

WHERE THE TROUBLE LIES:
CROSS-CULTURAL PRAGMATICS
AND MISCOMMUNICATION

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The trouble with pragmatic failure is that it lies deep – too deep, often enough, for it to be accurately diagnosed for what it is, and much deeper than other types of language ‘error’, at the syntactic, lexical and phonological levels. These are always manifest, and are usually corrigible by the L1 hearer. Pragmatic failure, on the other hand, is often simply not recognized as such; instead it is taken as a sign of some sort of delinquency on the part of the L2 speaker, such as ill-will or bad manners. At its worst, it leads to stereotyping the L2 speaker as a member of some deviant, inferior cultural group. (Thomas 1983:96f.)

In this paper I want to look at the problematic nature of cross-cultural communication, from a pragmatic perspective. I wish also to examine critically some of the concepts and methods that have informed cross-cultural pragmatic study to date, and to end by outlining, with a few examples, at least one direction that I think such study might profitably follow.

Let me begin with an example from my own experience, here in Poland. I was travelling on a train with a Polish acquaintance. The journey was over two hours long; the landscape beyond the window was filled with trees, the conversation was languishing, we did not know each at all well. I said:

(1) Me: I wonder how many trees there are in Poland.
[pause]

My interlocutor: I cannot imagine who would want to know that.

My first feeling was that I had been put down, in some sense rebuked for having asked an impossible question (which, indeed, I had), or even a foolish one (which, indeed, I may have done). However, I had felt that it was an innocent question, and the response more weighty than was warranted in the circumstances. Had the Gricean Co-operative Principle been violated in some way, and, if so, had it been

done deliberately? Was a rebuke intended, or merely an honest reply to a puzzling question? Was, indeed, my interlocutor being polite, in fact, in a way which I did not understand? What was the misunderstanding and what its cause? What kind of pragmatic failure was this? (I should say that my interlocutor spoke excellent English, so linguistic difficulty could be discounted.)

As I reflect upon this incident, I have concluded that the problem for my interlocutor was that she had not realized that I was engaging in phatic communion. My question was trivial, and meant to be taken as such, as a gambit in the task of passing the time conversationally on a train journey. My interpretation of her reply was that she did not know the answer (who would?), and did not wish to acknowledge this (who could blame her? I was, after all, asking something about her own country, about which she might be expected to be, and in fact was, knowledgeable). One way out of the dilemma thus posed was to deflect the problem back upon the questioner. In that way, at least one person's face, the second speaker's, could be saved. Which aspect of face, the negative or positive, I shall leave until later. I am not, of course saying, nor even wishing to imply that my interlocutor was being impolite. The problem precisely was – and remains for me – that I do not know quite what was happening, because my pragmatic perspective and my interlocutor's are not the same. The pragmatic problem was, it should be noted, more perlocutionary than illocutionary.

This in itself trivial example is meant to illustrate how problematic the pragmatics of inter-cultural communication may be. The example also illustrates, I hope, how much work may be involved in pragmatic interpretation, and the potential danger attendant upon misinterpretation. What is phatic communion in one culture may not be so in another. A given culture may not practise phatic communion at all. My Finnish students, for instance, regularly express their surprise at the loquaciousness of their British counterparts, and tell me that there is no 'small talk' in Finnish. They also tell me how they tolerate silence, for a much longer period than Britons can. It is, of course, quite fatuous to suggest that one society is more polite than another. The whole point is that what constitutes politeness – seen not merely as etiquette, but as a regulatory principle of socio-cultural life – differs from one culture to another and is therefore realized linguistically in correspondingly different ways.

I asked above what kind of pragmatic failure was involved in #1. Thomas (1983), following Leech (1983), introduced a very useful distinction in types of pragmatic failure between 'pragmalinguistic' and 'sociopragmatic failure'. Pragmalinguistic failure occurs where a non-native speaker performs an appropriate speech act in L2 but in an inappropriate manner. It can take the form of inappropriate 'pragmalinguistic transfer' (Thomas 1983), who gives as an example the use of *of course* by Russian speakers of English in circumstances where native speakers would use *yes*.

