

THE SPEECH ACT OF *BLAMING* IN THE FRENCH AND SETSWANA SOCIOCULTURAL CONTEXTS: SEMANTICO-CONCEPTUAL REPRESENTATIONS AND LINGUISTIC REALISATIONS

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Abstract

In this article we make a comparative study of semantic and conceptual representations as well as the performance of the speech act of blaming in Setswana and French. We make a general hypothesis that lexical competence in a language facilitates comprehension but does not shield from misunderstandings and linguistic obstacles if the acquisition of vocabulary is not accompanied by sufficient pragmatic competence. Lexical competence is understood here as the ability to use words appropriately and effectively in discourse.

Keywords: Blaming, Setswana, French, Semantic competence, Pragmatic competence, Semantic representation, Lexical meaning

Introduction

The communicative approach, used in second language teaching and learning, is essentially based on John Austin's theory of speech acts from his *How to do things with words* publication (1962). Given that language and culture cannot be isolated from each other, taking into account sociocultural factors and cultural entrenchment in the study and teaching of speech acts is indispensable for the learner's acquisition of cross-cultural, semantic and pragmatic competences. Studies have shown that different languages and cultures have different ways of understanding and conceptualising the world (Galatanu O, 2018, Lakoff G, 1987, Wierzbicka A, 1991). In this paper, we are interested in making a comparative study of conceptual differences and linguistic performances of the lexical entities of blame.

We make a general hypothesis that lexical competence makes communication easy but is not complete if it is not linked to sufficient acquisition of pragmatic competence. Different scholars have suggested several definitions of pragmatic competence. Thomas (1983:30) defines pragmatic competence as a speaker's "ability to use language effectively in order to achieve a specific purpose and to understand language in context." More recently, Kecskes (2014) describes pragmatic competence as the ability to produce and comprehend utterances that is adequate to the L2 socio-cultural context in which interaction occurs. Galatanu (2007) defines semantic competence as the aptitude to recognise and to produce phrases or utterances that conform to the semantic protocol of the target language. Semantic competence acquisition is therefore important because it allows the learner to use acquired lexicon needed for meaning construction. It is also important for pragmatic competence acquisition. The objective of our study is to make a comparative study of semantic and conceptual structures of the speech act of blaming as well as their linguistic realisations in the two languages. The semantic and conceptual structures of a lexical item, as we describe them in this article, are constructed using essential traits of the said lexical item. The semantic structure includes what Galatanu terms as the core, stereotypes and argumentative possibilities. The conceptual structure is described in terms of the lexical item's salient traits, in terms of the frame of

semantic knowledge associated to it. We would like to show the differences that exist between the two languages as well as the link that exists between the conceptualisation of the speech act and its performance in discourse.

For our analysis, we used, for the most part, the theoretic model of semantics of argumentative possibilities (SPA) that Galatanu has been developing since 1999, (1999, 2018). We were also inspired by Lakoff's theory of idealised cognitive models (1987) for the conceptual representations of the speech acts.

Methodology and theoretic framework

Our corpus was made up of data collected using three methods: an identification test, discourse completion tasks (DCT) and a metalinguistic knowledge test. The questionnaire on metalinguistic knowledge is aimed at assessing the recognition of the discursive potential of the lexical unit being studied. It also helps in the construction of the lexical meaning, which corresponds to referential and inferential knowledge. The identification questionnaire aims at assessing the informant's ability to recognise an utterance or an interaction as corresponding to a certain act. Several situations corresponding to the different acts were given to the informants to identify. The DCT is used to solicit discursive sequences that corresponded to the act of blaming at some point during a verbal interaction. We analysed data collected from 25 native Setswana speakers, who were learning French at the University of Botswana on their third and fourth year, including some teachers of French in Botswana as well as 25 native speakers of French from France.

