Social Expressions of Chinese University Students: Pragmatic Failures and Cultural Differences

Wang Ningfang[1*], Caesar Dealwis[2] and John Francis Anak Noyan[3]

[1] *Foreign Language Teaching Department, Ningxia Medical University, China*
[1,2,3] *Academy of Language Study, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia*

[1] *wangnf@nxmu.edu.cn;* [2] *caesardealwis@gmail.com;* [3]*jnoyan10467@gmail.com*

*Corresponding Author

ABSTRACT

Social language plays an increasingly important role in intercultural communication but the inaccurate use of social expressions will cause misunderstandings between the interlocutors that can lead to serious communicative conflicts and breakdowns. This paper examines the differences in the use of social expressions like greeting, parting, response to compliments, response to refusal and taking leave between Chinese and English languages, besides analysing the causes of these differences from the perspective of social values and criteria of politeness principles between Western countries and China. Drawing upon Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory and Austin's Speech Act theory, the study investigates the social expressions in various speech acts performed by 150 Chinese undergraduates when coming into contact with English speaking foreigners in Ningxia Medical University through a closed-ended survey. Findings reveal that there are pragmatic failures in the various social expressions of speech acts and the reasons are largely due to cultural differences.

INTRODUCTION

As an international language, English language is the official or second language in many countries, and hence plays a crucial role in intercultural communication among different countries and regions. Intercultural communication occurs between native speakers and non-native speakers, people from different regions have different ethical standards and pragmatic rules which influence the intercultural communication. Thus, in intercultural communication, in order to achieve a successful effect, the interlocutors should have the awareness of expressing and understanding each other's cultural background. Social language is increasingly important in intercultural communication, but the inaccurate use of social expressions will cause misunderstandings between the interlocutors which may lead to serious communicative conflicts and breakdowns.

To be a successful intercultural communicator, one should have a thoughtful understanding of the culture differences and pragmatic principles between the two languages. Sensitivity to cultural differences on social expressions is essential for university students to improve their intercultural communication. Stern (1983) pointed that language learning and teaching should always be considered in a particular context, setting or certain background. He believed that language teaching could be regarded as a series of activities in society. In China, most universities offer College English Course as a compulsory course to cultivate students with international perspective and intercultural communicative competence. However, according to Cai (2021) pragmatic failures are common among university students in their intercultural communication. Some students, including some postgraduates who have been learning English for many years, and passed CET (College English Test) with either Band 4 or 6 have often experienced communication breakdowns. Although Chinese students could express themselves using correct English grammatically, they would still be considered as being rude by native speakers of English, especially those from Western countries. This paper examines the pragmatic failures of social expressions among Chinese university students and analyses the cause of those pragmatic failures. The findings can help them better understand Western culture, reduce intercultural conflicts, and achieve the goal of successful intercultural communication.

THEORETICAL SUPPORT FOR THE STUDY

Pragmatic Failure

Pragmatic failure is the "inability to understand what is meant by what is said (Thomas, 1983，p.91)". It can be classified as pragmatic linguistic failure and social pragmatic failure. Riley (1989) defines pragmatic failure as the result of communication breakdowns between two different cultures. Pragmatic failure of social expressions may lead to misunderstandings between the interlocutors who are from different cultural backgrounds. The correct application of politeness expressions can create a harmonious communicative atmosphere, which is very important in intercultural communication. Pragmatic linguistic failure is easier to acquire for people's understanding and forgiveness rather than social pragmatic failure. This is because the native hearers of English prefer to consider the mistakes as language and knowledge deficiency of the speakers (Zhang, 2000). However, due to reasons related to different cultural backgrounds of the English language speaking countries on social values, morality, and personal privacy., social pragmatic failure is harder to accept and is not likely to be tolerated (Wang,1990). In other words, pragmatic failures occur when individuals' pragmatic behaviour and expressions are against native speakers' habits and the use of sentences are inappropriate, even if the sentence structures are grammatically correct.

Politeness Principle

In social communication, politeness is a pragmatic phenomenon (Leech 1983; Brown & Levinson, 1987; and Grundy, 2000). Brown and Levinson (1987) explained that politeness is a kind of rational guidance to satisfy a person's positive and negative face. In China, the equivalent of politeness "Limao" can be traced back to the notion of "Li", which originally refers to the various rules or practices employed in ancient sacrificial rites. However, the modern concept of politeness is different from the ancient notion. On the basis of western theoretic study, the pragmatic research of politeness began and developed from 1980s. Politeness can be understood as the social phenomenon, the standard of social communication, and the means to achieve good interpersonal relationships (He, 1995). Therefore, politeness is essentially both the phenomenon and the criterion.