- (2) English speaker: Is it open on Sundays?
Russian speaker: Of course. (Thomas 1983:102)

The use of *of course* in this context implies that the question is unnecessary or stupid, because the answer is obvious. The Russian speaker appears to be translating *konesno* literally and transferring it from a permissible Russian context into an impermissible English one. In the next example, we can see what looks like the same phenomenon, taken from an English medium university classroom, in which the teacher is a native speaker (NS) and the learners are all non-native speakers (NNS).

- (3) Teacher: did he have any holidays while he was in Italy or did he just fight . all the time?
Student 1: → course holi-
Student 2: (fight)
(1.0)
Teacher: mm?
Student 1: course fre: h-holiday
Teacher: → not of course but . he did he did have a short holiday
(Reynolds 1989:286-94)

We may note, first, that the teacher treats Student 1's use of *of course* as sanctionable. Teachers are not used to, and do not take too kindly to, having students point out their questions as unnecessary or ignorant! Thus, it is the student's social rather than his intellectual competence that is being called into question, since we can notice that the teacher, in fact, acknowledges that the student's answer is substantively correct.

Second the very fact that the pragmatic 'error' has been noticed is noteworthy. In the entire corpus of several hours of classroom data (Reynolds 1989) from which this exchange is taken, it is the only instance of a pragmatic 'correction'. Most important of all, however, is to consider the social circumstances in which this 'transaction' (Sinclair and Coulthard 1975) is embedded.

This is, of course, asymmetric classroom discourse, in which the rights and obligations are unequally distributed. The teacher is a 'powerful' figure, (the power holder), at least insofar as s/he is acknowledged as an authority and a gatekeeper to knowledge, and the students are 'power subjects'. In such circumstances, the power subjects are accountable for their actions to the power holder. The latter has the prerogative to question and to correct behaviour in the context, including verbal behaviour – and that is precisely what the teacher is doing here. As with #1, it is not possible to say whether the student's (verbal) action was intended to convey the discourtesy it was taken as, or not. Here, it has to remain an open question whether the student's difficulty is primarily pragmalinguistic – not knowing quite how to say the right thing – or sociopragmatic – not knowing, more basically, what should be done (or, as here, not done) in the circumstances. Finally, with this example, it must be noted that there is a double asymmetry present, the asymmetry of the power relation, and an asymmetrical control over the medium of instruction. This aspect of asymmetry, one that relates to unequal competence,

is a feature in all NS-NNS discourse that cannot be overlooked, and has pragmatic consequences, as I shall show later.

One way, then, in which sociopragmatic failure differs from pragmalinguistic failure is that it is not so easily perceived. Partly for this reason it has to be considered as more serious, insofar as it is capable of leading to more serious misunderstandings (Eisenstein and Bodman 1986:176). Thomas (1983:104) regards it as "a far more delicate matter for the language teacher than correcting pragmalinguistic failure." Sociopragmatic failure occurs when miscalculations are made about factors such as social dominance among participants and the perceptions of inequalities, the weightiness of an imposition, and the rights and obligations of speakers and hearers in a given situation. These are, of course, the kind of factors that form the Brown and Levinson's (1987) 'weightiness index' that they claim that interactants calculate in performing speech acts as 'face threatening acts'. It also occurs when a pragmatic norm of a culture is infringed, such as performing a speech act where it would normally not be performed (e.g. asking a middle-class Briton how much he or she earns, or overtly admiring an Arab's possessions), or the converse, the non-performance of a speech act where it is expected. Sociopragmatic judgements – perlocutionary acts – are value judgements, and failure of this type is likely to be put down not to linguistic but to social incompetence, and, as such, to be judged the more harshly.

A further example, presented in Kasper (1979:397) will demonstrate how pragmatic failure, when maintained over a number of turns, can lead to a communication breakdown. The situation here is that the gas fire in X's room has exploded and he and his landlady – Y – are discussing what to do. (X is a non-native speaker of English.)

