Cross-cultural pragmatic failure

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This paper explores the study of failures in intercultural communication due to misunderstandings in the linguistic field of pragmatics. It focuses on three areas of pragmatics; compliments, refusals and complaints and examines how cultural misunderstandings can arise in these areas with examples from different communities. The paper emphasises that the study of pragmatics needs a stronger focus in the teaching and learning of languages in teaching materials, in classroom practice and especially in computer-mediated communication, particularly through social media. The researcher stresses that more research needs to take place into not only what pragmatic failures in communication occur and why they happen across cultures and language but also into how they can be repaired and mutual understanding restored.

KEYWORDS: *pragmatics, intercultural communication, computer-mediated communication, social media, second language acquisition*

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper presents an overview of the scholarly literature on the topic of cross-cultural pragmatic failure. The main body summarises very briefly the main topics, findings and methods used in these articles under three broad thematic headings. This is a common-sense grouping that has no theoretical significance but is simply intended to give structure to a field that is amorphous and very wide-ranging across many languages and cultures, and many different aspects of pragmatics. These three main headings were chosen simply by examining the titles of the articles collected on the main topic, and sorting them into what seemed to be three coherent areas of research.

The topics cover (a) the definition and categorisation of pragmatic failure, (b) the implications of cross-cultural pragmatic failure for second language acquisition, and (c) pragmatic failure in computer-mediated communication.

The conclusion provides a brief overview of the whole field and suggests a gap in the literature and an appropriate method for addressing this gap with new, empirical research.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

There is some debate about how cross-cultural pragmatic failure should be defined. This arises partly because the core theory of pragmatics itself

has evolved considerably since the early days of speech acts and Gricean maxims, and scholars are continually revising what they understand by explicit and implicit meanings, propositions and implicatures.

One approach that has proved popular in recent years is the study of mental processing using high-technology brain imaging equipment. Holtgraves (2012) reports on experiments using split-screen imaging that the right hemisphere of the brain plays a crucial role in conversation processing. This is somewhat surprising, since the left hemisphere is where most other language activity takes place. By measuring the time that a person takes to process conversation data, researchers can work out whether just one or both hemispheres are involved.

Most researchers do not have access to the equipment needed for this very scientific approach to pragmatics, and indeed do not have the anatomical or medical knowledge to make sense of data produced in this way. Nevertheless, psychologists, teachers and other professionals still very often use tests and experiments to investigate issues around pragmatic failure, and the data that comes out of this then forms the basis for further theoretical research. A pre-test, post-test and control group methodology was used on Vietnamese learners learning the English pragmatics of constructive criticism, for example,

concluding that explicit teaching with explicit corrective feedback was more effective than implicit methods (Nguyen et al., 2012). Similar results with Arab learners of English were obtained through the use of a multiple-choice test with native English and Arabic-influenced formulations, since students preferred the latter and benefited from having the potential failure of such formulations pointed out to them (Al-Zubeiry, 2013).

A test was carried out in France, for example, comparing the processing of conventional expressions in French by 20 French native speakers, 20 long-stay Anglophone speakers and 20 short-stay Anglophone speakers (Edmonds, 2014). This method allows the researcher to home in on processing time, and the meanings that are attached to these conventional expressions, as compared with grammatical, but not conventional strings. Another study by Bardovi-Harlig and Bastos (2011) used two computer-delivered tasks, one an aural recognition task and the other an oral production task, designed to elicit conventional expressions from learners of English. Student performance in these tasks was correlated with three variables: language proficiency (based on a placement test), length of stay (measured in months) and intensity of interaction with native speakers (measured by self-report of weekly use). Interestingly, length of stay *'did not have a significant effect on either recognition or*

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production' (Bardovi-Harlig & Bastos, 2011, p. 347) but the other two variables did have a significant influence on the production of conventional expressions.

The implication of this research for knowledge about cross-cultural pragmatic failure is that failure is more likely when learners have lower proficiency and less interaction with native speakers, and that sending people to live abroad for a long period is not, in itself, enough to prevent cross-cultural pragmatic failure. People have to gain language proficiency (through instruction, for example) and also have intensive interaction with native speakers, in order to prevent cross-cultural pragmatic failure. They only gain competence with conventional expressions when they used them frequently in natural conversations with native speakers.

