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PRAGMATIC FAILURES IN CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION: THEIR CAUSES AND PREVENTION

The paper provides an insight into the causes of pragmatic failures (both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic) in cross-cultural communication and suggests some effective means to assist language students to develop not only linguistic but also pragmatic competence which will help them to meet practical communicative needs: to better interpret and express meaning in a target language. This will undoubtedly contribute a great deal towards intercultural understanding. Exposing learners to pragmatics in their second or foreign language helps them to expand their perception of the target language, thus preventing possible misunderstandings.

Key words: *communication, pragmatic failure, misunderstandings, prevention, cultural awareness*

Each of us is born into a culture that teaches us a number of shared meanings and expectations that people from other cultures might find difficult to understand and accept. And even when we are thoroughly aware of all the barriers to effective cross-cultural communication and make use of available aids and tools to assist us in communicating with people from cultural and linguistic backgrounds different from our own, misunderstandings will occur.

While problems caused when non-native speakers transfer vocabulary or grammar inappropriately from a native language are usually easily identified and forgiven by interlocutors, the transfer of pragmatic norms ("secret rules of speaking"), which are less visible, are less easily forgiven. A speaker who violates some pragmatic norm is likely to be judged negatively as being rude or at least incooperative rather than perceived as having made an "error" of proficiency. The consequences of not being aware of such norms can therefore be very serious. Where there is a mismatch of understanding on such matters, miscommunications are not only possible, but also potentially

damaging. And yet these pragmatic dimensions of language use are still sadly neglected in many teaching programs around the world. J. Thomas (1983) ascribes this neglect to the following two reasons:

- Pragmatic description has not still obtained the precision level of grammar, describing linguistic competence;
- Pragmatics – language in use – is a delicate area and it is not still very clear how it can be taught.

In spite of this, there are numerous studies proving that pragmatic knowledge is teachable and that instruction helps second and foreign language learners in acquiring pragmatic competence, thus preventing pragmatic failures.

So, how can educators contribute towards inter-cultural understanding and assist language students to develop not only linguistic but also pragmatic competence? What knowledge, attitudes and skills should a pragmatically competent person possess? What might be useful for language learners to know in order to better interpret and express meaning in a target language? What evidence base is available to language professionals to assist them to meet these practical communicative needs? It has been assumed that the answer lies in the study of cross-cultural pragmatics.

Cross-cultural pragmatics may be defined as “the study of linguistic acts carried out by language users with different cultural backgrounds” (Kasper and Blum-Kulka 1993, cited in LoCastro 2006). It can be divided into two subcategories: *contrastive pragmatics* and *interlanguage pragmatics*. With regard to contrastive pragmatics, researchers compare speech acts across cultures and languages to understand what kinds of linguistic actions talkers engage to reflect their backgrounds. *Interlanguage pragmatics*, the study of the pragmatic development of second and foreign language learners, focuses on non-native speakers’ use and acquisition of pragmatic competence of a second or foreign language.

Much of the research in inter-cultural communication and interlanguage pragmatics has focused on providing an insight into the norms underlying native-speaking expectations of interaction through “snapshots” of how groups of speakers react in various situations and contexts. It has long been assumed that it is both possible and useful to identify regularities in the language behaviour of groups of speakers which vary across contexts, situations and time. They nevertheless share interpretive expectations based on repetitive experiences within a sociocultural context. So here comes the issue of pragmatic universals, which have been formulated by outstanding scholars like Grice (Conversation Maxims), Leech (Politeness Maxims), Brown and Levinson (Concept of Face). Anyhow, it is difficult if not impossible to come up with universally applicable

rules for language use as each culture has more or less culture-specific pragmatic features which often lead to communication failures.

What is important is that we know how to prevent those failures and to learn to remedy misunderstandings if they ever happen to occur.

It is essential to make a distinction between two types of pragmatic failure proposed by J. Thomas (1983): *pragmalinguistic* and *sociopragmatic*.