The Semantics of argumentative possibilities and cognitive semantics

On one hand, we used the SPA to construct the lexical meaning of the speech acts and, on the other, the theory of cognitive semantics, especially that of idealised cognitive models (ICMs), to build a conceptual base of the two acts. The SPA makes it possible to account for modal values¹ embedded in the core or stereotypes in the lexical meaning, while at the same time preserving "discursive argumentative meaning," (Olga 2007). Meaning is presented as a process of abstraction concretised by a lexical unit, a process that aims at stability in language, but which has to take into account the evolving dimension of language.

The theory comprises three levels of meaning: the core (C), stereotypes (S), and argumentative possibilities (AP). There is also another level; that of discursive manifestations termed argumentative deployments. The lexical meaning description proposed by this approach also allows an appreciation of representations of the world as perceived and "modelled" by language as well as the "argumentative potential" of words. This potential can be activated, reinforced or, on the contrary, weakened in discourse. These representations allow one to account for and appreciate cultural entrenchment, which allows for the addition of new elements coming from a cultural and contextual context in the meaning of words.

- The core is the most stable part of lexical meaning. It consists of semantically transformable traits, which refer to essential properties of the concept. As a matter of fact, one can imagine that the image of a woman, for example, differs according to a particular linguistic community, and even between individuals of the same community at a given era. But, despite all the different images that the word is associated with, certain traits remain the same.

¹ According to Galatanu (2003), modal values are enshrined in the meaning of words (monovalent positive, monovalent negative, bipolar) that are used in discourse. In discourse different modal values can be mobilised to reflect the speaker's position with regard to the propositional content of an utterance as their position towards the addressee.

- Stereotypes come from cultural entrenchment, which at the same time allows for the addition of new elements, coming from the cultural or contextual context, in the meaning of words. These associations are relatively stable but composed of open ensembles.
- Argumentative possibilities are potential discursive sequences. The “argumentative possibility” is a pivotal concept of the SPA. It represents the last necessary stratum to the description of lexical meaning of a concept. AP’s can be defined as representing “potential or virtual associations” (in discourse) of a word with elements of its stereotypes. These discursive associations organise themselves in two beams oriented towards one or the other of the axiological poles (Galatanu 2002). Associations between the levels (C, S, AP and AD) occur in the form of argumentative sequences by means of logical markers, THEREFORE (TF), or YET (YT), according to the realisations conforming to the semantic protocol of the word.

The theory of idealised cognitive models (ICMs)

In his PHD thesis published in 2012, Bellachhab A makes a link between the SPA and cognitive semantics, especially Langacker R’s cognitive grammar by showing that the two theories aspire to explain representations that people make of speech acts, their meaning and their linguistic performance. An integral study of language should indeed take into account the sociocultural, linguistic and cognitive dimensions of communication, which is what resulted in this rapprochement between the SPA and cognitive grammar.

According to Fillmore C (2006), semantic knowledge is encyclopaedic in the sense that all knowledge relating to a word is essential in understanding its meaning. A word activates or evokes a frame of semantic knowledge associated to a specific concept to which it refers. People categorise the world in different ways because our knowledge of the world is mentally organised on the basis of our human experiences. Lakoff (1982) postulates that natural entities are natural categories. As a natural category, each word carries a certain number of meanings linked by family resemblance. These meanings show prototypical effects.

According to Lakoff, our knowledge of the world is organised into idealised cognitive models (ICMs). The meanings of words are described in relation to these idealised cognitive models and not according to the “objective” reality of the world. These models are idealised because they are abstracts and cannot be assimilated to all the complexity of reality. They are conceptualisations of our own experiences and it is for this reason that they are subjective and not consistent with reality. A construction of the ICMs of the speech act of *BLAMING* should also demonstrate how knowledge relating to the act is cognitively organized. This approach should also show the extent of cultural entrenchment (if there is one) in the semantic and conceptual representations of the acts of *BLAMING* in Setswana and French.