Further work by Bardovi-Harlig (2012) explores the more theoretical side of these findings in an article on the importance of formulas, routines and conventional expressions in pragmatics research. She argues that a growing awareness of the use of formulas in conversation, coupled with an appreciation of the role played by different communities including native speaker, L2 speaker, indigenised and lingua franca communities, is leading to new investigations into questions of the particular and the universal in formula use, and the importance of community and community membership. Such research adds an interesting social and even political dimension to the whole issue of cross-cultural pragmatics, since it implies that what is considered pragmatic failure in one community might in fact be a much-cherished marker of belonging to a non-mainstream community that operates under different linguistic norms.

This shift of perspective towards studying English as a *lingua franca* suggests that the very notion of pragmatic failure may need to be re-defined to take account of increasing diversity in language use in the world today, and some much more heterogeneous methods of analysis and evaluation need to be developed also (Kaur, 2011; Maíz-Arévalo, 2014; Chen & Li, 2015). The concept of 'translocal pragmatics' (Verzella & Mara, 2015, p. 12) has been suggested as a useful starting point for examining this issue.

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on particular speech acts, which form the basis of empirical study, either through specially designed tests and experiments, or through analysis of naturally-occurring speech or using an in-depth interview method, followed up by transcription of the conversation and analysis of pragmatic failures in particular situations. The following paragraphs survey a few of these narrower studies under speech act headings, though these are examples only, since the literature on these speech acts is very large.

3. MATERIAL AND METHODS

3.1 Compliments

An interesting perspective on cross cultural pragmatic failure in compliments comes from articles which analyse second language speech from the point of view of interlanguage, which

contains some faults but is a necessary step on the way to fluency. Yu (2011) examined the way compliments were formulated in naturally-occurring contexts involving Taiwanese and American speakers. The native Chinese speakers and native English speakers used very different linguistic strategies and options, suggesting that socio-cultural strategies from the L1 were translated into L2 behaviour.

3.2 Refusals

Refusals are interesting because they are potentially face-threatening speech acts which can have quite serious impact upon social relationships, and because they are usually presented using various formulaic expressions conveying different grades of politeness. The potential for failure is usually quite large. Allami and Naeimi (2011) examined refusals in 30 Persian-speaking EFL learners in Iran and 37 American English native speakers and concluded that *'refusing in an L2 is a complex task as it requires the acquisition of the sociocultural values of the target culture'* (p. 385). The American excuses for the refusal were more concrete, for example, and there was a positive correlation between proficiency and pragmatic transfer. Similar results, also with Persian-speaking EFL students, were obtained by Hashemian (2012), who noted that English native speakers used more adjuncts than Persian native speakers using English. A similar study involving British and

Omani interlocutors found that there were differences in the directness of refusal, and that these were related to the social status of the speakers (Umale, 2011).

A study by Bella (2011) with native and non-native speakers of Greek learning in relation to refusing invitations found that non-native speakers *'displayed an underdeveloped pragmatic ability in relation to mitigation devices, such as lexical/ phrasal downgraders'* (p. 1718) and noted also that contextual factors such as the social and economic exclusion of some groups also affected pragmatic development. The importance of small talk and local conversational conventions was recognised in an interesting longitudinal study of immigrants to Australia, and explicit discussion of the features that the immigrants themselves noticed about Australian language use was the starting point for reflection and discussion (Yates & Major, 2015).

3.3 Complaints

A longitudinal study (Taguchi, 2011c) using case histories of Japanese college-level learners of English found that high-imposition speech acts were slower in developing than low-imposition speech acts, reflecting, no doubt, the greater importance placed on politeness strategies in Japanese society. Similar results are reported by Gallaher (2014) with reference to American English speakers, Russian speakers, and American English learners of Russian in relation to the expression of complaints.