Pragmalinguistic failure takes place when the pragmatic force of a linguistic structure is different from that normally assigned to it by a native speaker. A cause for such an error may be the pragmatically inappropriate transfer of semantically equivalent structures without knowing the real meaning, ignoring that a whole sentence may have some special meaning in a given situation and not considering the scene and the listener.

Here are some examples of *pragmalinguistic* failures:

- Interpreting the speaker's meaning literally:

A: *Can you answer the question, Carol?*

B: *Yes.*

Speaker B, the pupil fails to answer speaker A's, the teacher's question because he/she doesn't understand the teacher's intention and interprets it wrongly.

- Not considering the scene and the listener:

The utterance "*Could you possibly help me with my luggage?*" will sound all right if addressed to a stranger, but will be offensive to a friend. "*Help me with my luggage*" would sound friendlier.

- Foreigners using English: A non-English (Armenian) shop-assistant addressing an English speaker:

"*What would you want?*" instead of "*Can I help you?*"

- Using improper expressions disobeying the language rules:

A: *Thanks a lot. You were of great help.*

B: *Never mind.*

Speaker B's answer "*Never mind*" is used to say sorry, but here the correct expression would be "*You are welcome*".

- The pragmatically inappropriate transfer of semantically equivalent structures:

Some expressions seem quite right in terms of sentence structure and grammar. However, they acquire a different meaning in a dialogue:

A: *It is a good restaurant?*

B: *Of course.*

Speaker B wants to give Speaker A a positive answer. However, he uses the phrase *of course* mistakenly because it implies that the speaker asked about something which is self-evident and only an idiot foreigner would ask such a stupid question.

Sociopragmatic failure derives from different intercultural perceptions of what constitutes appropriate linguistic behaviour. Such failures often occur in cross-cultural communication, and as Thomas states, these types of failure are more difficult to correct and overcome by the students since it involves making changes in their beliefs and value system.

Here are some examples of sociopragmatic failures:

- Using the native (in this case Armenian) way of speaking:

Generally modesty is considered to be a great virtue among Armenians. However, it is not the case in some western countries, such as Britain and America. For example

A: *You speak beautiful English.*

B: *No, no my English is rather poor.*

Armenians often negate the given praise but, oppositely, people in Britain and America always accept it and say: “*Thank you*”. So, it would be nice to say “*Thank you, I had very good teachers in the University.*”

- Value judgment and taboos:

Cultural differences may cause a different value judgment, too. Closely related to the concept of “free” and “non-free” information are taboo topics. Let’s look at the following dialogue:

A: *What is your name?*

B: *I am Barbara.*

A: *How old are you?*

B: *I am 27.*

A: *Where do you work?*

B: *At the Central Bank.*

A: *What’s your salary?*

B: *\$500.*

A: *Are you married?*

B: *Yeah.....*

Linguistically speaking, the sentences are perfectly right, but if we take a sociopragmatic view, they are not suitably worded. It must be considered very rude if you speak to an English person in that way because you are interviewing his private affairs. But Armenians like to inquire about other people’s private life.

Here is another example: on a bus a student wants to give his seat to an old man who comes from a western country. He says “*Please, sit down, Mam*”. This gesture will hardly be accepted as a sign of respect, but rather as a kind of offense.

- Cross-culturally different assessment of relative power or social distance:

Another illustration of sociopragmatic failure may be provided by the not infrequent phenomenon of foreign speakers’ judging of relative power or

social distance differently from a native speaker. And according to their different social status you should choose the proper expression, for example, you had better not speak to a taxi driver like this: *"Excuse me, would you please be kind enough as to take me to Green Street."* It would be more appropriate to say: *"Take me, please, to Green Street?"*

Our attention to this observation stems from the fact that many Armenian learners of English experience communication failures when encountering with native speakers. And this in turn is to a large extent accounted for by lack of cultural awareness as well as the tendency to transfer the rules of their own language use to English directly, resulting in miscommunication.

Now, let us try to understand what gets in the way of a learner's comprehending and producing of pragmatic meaning, comprehension preceding production. V. LaCastro assumes that "production of the social action and the enactment of pragmatic meaning by learners to achieve their strategic, communicative goals is predicated on comprehension of the particular ways in which implied meanings are conveyed in a specific second or foreign language" (LaCastro 2006: 252).