- (4) Y: we'll go into the next room and I'll make you up a bed in there
er will you have a cup of tea so well I need one anyway
X: yeah
[that's a good idea. Thank you.]
Y: and I'll give you a hot water bottle
X: yeah
[oh, that would be nice]
Y: and a nice hot cup of tea
X: yeah
[you're very kind]
Y: I just wonder if I've got a drop of whisky for you oh dear
X: perhaps I think er it's it's enough and I'm very tired and er
[no thanks a lot, Mrs. Walker, don't bother I think I'll go to bed right away if you don't mind]

The glosses in brackets represent the reconstructed utterance of a native English speaker. The hypothetical possibility that the failure here is in not knowing that the speech act of thanking is called for (i.e. sociopragmatic failure) is discounted by Kasper on the strongest of warrants: the student reported that he in-

tended to perform the illocutionary act, but failed to do so. So here we are dealing with an instance of pragmalinguistic failure, not knowing how to perform that act. (Note that I am leaving aside the possibility that shock in the circumstances is affecting performance!). There is another dimension, however, that this analysis overlooks, and that is the effect upon the NS hearer of the pragmatic difficulties that the NNS is having. It is at least possible that the landlady, in the face of X's illocutionary non-responsiveness, and acutely conscious of both her and his face wants in these awkward circumstances, feels obliged to pile on the offers of help (and restoration of X's negative face) to the point where her insistence has become itself a cause of embarrassment and further pragmatic difficulty for X; to the point where his final turn, a barely polite refusal, is appropriately characterized by Kasper as "weird". It is the cumulative mutual failure here that leads to the communication breakdown. Once more, it would seem that the problem is perlocutionary, a failure of appropriate uptake, as much as illocutionary, a failure to appropriately encode a speech act.

These examples have introduced some of the main points that I wish to make in this paper, namely that pragmatics is the study of an inherently interactive phenomenon, in which perlocutionary effects need to be considered as much as illocutionary forces. The perlocution is, indeed, the hinge between the speech act and the speech event. It is because uptake can only be conditioned and not determined by the illocutionary act that discourse is negotiable, and consists of only partially predictable speech act chains.

I should now like to consider some questions concerning the methodology of cross-cultural pragmatics, and then to consider some aspects of the analytic concepts that it has employed. First, the methodology.

So far, the by now considerable body of data collected in cross-cultural pragmatics – most notably the Cross Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989) – has employed two main methodologies for data collection, elicited written responses via a 'discourse completion test'¹ in which a written response to a role play situation is required, and role-plays. The strengths and weaknesses of the former have already been critiqued by members of the CCSARP team (cf. Wolfson et al. 1989; Rintell and Mitchell 1989 and House 1984) and so I shall limit myself here to a pertinent summary by Beebe (1985), quoted in Wolfson et al. (1989:183)

"written role plays bias the response toward less negotiation, less hedging, less elaboration, less variety and ultimately less talk."

¹ An example of the 'discourse completion test', is given below. In the example, the elicited speech act is a request.

At a student's flat

Larry, John's room-mate, had a party the night before and left the kitchen in a mess.

John: Larry, Ellen and Tom are coming for dinner tonight and I'll have to start cooking soon;

Larry: OK, I'll have a go at it right away.

The strength of the technique is that, provided the role play situations are given validity by being based on prior ethnographic fieldwork, it provides sufficient data for reliable quantitative analysis. Using their methods the CCSARP were able to base their findings on data sets involving, frequently, some hundreds (e.g. 200 German native speakers and learners of English in a study of requests and apologies, involving NS English and Germans). A methodological improvement was developed by Bonikowska (1988) in her study of opting out of doing 'face threatening acts' (FTAs) (Brown and Levinson 1987). She asked all her respondents to 'be themselves' in the questionnaire situations she provided, and made this feasible by designing situations that her subjects – all native speaker British university students – could easily find themselves in; for example:

(5) "Situation 13

You had an appointment with the Head of Department at eleven thirty. You've never talked to the head of Department before. You've been sitting in the hall and waiting for over half an hour. You are in a hurry." (Bonikowska 1988:175)

However, Bonikowska herself comments on the problems of self-report data, perhaps most importantly the authenticity of reporting *ex situ* on behaviour that is rarely monitored. A further difficulty with her methodology, one to which I shall return shortly, is her inclusion of the 'social distance' contextual value (called simply 'D' in the Brown and Levinson formula). For reasons that I hope will become clear, I find it difficult to see how this can be reliably estimated via a questionnaire.