Leech (1983) adopts the framework initially set out by Grice. However, Leech argues that Grice's framework itself cannot explain why people so often convey their meaning indirectly or fail to adhere to the comparative principle. In Leech's Principles of Pragmatics, he pointed out that politeness principle serves to offset the deficiency of cooperative principle. Leech proposed six criteria for politeness principle as follows: tact, generosity, approbation, modesty, agreement and sympathy.

Goffman (1967) put forward the influential theory of face. According to Goffman, "Face" refers to the positive social evaluation that a person effectively seeks for himself or herself and that others also believe he or she deserves such positive evaluation in a given social interaction. In daily interaction, all the individuals involved are striving for the idealized "self-image" that is "Face", and individuals would adjust their behaviour accordingly by observing whether the "Face" they want is achieved in the interaction with others. Brown and Levinson (1987) elaborated on their politeness theory: Face-Saving Theory. The theory actually includes three basic concepts: face, face threatening acts (FTA) and politeness strategy. The "face" here refers to "public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself" and "something that is emotionally invested, and that can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction" (Brown and Levinson, 1987, p.189). The individual's desire to be approved of by others is termed positive face, while the desire to be unimpeded by others in one's action is termed negative face. Brown and Levinson (1987, p.62) pointed out that "certain kinds of acts intrinsically threaten face, namely those acts that by their nature run contrary to the face wants of the addressee and/or of the speaker", which are called "Face Threatening Acts" (FTA). According to Brown and Levinson, when the speaker notices the act will threaten the face of others, he needs to analyse to what extent the face of others would be threatened by this act. The speaker must take power and distance between the two parties into consideration. On this basis, the speaker can decide to use which politeness strategy or means. Hu (1944), a Chinese sociologist, was the first person to define "Face" and introduced this notion into social science. She believed that "Face" means social prestige. It is a manifestation of an individual's social status improvement and is naturally acquired with success and praise. She emphasized that "Face" also needs individual's subjective efforts and persistent management to maintain it.

METHODOLOGY

In order to investigate the extent of the pragmatic failure of social expressions among Chinese university students, this paper examines the differences in the use of social expressions like greetings, partings, response to compliments, response to refusal and taking leave between Chinese and English languages, and analyses the causes of these differences from the perspective of social values, criteria of politeness principles between Western countries and China. Drawing upon Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory, this study was conducted in Ningxia Medical University. It is a unique medical high learning institution in Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, China. A total of 150 second year university students were selected randomly as the respondents of the study. These students have studied English as a foreign language for at least 9 years in high school and completed one year College English study. They have acquired basic grammatical knowledge of the English language, with some of them having attained Band Four in Certification of CET (College English Test). Therefore, the results of the sets of questionnaires distributed objectively reflected the accurate intercultural competence of Chinese students in Ningxia Medical University. The questionnaires were distributed to examine their pragmatic failures of social expressions.

The questionnaires were designed from the dimensions of students' personal background information, English language experience, self-evaluation of pragmatic competence, and a series of situational questions on social expressions in speech acts. The social expressions were performed as a series of situational questions in various speech acts like greeting, parting, response to compliments, response to apology and refusal. The questionnaires were distributed and collected by Wenjuanxian, an online data collection platform which was widely utilized in China. The collected data was carefully observed from the aspect of cultural differences to investigate the reasons which lead to pragmatic failure among university students in China in the five speech acts with students from the West.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings not only show pragmatic failures of social expressions among Chinese university students, but also reveal the causes of those pragmatic

failures. Although, 41% of the respondents have passed CET with Band 4, and most of them have learned English language for more than 9 years, the initial findings revealed that the pragmatic failures occur when Chinese students come into language contact with foreigners. These failures are related to politeness norms which seem to differ due to lack of understanding of Western culture. When dealing with native English-speaking foreigners, unintended conflicts occur leading to misunderstandings which affect the politeness behaviours of these Chinese students. The lack of understanding in their respective cultures when performing the various speech acts has caused pragmatic failures in social communication. The findings clearly revealed that pragmatic failures of social expressions are still common among students in Ningxia Medical University. There is no necessary correlation between students' pragmatic competence and their English learning experience and language competence. The main cause of social pragmatic failure lies in the cultural differences between speakers of English from Western countries and China. Negative transfer of native culture in intercultural communication is further discussed in the context of pragmatic differences related to   speech acts such as greetings, partings, compliments, apology, response to refusal and taking leave.

