

POPE-Q

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Submission date: 22-May-2018 12:48PM (UTC+0700)

Submission ID: 967048411

File name: ProsidingAustronesia2017_E-Book_SmallestFileSize.pdf (936.67K)

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INDONESIAN STUDENTS RESPONSES TO POPE-Q IMPLICATURE

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Abstract

POPE-Q implicature is considered as an easy implicature for English native speakers. If a speaker says “would you like to come to my party tonight” and the listener says “Is Pope Catholic?” both the speaker and hearer understand that the listener surely will come to the party. However, what the native speakers consider easy could be somewhat troublesome for non-native speakers. This study discusses the description on how non-native speakers found it difficult to interpret POPE-Q implicature. The second goal of this study also pursues the factors contributing to this difficulty and the strategies the non-native speakers try to overcome their difficulties in interpreting such implicature. This paper has the potential to unfold the linguistic factors and cultural interference contributing to the implicature interpretation process.

Keywords: POPE-Q; implicatures; interlanguage; pragmatics; learners’ difficulties

INTRODUCTION

POPE-Q or Pope question is a label given by Bouton (1992) to a very common formulaic implicature using an obvious fact stated in a question. This type of question can be modified accordingly as long as the semantic and syntactic formula remain the same. The basic form of POPE-Q implicature is as follows.

Speaker 1 : Would you like to go to the beach?
Speaker 2 : Is the Pope Catholic?
(Wiktionary 2017)

On the example above, the first speaker asks the second speaker whether or not he/she would go to the beach. Speaker 2 produces a question ‘Is the Pope Catholic?’. To interpret this response, the speaker and the hearer must be familiar with Catholic realm and must quickly assume that the Pope is the leader of Catholic Churches around the world hence the Pope must be Catholic. Speaker 2 response is a way to say ‘yes’ to the speaker 1 question. POPE-Q is very common in English speaking world so that POPE-Q is considered as a rhetorical question. The other variation of POPE-Q can be observed from the following exchange.

Speaker 1 : Are you happy meeting your boyfriend?
Speaker 2 : Is the sky blue?
(Wordreference, 2008)

This dialogue has the similar syntactic and semantic fashion as the previous dialogue. Speaker 2 assumes that most people perceive the sky having blue color. Thus, speaker 2 believes that if he/she ask ‘is the sky blue?’ the answer is always ‘yes’.

Some variations of Pope-questions include the inversion of the question and the expected response is ‘no’. This type of variation can be seen from *The Dark Night* movie when *The Joker* asks this question ‘Do I really look like a guy with a plan?’. For the audience who watch most of Batman series, they know the Joker’s reputation to act randomly and be full of surprises. The answer to this question is simply ‘no’.

Bouton (1994) argues that POPE-Q is a form of implicature and this implicature has a certain formula. Thus, Bouton classifies POPE-Q implicature into the type of *formulaic implicature*. To balance this classification, Bouton also has other type of implicatures called *idiosyncratic implicature*. Bouton argues that idiosyncratic implicatures unlike the formulaic one depends heavily on context and there is no way for us to find syntactical and semantic pattern to mark them.

From the example mentioned above, POPE-Q sounds very familiar to native speakers of English and native speakers of English would not find it hard to interpret the POPE Q. This paper would take the point of view of second language learners and investigates the learners comprehension of this particular implicatures. In order to test the learners' understanding of POPE-Q, I have prepared three dialogues containing POPE-Q implicature in a research instrument and invited 110 freshmen from three different classes at a university in Indonesia to answer the questions accompanying the dialogues.

Table 1 Three Dialogues Containing POPE-Q in the Instrument Set

DIALOGUE A

Context: Maria and Frank are doing a class assignment together. The date is almost due and there is no sign of them finishing the assignment.

4
Maria: Do you think that Dr. Gibson is going to lower our grade if we hand the assignment late?
Frank: Do fish swim?

Question: What does Frank's statement mean?
a. he believes that their grade will not be affected.
b. he believes that their grade will be lowered**
c. he did not understand Maria's question

DIALOGUE B

5
Context: A group of students are discussing their holiday plans. They would like to leave one or two days earlier, but one of their professors said that there will be a test before the start of the holiday. The professor said, there is no exception for anyone. All students must take the test. After class, some students gathered to discuss the situation.

1
Kate: I wish we didn't have that test next Friday. I wanted to leave for Florida before that.
Jake: Oh, I don't think we'll really have that test. Do you?
Mark: Professor Schmidt said he will not be going anywhere this holiday. What do you think, Kate? Will he really give us that test? Do you think we have to stay around here until Friday?
Kate: Does the sun come up in the east these days?

Question: What does Kate's statement mean?
a. Kate argues that the professor will conduct the test in any situation.**
b. Kate finds Mark's question too difficult to answer.
c. Kate thinks that other students will skip the class. They should just follow suits.

