

3rd PARTY ENGLISH : THE COMMUNICATION BREAKDOWN

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Most of us, and most of our learners, have at some time had the experience of listening to an announcement through the public address system, at an airport or a railway station, and we know how difficult it is to understand it. Because, however, we know how to deal with the redundancies of language we more often than not manage to filter out the information we require, in spite of background noise, distortion and other interference. If that same announcement is in a language other than our own the result is quite different.* Even those of us who consider ourselves proficient may be lucky to catch the required information, and those of us with a lesser skill may decide it is not worth the effort of trying.

On the other hand there are many learners who in a face-to-face interchange with another person who conveyed the same information would readily understand the message, and probably the entire utterance, Can all the blame for the former difficulty be attributed to purely acoustic factors, or the slight change of 'register' appropriate to the formal announcement? I think not. The difficulty is rather in what I call 'third party English' : the difficulty of understanding when one is not being directly addressed.

Now it seems that perhaps unwittingly the language classroom avoids third party English at anything below advanced levels. When the teacher makes an utterance he does so to the class as a whole. Even when he addresses one learner directly he expects, or hopes, that the remainder of the group are at the same time formulating a similar response. This is equally true whether the teacher stimulus is a question or not. Thus in a suitably communicative context the teacher may say

- a) Pass me the sugar Helmut. (request)
- b) Helmut, what sort of music do you like? (question)
- c) (to Helmut) I play tennis twice a week. (statement)

* A reference to just this problem is made in the opening paragraphs of an entitled 'Learning to Listen-What Can Be Done?' by Theodore B. Kalivoda in article 'Forum' Volume XVIII No. 4, October 1980.

Whatever reply he hopes to elicit is not relevant to this article; the fact is that the remainder of the group are all second person substitutes, and might well be faced with the identical utterance if Helmut fails to answer. Conversely even where the learner, unsolicited, addresses a question or remark directly to the teacher the remainder of the group are involved as first person substitutes, and not as 'third party' interlocutors. In a lively class the following is possible :

- student (1st person i) Mr. Long, what sort of music do you like?
 teacher I like classical music, especially Mozart.
 student (1st person ii) Do you like folk music?

It is clear that the above is different from the following (where no attempt is made to identify speakers A, B and C.) :

- A) Have you seen that movie at 'The President'?
 B) It's very difficult to get tickets.
 C) It's alright if you get there early.

The role of speaker (C) in the above is that of a third party, in that his utterance is not an echo, or variation of speaker (A), but a new dimension to the otherwise complete utterance of A and B. The conventional use of dialogue in the language learning classroom gives little opportunity for this type of response because the learner typically plays the role of either A or B, the first or second persons, whether in conjunction with the teacher, the tape, the group, or as one member of a pair.

The result of this is interesting. The learner is seldom able to take a third party role, as he seldom understands what speakers (A) and (B) are talking about, simply because, as with the public address announcement, it is an unfamiliar listening/hearing situation. In the case I am thinking of there is of course no interference or other non-linguistic problem. There is however a case for learners to practice this role. Otherwise, in real acts of communication, the 'third party' is almost certainly lost if asked for an opinion, and in answer to the question 'What do you think (+name)?' (usually with stress on 'you') he must necessarily answer 'I'm sorry I didn't catch what you were talking about'.

Ironically the prevalence of this communication gap, or breakdown, was revealed to me by the inability of learners to answer test items of this kind. It was an attempt at communicative testing that failed. I knew that if I asked individuals the question 'How much is cabbage?' all could formulate an answer of the type '40 cents a kilo', and similar related functional forms for seeking and imparting information had indeed been taught. This I did not do however because of the difficulty of administering spoken responses with a large group. Where it was required to answer directly (in writing) I chose a type where a discourse component was also included. The student hears, on tape, these questions, each of which is followed by a pause of sufficient length to write an answer :

- 1) (male voice) Er, yes. Now would you mind telling me how old you are?
- 2) Thank you. And which college are you studying at?
- 3) Where is that?
- 4) And when did you begin....when did you begin studying there?
- 5) And what were you doing before that? (etc.)

It will be observed at once that questions three and four cannot be answered without understanding, and retaining in the memory, question 2, while question 5 cannot be answered without a similar understanding of 'begin studying there' in question 4. This however seemed to present few difficulties. In spite of the tape, and the examination situation, the student is in the familiar situation of being spoken to directly.

