The Pragmatics of English Dialogues in the Chinese Context

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Abstract

This paper is part of a cross-cultural study on the differences in the principles governing English dialogues between native speakers and Chinese speakers in a special context where both sides share some linguistic and cultural backgrounds. From the findings, it distinguished the abstract cooperative code and the concrete maxims of the Cooperative Principle, holding that the former is prescriptive and the latter descriptive. In view of form and function of speech codes, the paper points to the universality of CP by showing that politeness can not override the action of the maxims in certain cross-cultural contexts.

Introduction

While discussions on the relationship between language and culture started in China in the 1950s (Luo, 1950), pragmatic studies of cross-cultural communication started only in the 1980s (Huang, 1984; Yan & He, 1985). Such pragmatic studies since then have largely concentrated their attention on listing Chinese learners' common 'errors' of interaction in English or instances of misunderstanding and miscommunication with native speakers in the name of 'pragmatic failure' following Jenny Thomas (1983). Some discuss the problems in terms of cross-cultural conflicts of pragmatic principles and maxims. Others attribute the problems exclusively to Chinese speakers' communicative incompetence in a second language. Thus, remedies were suggested such as more emphasis on communicative approaches in foreign language teaching, or an inclusion of culture-related courses in the curriculum, with few studies probing into the workings of the pragmatic principles in real-situation cross-cultural dialogues.

The present study aimed to find out how the general Cooperative Principle (Grice, 1975) is actualized in the choice of speech strategies and how the specific maxims work in accounting for what is actually said in such a particular context of verbal interaction. An investigation was conducted of everyday dialogues between individuals belonging to two different groups of speakers: Chinese English-speakers and native English-speakers, at a national university in Beijing. The subjects stay in the same complex and their daily dialogues are in both English and Chinese. They have approximately the same degree of second language proficiency, and presumably similar degrees of awareness to linguistic and cultural relativity. Instances of what would have been labelled as pragmatic failure or miscommunication due to inappropriate verbal behaviour or sociopragmatic match of speech acts, as is defined by Thomas (1983), have been observed in English data (from Chinese English-speakers) in similar patterns in comparison with Chinese data (from native English-speakers). Unlike common assumptions and expectations alerted by other existing studies in China, such risky or problematic speech acts (i.e. either Chinese-culture oriented ones in English data or the other way round) successfully accomplished practical communicative tasks in particular situations.

The Investigation

This investigation was a continuation of the research that was first started in early 1995. The university where the research was conducted, like many other national universities in Beijing, has an English Department and a Chinese Language Training Centre, the former preparing Chinese students of English and the latter training foreign students of Chinese, mostly from America and Great Britain. There is much out-class communication between students from the two departments.

In everyday communication, the two types of language students use either Chinese or English. Since both types of students prefer to use their second languages more for practice, the ratio of conversations in Chinese and English is approximately half and half. In both cases, similar patterns of verbal behaviour have been observed. On the one hand, speech acts in second languages seem to be strongly influenced by those in the speakers' first languages. On the other hand, with limited knowledge of their cross-cultural interlocutors' ways of saying and doing things, both types of speakers tend to over-generalize. For instance, in the initial stage, Chinese students of English tend to speak English in a typical Chinese way and native English speakers tend to speak Chinese in their own way. Some native English speakers take 'Have you had your

meal?' as a common greeting among the Chinese people and greet their Chinese schoolmates in this way regardless of time and place. When speakers have got more familiar with their second languages, they can learn more 'proper' ways of saying and doing things, but they still tend to go a bit too far because of stereotypical assumptions and over-generalizations. While Chinese speakers of English generally assume that Americans are informal and British people are more formal, native English speakers assume that the Chinese are too indirect and sometimes unfathomable. In spite of the cultural differences, the two types of speakers have obviously been making efforts in seeking common grounds. Therefore, instances of inappropriate verbal behaviour as are found in cross-cultural pragmatics and ELT studies (Huang, 1984; Hu, 1988, 1992, 1993) did not necessarily lead to pragmatic failure or communication breakdowns.