DIALOGUE C

Context: Will and Nina are husband and wife. Nina wants her husband to buy her one product that she likes a lot. This particular product is very expensive.

Will : How do you think we pay for all this?

Nina : I'm just asking you. What do you think?

Will : There's a money fairy that comes and slips an envelope under my pillow every month?

Question : What does Will's statement mean?

a. Will is happy to buy what his wife wants.

b. Will is reluctant to buy what his wife wants.**

c. Will changes the topic of the conversation to envelope.

In the real instrument set tested to the participants, only the dialogues are written in English. The context, the question and the choices were written in Indonesian to reduce misunderstanding and ambiguity. The test construction involved three native speakers of English: two Americans and one British. All native speakers chose the same answers and no dissenting opinion among them regarding those three dialogues.

I have tried my best to balance the cultural bias coming from the dialogues. The canonical question of POPE-Q itself has a strong reference to Catholic and western realm while Indonesia the majority of the students are Muslims. Consequently, the default question 'is the Pope Catholic?' is not used in the instrument for this study. The question used in dialogue A 'Do fish swim?' is taken from the study of Tuan & Hsu (2011). Tian and Hsu have tried to use this question to improve the generality of the question against certain stereotype. The question used in dialogue B 'Does the sun come up in the east these days?' is taken from Bouton (1994) and I think this question is also neutral. The question used in dialogue C is an inversion type of POPE-Q and it is a sample of variation to make the item less predictable. The question 'is there a money fairy that comes and slips an envelope under my pillow every month?' is taken from *One Hour Photo* movie.

The participants come from three different backgrounds. The first group is 40 students of English departments. They are taught in English and being prepared to become English teachers. The second group is 32 students from international classes. They are taught in English but their majors are not English. The third group is 38 students from regular accounting classes. They are taught in Indonesian and their majors are not English. The variations of the participants will serve as a control variable showing subtle divisions of different types of learners in Indonesian higher education setting. One week after written test was conducted, 18 participants were invited to join a *Think Aloud Protocol (TAP)* session. A TAP is a session in which the participants are asked to do the test and at the same time, they have to say loudly whatever they have in minds regarding the test they were currently doing. The TAP is designed to understand the participants' point of view via a reflective experience (Ericsson & Simon, 2003).

DISCUSSION

The instrument consists of three dialogues with three accompanying questions. If a participant answered those three questions correctly, the participant scored 3. The following is the recap of the average scores for all 110 participants in this study.

Figure 1
Bar Graph for the Average Score of all Participants

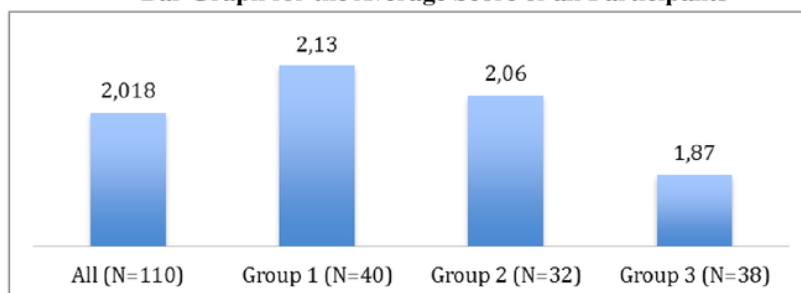


Figure 1 is the bar graph for the average score of all participants and the average score of each group of participants. The graph shows that from three instances of POPE-Q represented by the items in this research, the learners tend to fail to comprehend one out of three dialogues provided. If we convert this to real life situation, the rate of the second language learners to understand POPE-Q implicatures is only 67%. This rate is not favorable because it means that the learners are vulnerable to misunderstanding to this type of implicatures. The graph above is the average of all three dialogues. In order to see the details on each dialogue, the following sessions will break down the results into three sub-discussions.

Problems and Strategies of Learners to Comprehend Dialogue A

Looking at the data for dialogue A, there are 23 participants answered a, 55 participants answered b, and 32 participants answered c. It means that there are 55 (50%) participants answered the question correctly and 55 (50%) participants answered incorrectly. From all three dialogues, it seems that this dialogue is the most troublesome for the participants. For the participants who are able to answer the question from dialogue 1, they tend to grasp the rhetorical aspect of the question. The following are the excerpts of TAP sessions for the students who are able to answer the question from dialogue A.

The question is whether Dr. Gibson will reduce the score if they're late. The answer was 'do fish swim'. Although it's kinda opaque question but I think this is a rhetorical question. So, the score must be down (Participant ATOP 1)

The answer .. this one is Do fish swim ?. I know that fish swim. So if we submit the assignment late. It means that Dr. Gibson will reduce the score (Participant ATOP 2)

The unique thing about this case is that the students who are able this question testified that they have not found any case like this before. When they have to reflect whether such instances exist in Indonesian they also think that they don't. It is possible that those students are able to apply *inference technique* proposed by Vandergrift (1997)

For the students who failed to answer the question from dialogue A, there is a possibility that there is a missing link between the POPE-Q and the context of the conversation. For the students who failed to answer this question, the question 'do fish swim?' is a sudden change of topic and it does not make any sense to them.