Illocutionary threat and illocutionary intention

Research has shown that every illocutionary act has a threatening aspect that Galatanu calls “illocutionary threat” (*menace illocutionnaire*), which is felt in gradual manner (Galatanu 2012). This threat was identified before by researchers such as Brown & Levinson (1987). This threat is explained by the fact that any verbal interaction situation brings into play the different faces² of the speakers. For certain acts such as *THREATENING* (which is the prototype of face threatening acts (FTA’s)), *REPROACHING*, *BLAMING*, *ACCUSING* and *INSULTING*, the threat to the face is more precise as it is embedded in the “illocutionary intention” of the act. Moreover, in their modal configuration, one will find negative

² Refer to Levinson and Brown’s theory of politeness (1987).

axiological modal values referring to the public image of the addressee (Galatanu 2012). According to Galatanu, threatening acts are likely to provoke or are aimed at directly provoking a negative sentiment such as fear, humiliation, shame etc. According to the politeness rules portrayed by Brown P & Levinson S (1987), in normal situations one avoids committing acts that threaten the other's face. However, in real life, producing such an act is sometimes unavoidable in order to remind someone of societal regulations. In cases where one cannot avoid performing an FTA, the act is usually accompanied by speech softeners in the form of pragmatic markers aimed at easing the act's illocutionary threat.

The speech act of *BLAMING* has an illocutionary intent, which corresponds to what Anquetil S (2013) terms "canonical illocutionary intent" (*visée illocutionnaire canonique*), which is essential to their lexical description and which guarantees their "happy"³ performance. The speech act of *BLAMING* is indeed an act that is aimed at provoking a state of malaise, of face loss (*humiliation, shame...*) for the addressee, because are deemed guilty of a negative deed (morally or legally) (Galatanu 2012). Moreover, in Setswana, we noted that there is a desire or intention from the speaker's part to oblige the addressee to change their behaviour.

Semantic and conceptual representations of the speech act of *BLAMING*

In order to construct a semantic representation, we will start by making an analysis of the verb "to blame" in order to identify the stable elements of its definition. We started by studying lexicographic definitions in the form of dictionaries in both languages. Even though Wierzbicka (1991) strongly criticises dictionaries for their circularity, it is generally accepted that they give useful definitions and convert collective linguistic knowledge that is shared by given linguistic group at a given moment (Bellachhab 2012).

This inventory of lexicographic definitions in Setswana and French allowed us to have an idea of how each culture accepts and what the speakers share in terms of interpreting or conceptualising the act of *BLAMING*.

1.1 Semantic representations in Setswana and French

S refers to the speaker, *A* refers to the addressee and *P* corresponds to the propositional content and in affirming this propositional content, the speaker refers to an offensive deed committed by the addressee.

³ According to Austin (1962), a speech act is either happy or unhappy.

<i>Core</i>	<i>Stereotypes</i>
S think A responsible for P or do P	TF A do something bad, A behave bad, A commit crime, A lie, A constantly arrive late at work etc.
AND S think P bad for S and/or other	TF Fault, crime, wrongdoing, A do wrong, Face loss etc.
AND S think A know that S know A responsible for P	TF A indifferent
TF S have reactive attitudes towards A because of P	TF Discontent, indignation, misunderstanding, irritation etc.
TF S say 1,2,3 ⁴ to A	TF Words, reproaches, threats, reprimands, accusations, insults etc.
TF S must feel bad	TF Have regrets, feel remorse, feel humiliated, be afraid, not do P anymore

Figure 1: Semantic representation of the act of *BLAMING* in French

<i>Core</i>	<i>Stereotypes</i>
S think A responsible for or/and guilty of P	TF A make a fault, A be impolite, A lack respect towards S or other, A cause an accident, A behave unacceptably etc.
AND S know/think P bad for S and/or other	TF Fault, offence, damage, pain, Face loss etc.
AND S think A know that S know A responsible for P	TF A indifferent
TF S have negative sentiments towards A because of P	TF A ill-bred, A lack respect etc.
TF S want A to change attitude	Repair wrong-doing
TF S say 1,2,3 to A	TF Ask P to change behaviour
TF S must feel bad, feel ashamed	TF A regret P, A apologise, A change