Finally, an important methodological issue raised by Yu (2011) is the fact that Chinese native speakers were much less likely to compliment others. This point suggests that there might be some methodological difficulties in researching pragmatic failure across cultures, since tests, experiments and interviews that are based on textbooks, or designed to elicit compliments, or any other speech acts with cross-cultural dimensions, will not produce good data on the frequency of compliment, or other speech act occurrence. Researchers would have to examine large volumes of naturally-occurring data, extract instances where compliments might be a possible response, and then analyse whether or not compliments were offered, and how speakers formulate their compliment (or non-compliment) utterances. This would be a very laborious and time-consuming exercise, but fortunately some researchers are able to use large databases of naturally-occurring cross-linguistic conversations.

These studies are very interesting as explorations of the most likely areas, topics and speech acts where pragmatic failure might arise, but they all have the disadvantage of dealing with just one language/culture pair at a time. This makes it difficult for researchers to gain an overview of the underlying theory behind pragmatic failure in cross-cultural communication. Much of this

research has been conducted in educational settings, using quantitative, test-based methods to identify where pragmatic failures occur, and interviews with conversation analysis to explore these instances in more depth. Some concern has been expressed about the dependability of test-based research, due to the practical limitations of the research activities involved (Brown & Ahn, 2011, p. 198).

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 Implications for second language teaching and learning

It is often argued that pragmatics tends to be overlooked in language teaching, and yet a proper study of what pragmatics is in terms of context and meeting truth conditions and an understanding of potential ambiguity are very important in helping students to avoid cross-cultural communication problems (Li, 2012). Traditionally, students and teachers tend to focus on grammatical awareness, and this means that general awareness of pragmatic violations (another word for pragmatic failures) is not very high. Bardovi-Harlig (2013) suggests that teachers need to design and evaluate specific tasks which simulate conversations to enable second language learners to develop pragmatic competence, to measure pragmatic development, to manage the interface between grammar, lexicon and pragmatics, and to consider the effect of the environment on pragmatic development. Taguchi (2011a; 2011b) agrees with

this assessment and notes that there is an increased awareness of cross-cultural issues because of post-structuralism and multiculturalism in many societies, and research is finally beginning to address the needs of students and teachers for classroom resources and strategies for explicit and incidental pragmatics learning. Alternatively, Ifantidou (2011) suggests that genre-specific exercises should be used to help students gain pragmatic competence in pragmatically inferred effects, and suggests the use of different text-types exemplifying irony, humour, contempt, respect favouring or incriminating attitudes.

Not everyone agrees with these proposals for additional teaching materials, however. Rose (2012) suggests that pragmatics teaching should be integrated with grammar teaching, and so there is no need for additional elements for pragmatics in language teaching. Moody (2014), for example, describes a method which avoids direct instructions on pragmatic successes and failures, and advocates instead the use of a corpus of authentic examples which learners of Japanese should study, so that understanding emerges as they develop more nuanced understandings and modify their knowledge base.

Yet another approach is proposed by Li (2012) who compared three different methods of teaching the pragmatics of making requests to Chinese students of English, namely input followed by

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meaningful output activities, implicit teaching through visual enhancement of the input and the provision of explicit metapragmatic information. Only the input/output approach produced durable effects, while the visual enhancement produced temporary effects and the explicit activities can sometimes hinder development.

There seems, then, to be no consensus on how teachers and learners should proceed if they wish to remedy the lack of pragmatics awareness in language teaching and prevent cross-cultural pragmatic failure. Several researchers who report on their professional teaching experience are beginning to investigate the potential for better coverage of cross-cultural pragmatics in language teaching. Nguyen (2011) examined some recently published English language textbooks designed for use in Vietnam, and reports on a lack of contextual

information to accompany dialogues spoken by native speakers of English. It seems that this is a potential source of cross-cultural pragmatic failure. The reason for this appears to lie in a narrow native-speaker-centric view of language, which does not take account of the role that English currently plays as a global language, spoken by many people as a second language. The implication here is that cross-cultural pragmatics can and should be taught through properly situated and authentic learning materials that are set in, and ideally produced by, people who live in peripheral regions outside the dominant, native-English-speaking countries.