After these two groups of speakers had known each other for some more time, the frequency of miscommunicataion was greatly reduced. However, the so-called 'inappropriate' verbal behaviour on either side did not significantly diminish. At the same time, native English speakers arriving each year are increasingly more proficient in the Chinese language and Chinese students of English are better equipped with English before they enter college. Then, the communication was based on more common factors, and new features started appearing in the process. While typical 'cultural mistakes' and 'pragmatic failure' were no longer evident as the speakers became more communicatively competent in their second languages, certain risky and problematic speech acts had not been wiped out but seemed to be on the rise due to cross-linguistic and cross-cultural pragmatic factors. Therefore, a further attempt was made to narrow down the data on English dialogues between these two groups of speakers.

A long list was prepared consisting of the reported instances of pragmatic failure due to 'inappropriate verbal behaviour', including Chinese speakers' ways of greeting, initiating conversations, asking questions, giving and accepting advice, and responding to thanks and compliments, etc. Meanwhile, recordings were made of real conversations through some Chinese volunteers interacting with native English speakers. A comparison showed that the listed instances of 'inappropriate verbal behaviour' have positive pragmatic values in the conversations under scrutiny. Tracking-down interviews in the native English-speaker group showed that the transcribed items in question are acceptable and communicable, with the comments that they are 'intuitively nothing abnormal'.

The transcribed data were then put in questionnaires and distributed among a separate body of native speakers of English, who have an average of two years' experience of studying Chinese as a second language. 95% valid responses are retrieved (38 out of 40) through one of their Chinese language instructors and the results are as follows.

Initiating Talks

Ways of initiating talks consists of greetings and asking questions, ranging from the most impersonal chat to the more personal 'How are you?' and 'Are you all right today?', from 'I haven't seen you for ages' to 'What have you been doing these days?' and 'Where have you been recently?'. The last two are often regarded as being inquisitive and nosy by Chinese scholars on cross-cultural communication. However, not even a single native English speaker marked asterisks on any that he/she would in all instances regard as communicatively unacceptable. To my question whether they would take the last two as instances of invasion into their privacy, except for three subjects giving comments 'It depends', all the rest responded negatively. They commented that 'One is usually able to tell the difference between nosiness and curiosity and chit-chat', 'A colleague you know well can certainly ask these questions. But if someone you barely know is in the intention of demanding details, it is considered as rude'. The consensus is that these questions are not likely related to nosiness or invasion of privacy. The only minor exception is, 'If the questions are repeated, I would think he is being inquisitive'.

Receiving Compliments

Typical Chinese responses to compliments on one's excellence in certain skills, one's remarkable accomplishment, or the like are "There is nothing worthy of note", "You are over-praising me", "You may be joking", or "It is really difficult for me to do it well", "I have been really working hard on it", etc. These responses are typical Chinese sayings when receiving compliments, and students are therefore told, stereotypically, that they are associated with impoliteness in respect to the hearer. While the first three may carry strong implications of questioning the judgement or evaluation of the one who compliments, the last two may indicate a strong sense of immodesty of the one who responds to the compliment. But results of the questionnaires show that these responses are not inherently impolite or arrogant in the specified contexts of situation.

Two subjects reported that the Chinese speakers are being humble and reserved. But all the rest made the similar comments that the responses are 'normal', 'acceptable', and 'no problem' because the speaker is, or is being, modest. One subject commented, 'One not familiar with Chinese customs would generally find these responses [to compliments] annoying or impolite at best. Generally "Thank you" will suffice, or sometimes "Thank you, but it's nothing really"'. Another subject's comment was, 'I understand the Chinese customs of modesty, so I don't get offended. I continue to praise my students or friends if

they are worth because in America it's seen as being supportive or helpful to praise.'

Receiving Thanks

In many cases, when a native speaker thanks the Chinese English-speaker for his/her kindness or a favour that has been done, the Chinese, out of his own cultural norms, may respond with 'This is what I should do', 'Don't mention it' and "It's really nothing" (which are literal translations of Chinese utterances in receiving thanks), although he is taught to respond with 'With pleasure' or 'I'm glad to be of help', etc.