In a search for further question types with a communicative base I then developed the following paradigm, but without at this stage considering the third party problem :

- A) How much is cabbage?
- B) Eight *baht* a kilo.
- A) And what about cauliflower? How much is that?
- B) Twelve *baht* a kilo. But all vegetables are expensive at present.

Again this was heard, only (the student had no access to the tape script) but for this example the question (which was repeated for each of the following examples) and the answer were given, as follows :

Question : What are they talking about?

Answer : The price of vegetables.

Here are further examples which were used in the test, each followed by the question 'What are they talking about?' and a pause to write an acceptable answer, which can be one word or a phrase. A few examples have been omitted because of purely local referents, but those given here are intended to be of increasing difficulty :

(Instruction recorded on tape)

Listen to each conversation and say in two or three words what it is about

- 1) A Have you seen 'The Champ'?
- B No. But there's a good movie on at the Scala. You should.....(fade)
(possible answer - What's on at the movies)
- 2) A I stayed at a place called the 'Marco Polo'.
It was alright, but very expensive.

- B You should stay at the 'Irama' next time.
It's central, clean, and cheap, so(fade)
(possible answer - places to stay/hotels)
- 3) A A number 77? I'll take you to *Silom Road*.
B But does it go to *Siam Square*?
A No-o, er. No. You want a number 16.
(Possible answer - bus routes)
- 4) A *Ratana* got A and *Niraporn* got A.
B What did *Oranoot* get?
A I'm not sure, but I think C.
(possible answer - grades)
- 5) A Mog-a-don. Mogadon. Never heard of it.
And you say it makes you sleep.
B Sure. And it's harmless. And you can buy it anywhere-2 *baht* a tablet.
(possible answer - medicine/sleeping tablets)
- 6) A There's a train from *Sungai Kolok* to *Thonburi*.
But it's rather slow.
B What about the express?
A Yes. That leaves *Haadyai* every day at 12.45.....
(possible answer - trains (from the South))
- 7) A Would you just sign your name on the back please.
B Certainly.....There you are.
And I'd like 2000 in 500 *baht* notes, and 2000 in hundred *baht* notes.
A 2000 in five-hundreds.....2000 in hundreds.....
(possible answer - at the bank)
- 8) A Waist 36.....27.....19.....Leg 32½.
Now d'you want one pocket or two at the back?
B Two
A And will you wear them with a belt, or elastic?
B A belt, please.
(possible answer - having trousers made)

Where the interview type test was quite well answered, the 'third party test'-as I had now come to call it-was an almost total loss situation. Yet, surely, it still fell within the reference frame of 'communicative', while the fact that a

word which would constitute an answer was not invariably included in the interchange heard (e.g. the *price* of vegetables in the paradigm, but *routes* in no.3 etc.) did not seem an adequate explanation of the general lack of success; several of the questions in the 'interview' test required words in the answer which were not provided in the question. Two possible explanations are

- a) lack of practice in a third-party listening situation
- and b) failure to isolate the essential head-words.

If any teacher of English accepts the explanation of (a) and (b) above then it is necessary to use this type of material for *teaching* rather than just as a test item. A procedure for teaching, taking the paradigm above, might be, first, to check the words 'cabbage' and 'cauliflower', which should be done by translation, without waste of time, if there is a monolingual group. Follow this with the question "But what is speaker (A) asking about when she says 'How much is cabbage?' " -to elicit the word 'price'. Repeat this with 'cauliflower'. Follow this with the 'distractor' question "So is this conversation about vegetables?" and proceed until someone volunteers the answer "The price of vegetables". A similar procedure, repeated often but for just one or two examples, should be useful practice in isolating the essential headwords.

The practice stage could include a block of such items, as above, in which case it becomes a sort of drill. This is not particularly recommended, nor would it fit comfortably with a functional type textbook, as there is no uniformity of language function, only of skill. The teacher should develop one such example from the materials he is using, writing the earlier ones on the blackboard and if possible recording the on-going samples on tape, but always treating the learners as a third party, and repeatedly asking the question "What are they talking about?". It is not recommended to ask students, either individually or in pairs, to create their own examples and then ask another student to be the third party. At this level students are most unlikely to produce interchanges which are passably authentic, and, as with the public address system announcement, it is the authenticity which is a contributory cause of the communication breakdown.