This leads me to the second area, consideration of the conceptual basis of much of the cross-cultural work undertaken to date. It is based on two concepts that have been fundamental in the Anglo-American tradition of pragmatics, the speech act and politeness. I should like to indicate some problems with both concepts, and first with the latter. Considerable emphasis has been given to the Brown and Levinson model already mentioned, and its use of the Goffmanian concepts of positive and negative 'face'. Illuminating, stimulating and powerful as a means of investigating pragmatic behaviour as the concept of politeness, as a fundamental regulator of social behaviour – a universal feature, indeed, as Leech (1983) claims – has been, there are two queries about the model which I wish to raise, one of particular concern to cross-cultural study and the other of more general application to the model.

The first query is to do with the concept of negative face, defined by Brown and Levinson as: "the need of every 'adult competent member' that his actions be unimpeded by others" (Brown and Levinson 1987:62), and their claim is that both aspects of face (positive and negative) operate universally. A number of studies, reported in Kasper (1990), of non-Western cultures have cast doubt on this claim. Negative politeness, with its concern for territorial rights and freedoms, is of obvious significance in cultures that place a high value on individualism. Japanese culture, on the other hand, is one which places much more emphasis on 'social

relativism', "comprising concerns about belongingness, empathy, dependency, proper place occupancy and reciprocity" (Kasper 1990:195). In Japanese indirectness in performing speech acts, often a signal of negative politeness in Western cultures, is used instead to express empathy, the opposite of social distance. (Kasper 1990:200). What is called into question is the universality of negative politeness, and the possibility, therefore, that the model is itself culturally determined. If this is so, both the potential problems for cross-cultural communication between interactants from cultures with very different conceptions of politeness, and for the analysis of such communication problems, is easily imagined.

This constraint upon the concept does not apply to cultures that may be presumed to have more in common with each other, through sharing a common past and a common ethos (e.g. Western societies). Here the notion of a predominant 'politeness orientation' within a given culture, towards positive or negative politeness, may be of great value. Hickey (1991), for instance, has pointed out how Spanish has a positive politeness orientation, in which the maintenance of the positive face of both speakers and hearers (the need, that is, to be appreciated) is predominant. This can be seen in the ease with which compliments can be given and accepted, even by comparative strangers. The British, on the other hand, have an orientation towards negative politeness. Whereas the following,

- (6) Qué buena persona eres! (What a good person you are!)
 Qué puntual eres! (How punctual you are!)

are readily given and readily accepted complimenting expressions in Spanish, they are likely to cause embarrassment, or be taken as ironic or insincere when uttered in English (especially by English people), as has been corroborated recently by my own students. This general viewpoint concerning 'orientation' is endorsed by Leech (1983) himself, when he says that the positive version of his 'Politeness Principle' is "somewhat less important" (Leech 1983:81) than the negative. Investigation of the part that differing politeness orientations might play in cross-cultural miscommunication is well worth proper investigation.

The second query concerns the status of the D (social distance) variable in the Brown and Levinson face-threatening formula, which we may recall consists of two other variables, power (P) and the ranking (R), or weightiness, of imposition. Both P and D have played a prominent part in cross-cultural studies to date, but in practice many of the studies have conflated the two. Certainly it is difficult to see how the D factor operates, independently of the P variable, although in theory the two are independent. Social distance can, I think, for most operational purposes be subsumed under the power variable, in that awareness of status, and other manifestations of power, such as authority, is much more important in the calculation of speech act performances than awareness of social distance. This variable, in fact, boils down to the degree of familiarity between interactants, which in turn is measured (if it has been measured) by the regularity and/or frequency of contact. This is the chief reason for my doubt, expressed earlier, about Bonikowska's use of the variable, and her attempt to measure familiarity by means of a questionnaire.