The majority of the subjects took the 'This is what I should do' type responses as being 'the same as "You're welcome"', 'communicatively OK' and "very polite ways to acknowledge an act of kindness". One subject wrote, "We do this in America. We say "Don't think about it", "Not a problem", so I am QUITE USED TO IT'. All native speakers commented that the first response is 'great' and 'normal', and that the speaker was modest and polite. However, three subjects thought a little differently on the first response. Two responded that it 'sounds a bit awkward' and 'a bit too strong', and one commented that 'it is unacceptable because it is too humbling, so "Don't mention it" is the best'. In tracking-down interviews, all the three subjects admitted that they would appreciate the favour done to them and knew what politeness was meant in the responses. The one who regarded it as unacceptable commented that when she heard this, she was aware of the polite message there. Only when a non-native English learner asked her whether it was good English, she would reject it as unacceptable.

Accepting Offers

During visits, when a native English speaker as host shows hospitality and offers a Chinese visitor a cup of coffee or a tin of sprite, the visitor often replies 'Please do not take the trouble' or 'No, thanks' when he actually means to accept the kind offer. These are typical Chinese responses to offers: The guest pretends to save the host trouble making such offers, and the host will appear even more hospitable if he insists. While politely rejecting, the guest understands well that the host will show further politeness and continue the offer. In fact, he is still expecting the coffee or sprite to be brought unless he repeats his utterance or explains why he does not want to have any. As a norm, he will make further polite protestations when coffee or sprite is brought and then take it after being repeatedly urged. However, among close friends, a simple 'Thank you' in Chinese would mean a happy acceptance.

Chinese speakers of English are taught not to say anything in a typical Chinese way in English. While most students avoid using 'Please do not take the trouble' as a proper response to polite offers, a significant number of students do use it. While they are taught that a 'No, thanks' would definitely mean a rejection, these students do use it when they really wish to accept the offer. However, all the native speakers of English in my research commented that responses of this type in given situations are 'polite' and 'normal', although a few of them added that 'Most Americans prefer a more straightforward approach'. Typical comments are 'It is expected. If I do not hear it, I began to think they do not appreciate my trouble', 'He is being polite and only means it if he insists', 'One should take the trouble, unless it makes the guest uncomfortable. Or if they just don't want it, they'll probably say it out directly', 'My friends in America are the same. They say it and I still give them a cup of coffee', 'I understand culturally why they do this', and 'I would just bring them a cup of coffee for fear that they are just being polite', etc.

This result is surprising because I myself used to strongly believe that these responses are literal translations of a Chinese version *Qing Bie Keqi*, and so I had expected more opposing comments on these utterances of accepting offers from native English speakers.

Giving Advice or Showing Concern

A Chinese may say to a native English speaker 'You should really go and visit the beautiful city of Harbin' (before Christmas), 'You must get ready by . . .' (before a winter holiday), and 'Be careful!' or 'Look out!' (when climbing a mountain).

These typical Chinese ways of giving advice or showing concern led to no controversy on the issue whether the speakers are being imposing. Responses range from a simple 'No' and 'Gosh, no' to the most emphatic 'No, not at all!!!'. One subject added 'I'm used to them, and I realize most Chinese never mean to impose', and another added 'I'd appreciate such information if it was with good reason'. Still others commented 'I'd think they are being helpful', 'That's normal everyday talk', 'Only pushiness and repetitiveness in this case are considered unreasonable'.

In this particular context of exchange involving cross-cultural speakers, possible problematic implications on the side of the Chinese speakers of English are comprehensibly and empathetically ruled out by the native English speakers, especially those of nosiness (in asking questions for phatic purposes) and pushiness (in giving earnest advice). Significantly, when the attention of these informants was deliberately drawn to reconsidering the issues, the subjects made notations that the risk of pragmatic failure or misunderstanding is only a matter of degree. For example, they reported that Chinese students initiate talks with native English speakers by compliments or questions. They use compliments on various subjects just for phatic communion, as the native English speakers often do. And the native speakers of English understand that their Chinese interlocutors are choosing the safest topics possible or available, so they do not take their remarks at the face value. Incidentally,

the native English speakers admitted themselves sometimes deliberately communicating in a typical Chinese way in either English or Chinese. Even if the topic for compliment or initiation of a talk is not the best chosen by the Chinese, no native English speaker reported having been offended.