The problem here is ... Maria and Frank did not do the assignment together. And then Maria asked Frank, this is the question ... the meaning of 'do fish swim?' And Frank didn't understand. He may not understand Maria's question. It is possible that he did not understand Maria's response

(Participant ABOT 1).

Because Maria asked Frank what he went for? Whats is the meaning of this word? If we are late? Is that the point? Does it Frank fail to understand Maria's response? (Participant CBOT 2)

Participant CBOT 2 found the question difficult because she had trouble with some words on the test item. The context is not clear for CBOT 2 and it makes her impossible to guess the right answer. Note shall be taken for some participants who answered this question correctly but they do not even understand the context of the dialogue. The following is an example how such event could take place.

So the fish swim? And fish swim downward from the surface. So the fish is down. Then the score must be down too. (Participant ABOT 2)

Participant ABOT 2 was completely misled. However, he managed to answer the question correctly. It is the same technique done by ATOP 1 and ATOP 2 but ABOT 2 use the wrong premise for this question.

Problems and Strategies of Learners to Comprehend Dialogue B

Looking at the data for dialogue B, there are 81 participants answered a, 11 participants answered b, and 18 participants answered c. It means that there are 81 (74%) participants answered the question correctly and 29 (26%) participants answered incorrectly. According to the number, this dialogue is not as tricky as dialogue A. The participants who answered correctly are 74% and the following is the excerpt from the participants who answered the question correctly.

This one is the same analogy like the previous one. No matter what the situation is, the professor will hold the test. (Participant ATOP 1)

From the last response 'does the sun come up in the east these days'. So does the sun rises from the east. The answer is when people say 'yes of course'. (Participant BTOP 2)

Participant ATOP 2 and BTOP 2 recognizes the pattern of this response as a rhetorical question and the answer is always 'yes'. Furthermore, they understand the context of the dialogue and can predict the intention of the speaker.

Just like the previous case, there is also the possibility that the participant took the wrong route of inference but the answer was correct. The following is the example of wrong logics results in the right answer.

East is an impossible case, so Kate says that the professor is impossible to cancel the test .(Participant BTOP 3)

The evidence shows that participant BTOP 3 forgot that sun indeed rises in the east. She thinks that it is impossible that the sun comes up in the east. According to her logics then, the Professor is also impossible to cancel the test. This type of inference is wrong but the effort needs appreciation because in real life situation sometimes second language learners do not have any other choices than using whatever possible sources to support understanding.

Problems and Strategies of Learners to Comprehend Dialogue C

Looking at the data for dialogue C, there are 9 participants answered a, 86 participants answered b, and 15 participants answered c. It means that there are 86 (78%) participants answered the question correctly and 24 (22%) participants answered incorrectly. Among the other three

dialogues, this dialogue is the easiest with 78% of the participants answer it correctly.

So it's impossible that there is a fairy who gives money every month (Participant BTOP 1)

Because Nina wants something. And then Will seems that he didn't have money. It seems that he does not want to buy it for her. Then he came up with the expression. A fairy who will give envelope? (Participant BBOT 1)

Because the last response explains that Will will buy it if he got money under his pillow every month. In reality he doesn't. So he doesn't want to buy it. (Participant ATOP 1)

This type of inverted POPE-Q is considered as easy for the participants. The context looks clear for the participants. Even when participant ATOP 1 did not even realize the concept of fairy, but she correctly guessed the context of the dialogues.

CONCLUSION

This study questions what is the non-native speakers ability to interpret POPE-Q implicature. The second goal of this study is to find the factors contributing to the difficulty and determine the strategies the non-native speakers try to overcome their difficulties in interpreting such implicature. Regarding the first question, this research shows that the success rate of learners to interpret POPE-Q implicatures is around 67%. This rate varies slightly among groups tested in this study. For the students who are exposed with English in their classroom, the average score is 2.13 and 2.06 out of the maximum score of 3. For the students who are not exposed with any English in their classroom, their average score is 1.87. For the second question, the researcher found out that some students failed to interpret POPE-Q implicatures because they stumbled words or phrases they did not understand. The researcher also finds that some difficulties also come from cultural unfamiliarity of the target language such as fairy. To cope with those difficulties, most of the time, the students use inference technique (Vandergrift, 1997). Although the route of the inference sometimes was not accurate, somehow some students managed to answer the right question. This fact shows that inference technique is a worthy technique even when the use of the technique is inaccurate.

I would like to thank Universitas Negeri Semarang (UNNES) for the partial funding for this research and for the ethical clearance for the participants joining this research.

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**UDAYANA
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ISBN 978-602-294-239-9



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