Figure 2: Semantic representation of the speech act of *BLAMING* in Setswana

⁴ Utterances that are intended to induce feelings of regret, remorse, humiliation etc. from the addressee

The definitions given by Batswana speakers of the verb blame shows that, in performing the act of blaming, there is a desire, on the part of the speaker, to make the addressee change something in his behaviour: either they become aware that the deed is bad, or that they stop etc. In this sense, blame is perceived as an incitation to repair one's acts and consequently, to repair the relationship in order to, perhaps, have the relationship that corresponds to the one that existed before the change of attitudes (in the sense of Scanlon 2012). It is for this reason that we found it pertinent to add the line, *S want A to change attitude*, to the semantic structure of the verb *blame* in Setswana. This desire wasn't very visible in the French lexicographic discourse.

The stereotypes relating to the offence are more or less the same, and show the conceptualisation of the object of blame as something that is morally bad. We also recognise in the two cultures that the addressee has supposedly done something judged to be morally unacceptable. Because the French is very influenced by the catholic religion which is based on a dichotomy of good and bad, moral blame can be analysed through this Manichean view. Nevertheless, while the French stereotypes make us think of the biblical crimes; *crime, lying, fault, bad* etc. the Setswana stereotypes make us think of the concept of "*botho*"; some of the stereotypes given in Setswana, "go tlhoka maitseo," – lack of respect, "go sa itshwara sentle," – to behave badly, all allude to lack of good manners or, to borrow a very French expression "manque de savoir-vivre." This "*savoir-vivre*" in Setswana corresponds to a system of social values, a contract to which individuals living collectively or as a community owe to themselves to respect and live by. According to this philosophy of *botho*, the community comes first because everything an individual does or says has an effect on the community. Everything that goes against this system of values, lack of respect, bad behaviour, insults, or anything that can morally hurt, shows a lack in this value of *botho* and can be blameworthy. It can be said of a person that they are lacking in *botho*, that they are losing their *botho* or that they have lost their *botho* if they are deemed blameworthy.

The reactive attitudes associated to blame show some interesting similarities and differences in the two cultures. We noticed some salient emotions such as anger, dissatisfaction, satisfaction, feeling of authority, sadness and deception. Anger is largely associated to blame in the two cultures. If blame seems to provoke a sentiment of sadness on the side of Batswana speakers, this is less so on the side of the French speakers. Also, curiously enough, *BLAMING* also brings about a feeling of satisfaction for Batswana speakers. According to our study, the act of *BLAMING* brings about satisfaction because it is perceived as having a restorative intention. Restorative because when one blames someone, they are in fact doing it with the intention to make him or her become aware of their errors and correct them thereon. Because of this, the speaker feels satisfied with the knowledge of having done well by the other. Therefore, it is not all about judging the other but also about helping them correct their mistakes. Satisfaction does not appear in the French discourse. However, on the French side we found feeling of authority and power. The one who blames feels that they are in a position of authority because they find themselves in a position of being able to pronounce judgement against the addressee. Sadness, even though found in both cultures, seems to be felt more by Batswana speakers than their French counterparts. However, the feeling of deception was more frequent in French discourse.

Conceptual representation and ICMs of the act of *BLAMING* in French and Setswana
The figures below (Figures 3 and 4) representing the ICMs of the act in the two languages illustrate the conceptual base of the speech acts in the form of their most salient traits. These representations were constructed using data from the lexicographic discourse data.



Figure 3: Conceptual base of the act of BLAMING in French



Figure 4: Conceptual base of the act of *BLAMING* in Setswana

In the two languages the dichotomy between good and bad is visible but the French culture, being more influenced by the catholic religion, punishment and fault are the most salient traits in the ICM of blame. In French, blame is above all related to punishment and morality. In Setswana, acknowledgement of guilt is the most salient trait followed by crime, reproach and sadness. These traits are coherent with the semantic structure of the verb blame in the two languages respectively and show the conceptual base of the act in each language.