Kasper and Blum-Kulka focused on the following features with respect to comprehension: attribution of illocutionary force, perception of politeness, the role of linguistic form vs. contextual information. The impact of the L1 background and of stereotypes of L2 language behaviour, the processing of conventional and conversational implicatures, the perception of such sociopragmatic features as social status and weight of imposition. According to them, the obstacles to learners' situationally appropriate production of pragmatic meaning and the main reasons for difficulty in enacting their pragmatic knowledge derives from either restricted L2 linguistic knowledge or difficulty in assessing it smoothly. They may have low proficiency in the L2 or may not be able to retrieve from their memories the linguistic forms and routines needed. Other possible factors, cited by Kasper and Blum-Kulka are as follows: transfer from the L1 or other languages the learner may know, the influence of possible stages in interlanguage development, lack of adequate exposure to the second or foreign language use, inadequate or uninformed teaching, a strong ethnolinguistic identity factor, motivation (Kasper and Blum-Kulka 1993).

It is our view that educators over the world have the potential and responsibility to contribute towards inter-cultural understanding and to assist their students in the development of global competencies. Exposing learners to pragmatics in their second or foreign language helps them to expand their perception of the target language, which in its turn leads to a better understanding of their native language.

In order to achieve conversational competence in the target language learners need to become aware of what native speakers *do* in conversation. This process could be facilitated by the use of awareness-raising activities fostering the students' awareness of conversational rules and strategies. Such awareness can sometimes be acquired unconsciously as the result of prolonged exposure to the target language, but for many students the process could be facilitated and shortened by the use of activities which promote the following:

- awareness of the target culture;
- the ability to "sound" English;
- development of the ability to interpret what is being said;
- a feeling for what is appropriate in conversation and the effect it is having on the listener;
- awareness of strategies used to further conversation.

When awareness activities are introduced for the first time it is a good idea for the teacher to give a simple explanation as to their purpose, and if necessary the initial activities could be done on a sample of the mother tongue so that the students become more familiar with the type of features they are looking for. They may consequently be more sympathetic towards identifying similar features in the target language.

Cross-cultural training should form a part of the language learning programme. However, if we accept the fact that language is embedded in culture, then some elements of cross-cultural training are inevitable and the inclusion of some cross-cultural work in the teaching of conversation would seem to offer the following advantages:

- Knowledge of why people in the culture of the target language behave in certain ways should make native speakers more approachable and easier to interpret.

- Sensitivity to the ways social norms operate in other languages should make the learning of certain areas of language easier, among them politeness formulae.

- If students become aware of issues such as social taboos, they are less likely to cause offence by breaking them.

The content of a cross-cultural programme will vary considerably according to the circumstances, and the exercises will serve to illustrate some of the techniques which can be adapted for use with different content.

To make students sensitive to social behaviour in the target language the teacher may ask them to listen to dialogues indicating potential social situations which the learners are apt to find themselves in (greetings, compliments, refusals, requests, complaints.....) when talking to foreigners. Then the students should infer what the speakers are talking about, what's happening

and why they prefer one dialogue to the other. They can also find similarities and differences in performing speech acts and compare these situations with the ones occurring in their country. The teacher may pose questions like: What do you usually do when you:

- greet someone? (What do people typically say? Do people shake hands, kiss, etc?)
- compliment someone? (What do people say when complimenting someone? Are there any gestures that you use when you compliment someone? Would you compliment a stranger?...)
- apologize to someone? (In which situations do people expect you to apologize? What expressions do you use?...)
- criticize someone? (When is it appropriate to criticize someone in your country? What would you criticize people for? Would you be direct in your criticism or very indirect?...)

Learners can also discuss if the ways of performing refusals, greetings, requests, offers and other speech acts are realized similarly or differently in their own culture. Students usually participate more enthusiastically when their native language and culture are brought into play.

Thus, awareness-raising activities can be effective for helping the students improve the interactional elements of their speaking skills and go a long way in developing interlanguage communicative skills.

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