The interworking of familiarity with and within the power relation present in all interaction is an area that needs careful investigation. It has already been noted that the D factor needs to be subdivided into familiarity and 'affect', the degree of friendliness between interlocutors (Kasper 1990:204; Slugoski 1985). In essence, familiarity does not by itself imply friendliness, or closeness. In the old proverb, it may breed contempt, indeed. Kasper (1990:204) reports how a recent study of politeness behaviour in Shakespeare's major tragedies (Brown and Gilman 1989) demonstrates that whilst power and weightiness (R) explain politeness behaviour, social distance does not. Brown and Gilman show that "more liking is expressed in greater politeness investment, less liking in reduced amounts of politeness." (Kasper 1990:204)

Support for the Brown and Gilman finding is provided by House's (1989) study of requests in German and English, and by German learners of English, in which her definition of 'standard situations' for requests draws heavily on the participants' awareness of the weightiness of imposition. If the significance of R as a variable in the calculation of speech act riskiness is indeed as important a variable as P, and much more significant than D, then research should focus more sharply than it has on this variable.

Further undermining of the D variable is supplied in Wolfson's finding of the 'bulge', whereby direct strategies are used between intimates and strangers, whilst between friends and acquaintances, those that might consider themselves as status-equals, employ the more elaborate and indirect strategies

Blum-Kulka and her associates in the CCSARP identified three broad types of strategy in speech act realizations across cultures, which she labelled as *direct* (e.g. by means of imperatives, or performative verbs), *conventionally indirect* (e.g. formulating a request in English with *Could you...?* or *Would you...?*) and thirdly *non-conventionally indirect* (see Blum-Kulka and Olshtain 1984; Blum-Kulka et al. 1989 for detailed explanations), the latter being performed as hints. This latter area is one that would repay further study, as a source of cross-cultural pragmatic miscommunication. Once more, there is both an illocutionary and a perlocutionary aspect involved. For the non-native speaker, there is the problem of knowing how and when to use a non-conventionally indirect strategy in order to perform a speech act, which in turn means knowing how to calculate the riskiness formula. This is a sociopragmatic problem. From the perlocutionary perspective, there is the problem of interpreting the hint in terms of what speech act is being realized. Research on requestive hints (Weizman 1989) shows that there is variation in the use of hints between languages (e.g. in a comparison of Canadian French, Israeli Hebrew and Australian English), she has done some very useful work on the substrategies employed by the three languages in making hints. The value of this work, and the need to extend it to other linguistic cultures, and in cross-cultural settings is clear, and particularly so for language teaching and learning purposes. Without such detailed information, the teaching of non-conventionally indirect strategies is very difficult: this is the area least open, by definition, to routines (such as those examined by Davies (1987) for Moroccan Arabic and compared with "politeness formulas" in English).

In conclusion, I wish to state that there is a need now for research in cross-cultural pragmatics to broaden its focus from the speech act to the speech event. It is, I think, significant that Brown and Levinson's 1987 book appears in a series entitled 'Studies in Interactional Sociolinguistics'. Their link between pragmatics and sociolinguistics is a welcome and a healthy one. Although there have been attempts to focus on hearers as well as speakers in interaction (see Edmondson et al. 1984 for instance, and the emphasis given to the Hearer-supportive maxim), there has been a tendency, imposed by the speech act orientation in research to date, to focus upon speakers and thus to undervalue how negotiable interaction is, and how contexts and relationships are developed in and through interaction. In this sense, Brown and Levinson's variables, although a useful template, run the danger of being too static and too all-inclusive to capture the fine-tuning which articulates naturally occurring interaction. To aid investigation, I would like to suggest that we have much to learn from the methodology developed by conversational analysts, such as Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson. One fruitful area for the investigation of cross-cultural communication, and its breakdowns, is the study of repair (see Schegloff, Jefferson and Sacks 1977, and Reynolds 1989).

