

Blum-Kulka, Shoshana

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Blum-Kulka is Professor Emerita at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, specializing in pragmatics and discourse analysis. Her pioneer contributions to the fields of translation, cross-cultural pragmatics, pragmatic development, interlanguage pragmatics, language education, family discourse, peer discourse, and media discourse assisted in establishing the methodological and theoretical basis of applied linguistics. The discourse pragmatic approach, developed in her theoretical and empirical studies, made an important contribution to the field of linguistic pragmatics, helping to refute claims of the presumably monological nature of pragmatic theory, and speech act theory in particular (Linnel, 1998).

Shoshana Blum-Kulka was born in 1936 in the city of Cluj, Transylvania (then Romania, taken over by Hungary in 1940). Following the Nazi occupation of Hungary in 1944, she escaped on what is known as the “Kastner train” with 1,683 other Jews. Blum-Kulka arrived in Israel at the age of 9 and was educated at the Hebrew Reali School of Haifa. She earned a BA in English Literature and Romance Languages at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and a Master’s in Education from Teachers College, Columbia University in New York. She continued her academic studies back at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, earning a PhD in Hebrew Linguistics under the supervision of Chaim Rabin in 1974. Prior to pursuing a full-time career as a scholar, Blum-Kulka ran the Intensive Hebrew Language Program for Overseas Students at the Hebrew University for 10 years, and was involved in writing and editing several textbooks of teaching Hebrew as a second language. She is credited with having introduced new approaches (both communicative and structurally graded) to the teaching of Hebrew as a second language, which subsequently completely transformed the way L2 is taught at university level in Israel. She began her academic career as a lecturer at the Center of Applied Linguistics at the Hebrew University in 1974 and was later invited to join the Department of Communication and the School of Education at the same university, where she served as professor of communication and education until her retirement in 2004.

From her early research on speech acts across cultures to her latest research on the dialogic and intersubjective nature of communication, Blum-Kulka promoted two basic ideas that establish the range and vision of applied linguistics: language use as social action and language use as a process of meaning making. Blum-Kulka’s contribution to the field of applied linguistics in the late 1970s took several forms: her dissertation on linguistic simplification for language learners, textbooks for teaching Hebrew as L2, articles on principles and methods of language teaching, pragmatic studies of translation (e.g., 1982) and lexical simplification (Levenston & Blum-Kulka, 1978).

At the outset of the 1980s Blum-Kulka’s research expanded to cover cross-cultural pragmatics in addition to the study of pragmatic competence in a second language (interlanguage pragmatics). The well-known Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP), headed by Blum-Kulka, Kasper, and House, integrated linguistics, speech act theory, and politeness theory in demonstrating cross-cultural and situational variation in the performance of requests and apologies (Blum-Kulka, Kasper, & House, 1989). This study provided the theoretical and methodological framework for the empirical study of speech acts across cultures, adding to the “armchair” or role-play methods used until then—a semi-structured

questionnaire (the Discourse Completion Test), which became widely popular for the quick collection of speech act data from large samples. Among the major contributions related to this project is Blum-Kulka's finding (1987) that different cultures exhibit diverse scales for the perception of politeness that do not conform to Brown and Levinson's equation of politeness with indirectness. This finding may be viewed as one of the first to challenge the universal claim of politeness theory.

Concurrently, in the mid-1980s, Blum-Kulka was also involved in studies of natural discourse, focusing on issues of (mis)understanding (with Weizman, 1988), and cultural ways of speaking in family discourse. These studies, which focused on the interactive nature of communication as a process of meaning making, were the basis for formulating her discourse pragmatic approach during the 1990s (e.g., 1997b). In her studies on family discourse she explored cross-cultural differences in natural family discourse at dinnertime between native Israelis, native Americans, and American immigrants in Israel. Blum-Kulka showed that family dinnertime, at least in the communities studied, share several basic characteristics related to the nature of the speech event, yet differ deeply in patterns of sociability and socialization, providing culturally distinct sites for children's pragmatic development (1997a). *Dinner Talk* was a major contribution to the study of pragmatic socialization in that it devoted close attention to the many-faceted contributions of multiparty, intergenerational talk for children's pragmatic development whereas other contemporary research tended to focus mainly on dyadic mother-child interaction. Further work along these lines showed the benefits of multiparty talk for pragmatic development across different cultures and genres (see Blum-Kulka & Snow, 2002). Best known from Blum-Kulka's work on specific genres are her studies on narratives, in which she developed a three-dimensional model (*telling, tales, and tellers*) to account for cultural variability in the unfolding of stories in conversation (e.g., 1993).

Blum-Kulka's interest in pragmatic development led her (by the mid-1990s) to the study of young child-child peer interactions in natural discourse, developing a theoretical view of peer talk as a "double opportunity space," which functions concurrently on the plane of meaning making within childhood culture as a locus for the co-construction of children's social world and peer culture, while at the same time affording opportunities for the development of discursive learning (e.g., 2005). Her studies of natural peer talk of preschool and preadolescent children demonstrate the cultural co-construction and discursive affordances for pragmatic development of peer talk in a gamut of genres, including casual conversation, narratives, explanations, pretend play, and argumentative talk (e.g., Hamo & Blum-Kulka, 2007).

Blum-Kulka's broad intellectual interests found further expression in her important contributions to the field of mediated political discourse. Her pioneer studies on political interviews (1983), and later on debates and talk shows (2001), made significant contributions to the contemporary field of broadcast talk. In her studies during the late 1990s and the 2000s Blum-Kulka integrated methods of conversation analysis, ethnographic observations, and pragmatic methods and theories, thus defining the methodological tool box used by scholars of discourse analysis (Tracy & Haspel, 2005).

To conclude, Blum-Kulka is among the first to introduce pragmatics to the field of applied linguistics, to develop an integrative approach (discursive pragmatics) to the study of language use, and to apply this approach innovatively and fruitfully to relatively understudied areas of interest, such as media discourse, family discourse, and, more recently, first- and second-language child peer talk.

SEE ALSO: Discourse Analysis and Conversation Analysis; Politeness and Face Research; Pragmatic Socialization

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Suggested Readings

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