manifests itself in many other speech utterances, such as the following expression, in which parents would express their pleasure with their children by saying, *Laah jardī ʕliik awuldi/abinti* (May God be pleased with you, oh my son/daughter). *Mardii lwalidiin sammrou majxiib* (the one whose parents are pleased with him never fails) signals how one's ultimate success directly ties in to satisfying the cultural duty of pleasing one's parents. Given its importance, this notion can, at times, be misused, as a culturally coercive device, by a parent. He or she may utilize it to demand complacency

of their children or as a warning: *haa səxt wuhaa rrɔdaa* (here is my wrath/displeasure [if you do it] and my pleasure [if you don't do it]). Unlike the case in the Western context, where one's family relationship is unrelated to one's social image, in Morocco, any transgression committed against one's parents is regarded as being committed against the entire community. For the Moroccan Arabic (MA) speaker, these expressions become culturally induced “speaking rules [which] potentially enables him to move communicatively” (Hymes, 1972, p. 55). These speech communities ensure individual conformity in observing the behavioral code, so one is keen to collectively construct culturally-bound speech patterns. The following exchange shows how bargainers invoke and mobilize salient concept of their cultural knowledge to win the bargaining duel.

(1) **Setting:** an electronic store

Interactants: a young salesman and an old buyer

Situation: the older man wants to buy a cell phone battery

Buyer: *hij:əd xamsi:n hij:əd. hij:əd xamsi:n La:h jərɔdi: ʃla: wuldi*

‘Take off 50 (dirhams), take it off. Take off 50 may God be pleased with my son’

Seller: *ra:h tsajbna: mʃa:k.*

‘I have given you the right (good) price’

Buyer: *ja: nʃal ʃ:ita:n ma tkunʃ qa:səh*

‘Just curse the Satan, do not be hard’

The H-oriented speech act *La:h jərɔdi: ʃla: wuldi* (May God be pleased with my son), performed by the seller is successful in fulfilling the necessary SA ingredients governing the felicitous performance of any given action. The literal meaning of this speech act is an expressive, namely, a blessing. The non-literal meaning of the speech act is an order to reduce the price, with the right communicative intention and the belief that the seller is able to perform A. The buyer, given his age difference from the seller, fulfills the “institutional conditions” to felicitously perform this act of blessing toward the seller, not by virtue of his parenthood, but by virtue of his age. The fact that the buyer was able to invoke the illocutionary force of an order with the propositional content to persuade the seller to reduce the price is not solely by fulfilling these felicity conditions, but also because it was made salient in the Moroccan culture. It is a cultural requirement for the H to first obey the S, and, therefore, performing A will enable the H to observe parental obedience. Therefore, by virtue of all the cultural conditions which organize the relationship between the S and H, it becomes possible for the S, in addition to the institutional authority vested in him, to perform the utterance with the illocutionary force of a directive to force the seller into reducing the price. This directive would not have been possible in a cultural context where the interpersonal dynamics are based on egalitarian terms, for its performance would be condescending and nonsensical. In the context where the notion of being *mərɔdi* (the one whose parents are pleased with him/her) has cultural resonance, the speaker, given his older age, was able to successfully utilize the expression above in this speech situation. Thus, it is the cultural importance allocated to parental obedience in Morocco which makes the performance of such an act socially and interactionally meaningful, and enables the usage of this discursive strategic expression to win this bargaining duel.

The reading of this utterance as having the primary force of a blessing and a secondary illocutionary force of a mand is further supported by what Labov and Fanshel mention as having the right and obligation to perform A, which they called “social felicity

condition” (in Brown and Levinson, 1987, p. 40). Moreover, the use of this expression neutralizes the relationship between these participants by transitioning it from an unfamiliar and symmetrical vendor-buyer business relationship, with partners equally located at opposite sides of the bargaining poles, into a familiar and asymmetrically constructed father-son relationship. Therefore, speech utterances should be construed as cultural and a direct reference to culturally relevant notions that are collectively agreed upon, and which are selectively mobilized and manipulated by the speaker in building meaningful speech utterances in order to support their communicative messages and advance their interactional goals.

3.2.2. Hospitality

Bargaining participants draw upon the notion of hospitality to construct their utterances. Given the strong value attached to this notion, it has been a cultural practice in Morocco for families to host guests in their houses, even if they are strangers. Part of the formulaic expression from the guest request accommodation is *taalab dīif lla:h* (I am asking to be the guest of Allah), which receives an uptake with a similar connotation from the host, who often says *mrahba b dīif lla:h* (welcome, the guest of Allah) or *ddaar daarak* (the house is yours). These two-way formulaic notions promulgate the fact that the host is only considered a means through which the guest can receive God's generosity. This, in fact, translates into a privileged social status into which the guest is positioned, and being hospitable to him/her becomes one's duty. In the West, the guest is positioned as the powerless and the disadvantaged, and hosting him/her is translated as a generous favor. These different ways of viewing the guest-host dynamic influence the way we interpret the utterance *Biti tazri: flija:* (do you want to chase me away), for, in Morocco, it would be considered as breaching the sacredness of this concept, whereas in the West, it is a nonsensical expression and cannot be used as a linguistic device in persuasive discourse.