Pragmatic Difference on Greeting

Greetings is the starting of verbal communication, thus, an appropriate greeting is the promise of harmonious communication. According to Tang (2018), pragmatic differences between English and Chinese greeting expressions implicate certain pragmatic conditions. Misunderstanding would occur if the interlocutors negatively transferred native language in intercultural communication. Taking addressing as example, the pragmatic condition of this kind of greeting is in informal occasions or between acquaintances in China. Addressing could be used as greeting expressions among the Chinese where people would greet their friends by addressing their surname "Lao Li", "Xiao Wang" with smiling or waving. However, if Chinese students transferred it in their intercultural communication, people from Western counties may expect more information after their addressing that may lead to pragmatic failure. Another pragmatic failure that Chinese students are likely to make is that they would greet their teachers like, "Good morning, Teacher Li". This is acceptable to their Chinese teachers, because in China, 'Teacher' is a

respectful term of addressing. As presented in the results of the questionnaires, 40% of the respondents prefer to greet their foreign teacher, "Good morning, Teacher John" or "Good morning, Teacher." There is an old Chinese proverb, he who teaches me for a day is my father for a life. However, it would be considered as an offence to people from the Western countries since the term 'Teacher' is considered a kind of career and is not a proper form of addressing someone. Apart from that, Chinese people will greet others by asking questions like, "Where are you going?", "Have you eaten?", . From the analysed questionnaires, 33% of the respondents chose "Where are you going?", and 51% of them chose either "Have you eaten?" or "What have you eaten for dinner?" when greeting their foreign friends. This is by no means of detecting other's privacy. On the contrary, in Chinese culture, food is regarded as one of the basic needs, so people greet one another as such to show their concerns. But it will be impolite to greet people from the Western countries similarly, or else they may be misunderstood or that the Chinese may be inviting them for dinner. These pragmatic failure of politeness expressions of the greeting speech act is mainly caused by negative transfer of the Chinese native culture to foreign language.

Pragmatic Difference on Parting

As a signal to end the communication, parting is very important in politeness expressions. The pragmatic differences of parting in the English and Chinese languages are quite different. Some politeness expressions of parting in Chinese cannot be applied in the English language. The pragmatic failure would occur if students negatively transferred the Chinese speech act of taking leave or parting to foreigners in their intercultural communication. The following examples show this clearly. In China, when the hosts see the guests off, they would use the expressions in Chinese such as, "Be careful on your way home!", "Walk slowly!". That is the choice of 43% of the respondents in the questionnaires analysed. The hosts applied that kind of politeness expression to show that they are concerned about their guests' safety. Using such expressions would mark the act of taking leave and the ending of their social interaction. On the contrary, it would be misunderstood as socially inappropriate when the guests do not have such awareness of the Chinese form of leave taking. Besides, in Western cultures, the care for the other party's health can be used as the content of intending to leave, not as a parting expression. It should be noticed that Chinese politeness expressions of parting can be in terms of notification, explanation,

or apology in informal occasion or between acquaintances. "I'm leaving.", "Since, you are busy, I wouldn't disturb anymore.", "I'm sorry to disturb you.". People from Western countries will consider these as trespassing information instead of parting expression. According to Huang (2021), this is because Chinese people like to express their demands in a euphemistic way, while people from the Western countries seem to do so more directly.