A four-step pedagogical model for the teaching of pragmatics with online activities that can be used in the classroom is suggested by Félix-Brasdefer and Cohen (2012) as a way of addressing the lack of pragmatics coverage in language teaching. We must conclude that the analysis of textbooks and other learning materials is a fruitful area for research, and it has produced some interesting suggestions on how to prevent pragmatic failure through improved second language teaching methods. Furthermore, teachers are beginning to focus on the skills needed by hearers, and not just by speakers, when pragmatic failure occurs in cross cultural situations (Cruz, 2013, p. 23), and on the different opportunities that are offered for learning pragmatic competence abroad, in class and online (Taguchi, 2015, p. 3).

4.2 Cross-cultural pragmatic failure in computer-mediated communication

Finally, as computer-mediated communication extends its reach across the globe, it is perhaps understandable that researchers have started to explore the problem of cross-cultural pragmatic failure in various digital genres (Baumer & Van Rensburg, 2011). Eisenchlas (2011) suggests that students should use online sources to supplement their formal language learning, because speech acts such as advice giving, for example, are plentiful there and very good examples for students to follow. A recent study into pragmatic failure in Greek-Cypriot student email requests to English language faculty members identified five problematic features: *'Significant directness (particularly in relation to requests for information), an absence of lexical/phrasal downgraders, an omission of greetings and closings and inappropriate or unacceptable forms of address'* (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011, p. 3193). Similar results were found in a study of the pragmatics of opening and closing sections in native English-speaking and non-native English-speaking students' emails in an American university context (Elsami, 2013, p. 71).

Some preliminary work has been done on social media and pragmatics, and this serves as a basis for theory and the selection of suitable methods (Chun, 2011). Recent relevant topics include work on multiliteracy in computer mediated communication (Blattner & Fiori, 2011), and on the epistemic injustices such as negative stereotyping that can occur as a result of pragmatic failure in cross-cultural conversations in many different contexts (Cruz, 2014).

5. CONCLUSION

After this survey was completed, it became apparent that much of the focus in the research on this area was on defining what pragmatic failure is; how, when and why it occurs; and what the implications are for second language students and teachers. One study on cross-cultural issues in court interpreting suggests that *'interpreters are almost always unsure how to react and of what is expected of them'* (Hale, 2014, p. 321).

The very recent material on email and internet conversations reviewed in the previous section is interesting because it opens up a new field of research on a global, and yet easily accessible scale. It uses authentic data which is available in written form in vast quantities, thus solving some methodological difficulties in obtaining live conversations, and in some formats, such as message boards and blog posts, it also shows how people deal with the consequences of pragmatic failure. Very little of the literature surveyed above deals with recovery from pragmatic failure, and how people in authentic settings resolve the difficulties that it can produce in cross-cultural conversations.

This insight suggests that there is a gap in the existing literature on strategies for recovery from cross-cultural pragmatic failure. This would be a good topic for further research, particularly using message boards and/or blog posts on Facebook or some other social media platform. Failures could be identified, and then responses (if any) examined to see how often a recovery is attempted, or achieved, and how exactly this is done, for example involving the person who initiated the failure, the addressee(s), or some other member of the on-line community who acts as mediator, perhaps using correction or apology formulations. This topic takes in the dimension of community in English language usage, and fits well with current research trends on pragmatics across sub-cultures who all speak English but have differing proficiency levels, attitudes and culturally-specific usage. It would provide new data, and indeed the findings could be used as design criteria which could remedy some of the failings in conventional English language teaching methods and materials. Such a study would have to define some firm exclusionary parameters, however, because the literature on cross-cultural pragmatic failure is expanding all the time, and it would be impossible to cover all speech acts, all language pairs, and even all internet-based media. A focus should shift to a clearly defined social media site, with a short time parameter (for example posts on one blog or forum for a year, or posts on several blogs in a week, or posts on one or more Facebook accounts over a defined period).

Suitable contextual information would also have to be researched, such as the values of the online community, its history, and the age, gender, and location of its members, as far as these details can be determined, since these are important factors in judging whether pragmatic failure has occurred or not, according to the rules of the community, as well as according to the norms of Standard English or any other external rules. The method that would be best suited to this study is a mix of quantitative and qualitative analysis, recording frequencies and strategies, and analysing the contextual factors that may have contributed to the failures, and to any attempts to repair them.

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