In my study of a cross-cultural classroom, one area I examined was metapragmatic repair, and the way it was used by the teacher to both control discourse, and to establish meanings, in the doubly asymmetric classroom setting sketched earlier. The following examples demonstrate the use of one of the major strategies, that of *reformulation*, a strategy open to the power-holder in interaction, for mutually establishing meaning, largely on the power-holder's terms.

- (7) 1 Teacher: Sorry
 → What did you say just now?
 2 Student (overlapping with the teacher):
 () water
 dry out water
 3 Teacher: *Dry out*
 4 Student: Yes. No, I'm *not* saying enough water =
 5 Teacher: → = *Not* enough water. The *lack* of water you mean.
 The *lack* of surface water

Here, the teacher is attempting to understand what the student means, in order to evaluate it as a contribution to the lesson so far. In so doing, and in order to do so, he reformulates the student's meaning, by replacing the latter's words with his own (*I'm not saying enough water* → the lack of water).

- (8) 1 Teacher: so human trampling can destroy the grass.
 Yes.
 2 Student: thee lowering of the water table under thee
 (1.5 second pause)
 thee thi *use* of thee water table thee er the (XX)
 (1.9 second pause)

- this er, on the back dune. The raising of water table there reduces it, water table =
- 3 Teacher: = ah-ha
- 4 Student: so the grass will not grow
(1.5 second pause)
- 5 Teacher: → Why did you suddenly tell me that?
- 6 Student: Bicz then sir the handout
- 7 Teacher: → But what has that got to do with human trampling which we were talking about?

In this example, the teacher undertakes a more radical reshaping of the discourse, by questioning the propriety of the student's contribution at all (see the arrowed turns, 5 and 7). This is a serious metapragmatic questioning, and an exercise of the powerful right to direct the discourse, in terms of who shall say what and when. It cannot be overlooked, however, how the teacher's 'powerful' intervention is bound up with the difficulty he is experiencing in understanding the student (see his turn #3, in which it seems that he expresses his grasp of what the student is saying).

The study of repair in discourse, and more generally of the structure of talk into preferred and dispreferred sequences can quite easily be linked to the operation of face, as Brown and Levinson have themselves shown in their 1987 version of the politeness model (Brown and Levinson 1987:39-42). For example, the preference for self-correction in conversation over correction by a conversational partner can be seen as a face-saving device. As #7 and 8 demonstrate, the ongoing negotiation of discourse is readily evident in repair work, which itself is performed within a framework of roles and relationships where the power relation is a fundamental (and dynamic) factor.

What I have shown here are examples from classroom cross-cultural discourse, in which the P variable is obvious. Further study on how face and power co-operate in the classroom remains to be done. Another fruitful focus is to study the effect of different genres upon discourse behaviour. Again, we may expect that face will operate differently, for instance, in largely transactional discourse, such as that found in the classroom, where the transmission of information is given a high priority, and in more interactional genres such as conversation, where the establishment of relationships is more prominent. Finally, I would hope that, despite the difficulties of collecting adequate quantities of desired data when working with naturally occurring discourse data, the determination to do so will continue: this remains the most valid data for the study of cross-cultural communication and its pragmatic dimension. Here I would advocate the use of role-play situations in which inter-cultural participants were put under pragmatic pressure, in order to see what constituted such pressure, and how it was dealt with. An example would be to examine the effects of complimenting paid by a member from a positive politeness culture to someone from a negative politeness culture. The sort of work outlined by Hickey (1991) above, (cf. # 6), and involving for instance British Eng-

lish and Castilian interlocutors, deserves exploration. The role plays would be followed up by a triangulation phase, in which the participants would analyse their own interactions, and thus shed participant light upon the nature and the resolution of pragmatic difficulty.

Studies of cross-cultural communication and miscommunication is at an interesting stage, in which a uniting of two traditions is both possible and necessary, namely the rich qualitative insights of conversation analysis with the established theoretical (and quantitative) frameworks provided by the politeness and speech act theories. The study of cross-cultural pragmatics is complex. The prize for understanding it is to lessen the real damage that can be done through pragmatic misunderstanding.

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