However, on the relation between conversation implicature and politeness in certain cases, there is a drastic difference between their interpretations. For instance, He (1988: 84) rightly interprets the following conversation

Student: Beirut is Peru, isn't it?
Teacher: Rome is in Romania, I suppose.

as the teacher's violation of Grice's maxim of quality. However, a few pages later his interpretation goes that the teacher is being polite, in order not to hurt the student's feelings, for the teacher could have made a direct comment 'It's absolutely ridiculous!' (p. 101).

More than 90% of Chinese college freshmen under an earlier survey took the latter interpretation for granted, except for a few who thought that the teacher is not necessarily polite. In contrast, the pattern is just reversed among native speakers of English. Except for only two, all the rest of the 38 subjects gave the comments on the questionnaires that the teacher is not being polite in whatever circumstances, but being 'sarcastic' and 'rude'. Interviews with the two subjects responding 'Yes' showed that they would think so only if the teacher is speaking in a most humorous tone and a friendly atmosphere with obvious intentions to cause a hearty laugh. However, a survey from Chinese sophomores produced a pattern similar to that of the native English speakers.

What is significant is that, in this special context, typical Chinese ways of talking in English are mostly accepted rather than rejected as incommunicable or labelled as instances of Chinese speakers' communicative incompetence in their second language. Certain unpleasant and impolite conversational implicature, which may otherwise have arisen, has been reasonably cancelled because the speech acts concerned are not inherently polite or impolite without considering specific contexts of situation.

Discussion

As communication is a two-way process, what lies behind may be the functioning of a general code, or what Leech calls 'Interpersonal Rhetoric' (Leech, 1983), which consists of Grice's Cooperative Principle and his own Politeness Principle with their respective maxims. The general principle of co-operation serves as a binding force between the interlocutors who, whether conscious or unconscious, successfully bridge the gap between what is intended and what is actually said in each communicative event, in terms of the speaker's deliberate choice of speech strategies and the

hearer's cooperative attempt to infer the communicative intentions therein. The distinction of pragmatic competence and performance brings us to the discussion of a distinction between the abstract 'code of cooperative behaviour' which already presumes politeness, and the concrete maxims in the Cooperative Principle put forward by Grice.

Few works discussing Grice's theory distinguish the two related aspects of the Cooperative Principle: a general principle and four maxims. For example, Levinson (1983: 101-2) treats the general principle and the maxims as the same in nature. Likewise, Leech (1983) makes no point of treating the 'principle' and the 'maxims' differently, saying that the maxims are 'special manifestations' of the principle. But Grice originally implies a different status of the principle and the 'attendant' maxims (Grice, 1975), or as others may call them as 'concomitant' maxims (Mao, 1994).

This distinction is closely related to the nature of the Cooperative Principle with its maxims. By the 'code of cooperative behaviour' which 'organizes the way interlocutors interpret each other's speech', Grice only emphasizes the interpretative efficacy of his maxims for conversational implicature. This may partly account for a negligence of the other related aspect of Grice's principle. For example, Leech, in a later work, characterizes the maxims of the Cooperative Principle as 'purely descriptive', 'postulated for the purpose of explaining observed behaviour' (Leech, 1992: 261). However, it is the abstract code that has normative, if not moralistic, values on the speaker's having to be cooperative and assuming his interlocutor's cooperative act in order to accomplish a sensible communication event. Against this backdrop, the so-called 'conflict' of the individual maxims, or groups of maxims in CP and PP in Leech's discussion, can be better explained as a matter of explicitness in actualizing a cooperative (and polite) act in achieving certain communicative goals.

Conclusion

In cross-cultural circumstances, where there are always special problems, the normative and prescriptive values of the abstract code of cooperation and politeness may go beyond cultures. The assumption of mutual cooperation and politeness between conversation participants is the key point in securing contextually appropriate encoding and decoding of communicative intentions. Thus, it is the social message being conveyed that actually counts, and it is the good or bad intentions of the speaker that determines whether a speech act is polite. In spite of cultural differences, there seems to be implicit norms for the cooperative principle to be observed and the sub-maxims to be specifically actualized (with or without violations). Thus, pragmatic functions that contextual utterances serve can outweigh isolated speech forms, whether superficially polite or impolite.

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