(2) **Setting:** a clothing store in the *medina*

Interactants: a mid-aged seller in his 40's with two female buyers, one about 45 and the other about 50

Situation: the buyers want to buy jellabas (man's robes)

B2: *waf biti tazri: fliina: ?*

'Do you want to chase us away?'

B1: *alfajn la:sqa, bi:na nwalfu flla lmaħal*

'Two thousand (riyal) exact, we just want to get used to the store'

S: *maħalku:m hada*

'This is your store'

The utterance above, *waf biti tazri: fliina: ?* (Do you want to chase us away?), although produced with a literal form of a question, does not, in fact, constitute a request for information, since the buyer already knows that the answer to his question is negative. Therefore, the speaker performs a second illocutionary act of a mand, the propositional content of which is to reduce the price, since he knows that the seller cannot perform such a culturally daring act of chasing one's guest. According to SAT, this utterance is performed felicitously as a communicative act and takes effect from the seller's uptake in the form of an assertion. This “interpersonal” illocutionary act of the buyer took effect because these acts “require that H react to S's illocution—mere understanding of the illocution is insufficient” (Allan, 2001, p. 924).

The notion of hospitality is often invoked in the bargaining exchange when interactions come to a standstill due to a price gap or when the buyer finds himself/herself in a transactional disadvantage. The seller's answer reveals that the meaning of the buyer's utterance was not to be interpreted literally and therefore, did not constitute a simple and straightforward yes or no question; she conventionally implicated that the price should be reduced. However, the assertive utterance *mahalku:m hada* mobilized by the seller answers the literal meaning of the question and also conveys the non-literal meaning in the form of an implicature. The seller tactfully cancels the implicature generated by the buyer, that the price is high by making an assertion, the literal meaning of which implicates and presupposes that none can chase them from their store. Consequently, the price should not be reduced any further.

(3) **Setting:** children's clothing store

Interactants: a couple with a children clothes seller

Situation: the buyers want to buy an item from the store

Buyer1: *ʃha:l axu:ja hadi ?*

‘How much is this my brother?’

Seller: *ha:da tajeʃ mæl tsaʔta:ʃ ləmja*

‘This one costs nineteen hundred (riyals)’

Buyer2: *bi:ti təjri: ʔli:na: ?*

Do you want to chase us away?

Seller: *ha:ʃa*

‘Oh, Not at all’

Buyer2: *hna: tandəxlu: mælba:b tanziw di:rikt həta: lʕəndək*

We enter from the gate (of the *medina*) and we come directly to your store

Seller: *mrəhba: biku:m*

‘You are welcome here’

Both responses to the question *bi:ti təjri: ʔli:na:?* (Do you want to chase us away?) are in the form of a strong denial to the assertion implied in the customers' questions. While *ha:sha* is the response to this question, *mrəhba: biku:m* is a response to both utterances. From the question in line 3 and the statement in line 4, the reader can infer that there is a direct reference to the notion of hospitality and in the welcoming expression “*ddaar daarak*” (the house is yours), which the host uses to perform the behaviative speech act of welcoming a guest. The strong denial of the host could not be understood if we are to interpret the utterance solely in terms of convention and fulfillment of felicity conditions, but can be explicated in cultural terms. Because of the strong cultural implication involved with chasing one's guest mentioned above and the gravity of such an act in terms of cutting ties, any short-circuited conventional non-compositional implicatures pertaining to such an act when imparted by the buyers are to be immediately canceled using strong expressions of denial.

Therefore, learning how to navigate as a virtuoso and how to structure one's utterance in a bargaining interaction necessitates knowing the ethno-pragmatic mechanics governing the bargaining exchange and the cultural script behind speech utterances. This requires access to the local cultural norms which regulate the interpersonal relationship and speech practices. Interactants appeal to many Moroccan cultural norms in order to affect the financial decision of their co-participants. This is achieved by appealing to “deeply felt

etiquettes, tradition and moral expectation” (Geertz, 1979, p. 222) that are encoded in Moroccan notions of hospitality and parental obedience.

4. Conclusion

This paper investigated the role of cultural context in the reading of utterances. Contrary to the traditional SA paradigm which centers on reading utterances based on the successful performance of the felicity conditions, this study showed, using bargaining data, that unpacking the meaning and the illocutionary force behind an utterance is not simply contingent on speaker's intention or hearer's inference, but partially on the cultural meaning that these utterances have acquired in the Moroccan culture. Utterances, mobilized by interactants, index cultural notions, and in turn, draw part of their meaning from these notions. The interactants' success in performing felicitous and persuasive speech acts was based on, and contingent upon, their knowledge of the local Moroccan culture. It is clear that the invocation of cultural context is essential in analyzing not just the illocutionary force, but also the persuasive aspects of utterances. This invocation becomes especially apparent when we compare the language local sellers use when they converse with local buyers as opposed to the one used with tourists. Therefore, a future comparative study between the bargaining strategies used with local buyers, as opposed to those used by tourists, might yield insightful results and provide further evidence as to the role of culture in contextualizing speech utterances in bargaining.

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