Linguistic realisations of the speech act of *BLAMING*

The semantic and conceptual structures of the act of *BLAMING* as we have described and illustrated in an onomasiological approach, allow for an appreciation of different possibilities of discursive realisations of the illocutionary act. These semantic and conceptual representations will show, as per our hypothesis cultural entrenchment in the form of speech mobilised to express blame.

The act of *BLAMING* can be performed in different linguistic forms, the most direct being through the use of the performative verb *blame* in the two languages. Below are utterances that we found in the two languages extracted from the DCT data:

- a. French: *I blame you for...*
- b. Setswana: *Ke go tshwaya phoso* (I blame you)
Ke tshwaya wena phoso (It's you that I blame)
Ke tshwaya wena phoso ka gore... (Its' you that I blame because...)

The verb *to blame* in Setswana can take the transitive or intransitive form whereas in French we only found transitive forms. In French blame can be pronounced to signify disciplinary sanction against an employee or as a penal sanction pronounced by a judge. In Botswana, the act of blaming seems more oriented towards showing the addressee as being guilty of a fault rather than as a moral or judicial sanction as is the case in French.

The two languages do not contain a lot of discursive markers aimed at softening the act of blame. French contains what Galatanu describes as holophrases (2007), *eh bien, bien...*. Our hypothesis is that in a situation where one performs the act of blaming, face threat is not softened as the act that is deemed as being more severe, than for example, one that calls for a simple reproach. As a matter of fact, we have already shown that the speaker's intention is to provoke a sentiment of malaise on the side of the addressee and to make them lose face. Therefore, blame is usually a deliberate act: examples (c to f):

- c. "You are the first culprit of the violence that broke out" ("*Vous êtes le premier responsable des violences qui ont éclatées...*")
- d. "The actions for which you have been summoned are not tolerated in this establishment" ("*Les agissements pour lesquels tu as été convoqués ne sont pas tolérables dans cet établissement*")
- e. "You see that your not paying proper attention has led to my brother burning himself with fire" ("*Wa bona gore go tlhoka kelelelo gag ago go dirile gore kgaitsadiake a iphise ka molelo*")
- f. "I don't like your behaviour at all" ("*Ga ke rate gotlhelele ka fa o dirang ka teng*")

In the two languages, the act of *BLAMING* is, however, often performed indirectly or is accompanied by other speech acts such as threats, ultimatums, orders, reproaches or even an plea, as we saw in the Setswana corpus (g).

- g. "I'm begging you to stop doing bad thing" ("*Ke kopa o emise dilo tse di maswe*")

We also found modal verbs such as “*must*” (devoir) and “*should*” (falloir) which highlight what *must* and *must not be* the conduct of the addressee. These verbs evoke deontic modal values of the acceptable, obligatory and non-acceptable (Galatanu 2003).

Conclusion

Our analysis shows that indeed differences exist in the conceptualisation of the speech act of *BLAMING*. These differences are brought about by the different perceptions, which come from different cultural experiences. As part of teaching and learning a foreign language, like in the case of Botswana, it would be beneficial to take into account certain sociocultural aspects such as cultural entrenchment of an act, its lexical and conceptual structure in both source and the target cultures in order to build sociocultural, semantic and pragmatic competence. This would also help in anticipating interferences linked to the source language and culture and also help the learner to avoid misunderstandings related to insufficient semantic and pragmatic competence.

Pragmatic competence can be integrated in an L2 class through the use of methodologies such as McCarthy’s “Three Is” Illustration- Interaction-Induction (McCarthy 1998) and through a systematic comparison of the performance of speech act in both cultures in real life. It is essential that the teacher be aware in the possible ways that pragmatic transfer can occur in the use of the lexical item and that they use real life examples derived from spoken language. Exposure of learners to material that mirrors real features of the spoken language and exposure to natural spoken data will help in increasing pragmatic competence.

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