Pragmatic Difference on Response of Compliments

When it comes to response for compliments, the Chinese people believe that the modest receive benefit, while the conceited reap failure. While, Western people believe that generously accept praise from others is a kind of politeness, affirm people's affirmation can avoid awkward situations in communication. This is quite the opposite from the Chinese habit of self-denying when receiving a compliment. In intercultural communication, Chinese university students usually disparage themselves and respect others. When praised or congratulated by others, they prefer to use expressions like, "No, not at all." or "You are flattering me" to show their modesty. According to Gu's politeness principle, devaluing oneself and respecting others is a good reflection of this point, which requires people to minimize their praise and devalue themselves to highlight others in the process of communication. For example, Chinese university students tend to respond to compliments praising their clothes with replies such as, "It's very common and very cheap." A total of 26% of the respondents chose this response. Relating to one's feeling of gratitude for being complimented, the Chinese respondents chose, "No, it's nothing", "It's my duty." According to the Chinese culture, people are required to minimize their own praise, belittle themselves and highlight others in the communication process (Gu, 1992). On the contrary, such expressions may lead to pragmatic failures, that may make people from the Western counties feel the interlocutors disagree with their views or their compliments, thus causing a communication breakdown.

Pragmatic Difference on Response of Apology

The apology speech act is the public admission of something that should have been done by the speaker. The function of apology is to remedy the fault, resume the dialogue, or establish rapport between two interlocutors. It is necessary to know when to apologize and how to respond to apology.

When performing such act, sincerity is a prerequisite for apology. Language used in the apology speech act is also conventional. The person who apologises also hopes that the offended party can express tolerance and forgiveness with replies such as "That's all right." That is the entire process of the apology speech act as practiced by the Chinese people in China. Furthermore, people knowing the Chinese culture would say "mei guan xi" as the response to apology, which is literally translated as "It doesn't matter." in English. The confusion may be caused by the negative transfer of Chinese culture of responding to apology, which cannot be seen as acceptable in the Western culture. People from western culture usually use "That's all right", "That's OK" or "No problem" to respond an apology speech act. The expressions might be almost similar but the Chinese feel that they are more obliged to respond as such so as not to prolong the awkward situation.

Pragmatic Difference on refusal

Rejection is a common phenomenon in daily life. It is common to refuse invitations, orders, suggestions, criticisms, requests and so on. Since refutation denies the expectation or behaviour of the other party, it requires both parties to have a high level of pragmatic competence. Lu (2014) pointed that face is conceptualized on the basis of relationship, that is, face is based on human emotion. Taking into account the face of others can play a role in promoting interpersonal harmony in China [4]. Influenced by the concept of face, the Chinese people tend to express their thoughts and feelings implicitly and conservatively, and are not predisposed to speaking directly and clearly. When invited to dinner, most Chinese people prefer to explain the reason why could not accept the invitation first, rather than an immediate direct refusal. From the analysed sets of questionnaires, only 8% of the respondents would choose to refuse directly while the majority of them prefer to come up with an excuse. That is taking into consideration not to make the person who invited lose face. On the other hand, in intercultural communication, not applying the politeness principle as correctly understood, may also cause pragmatic failure. For example, when a Chinese asks a foreigner "Don't you like this movie?" People from Western countries often respond with "No, I don't like it," But in fact, some Chinese university students may subject themselves to pragmatic failure when responding with the answer "Yes, I don't like it", when actually they meant, "No, I don't like the movie". The reason for such pragmatic failure can be revealed by Gu (1992)'s agreement maxim, one of five maxims of politeness

Principle. It refers to the willingness to reach an agreement in daily communication while respecting the other person's ideas. This is caused by the lack of knowledge among the Chinese on how to respond to Yes and No questions by foreigners.

CONCLUSION

This study provides concrete examples of how pragmatic failures occur among university students in their use of social expressions for intercultural communication. From the study, it is obvious that pragmatic failures among Chinese students who came into language contact with foreigners is caused by differences between Chinese and Western cultures. In cross-cultural communication, both sides of the cultural divide adhere to the cognitive pattern formed by the influence of their own culture. The way of thinking and the code of conduct which results in misunderstanding, adversely affects communication between Chinese students and their western counterparts, even to the extent of causing uneasiness and dislike on the part of non Chinese speakers of English. Second, the lack of contextual consideration leads to pragmatic failures. The complexity and charm of language lies in the changeability of language. The same sentence often has different meanings in different contexts. It is of no practical significance to talk about language without context. In intercultural communication, it is difficult for both sides of the communication divide to fully integrate the use and understanding of meaning into the context because very few university students have the opportunity to learn in the actual foreign language environment. Expression of the target language is often very mechanical and stiff, and it is difficult to use the language flexibly according to the combined context. Third, pragmatic failure is caused by the lack of cultural knowledge and cultural identity. Intercultural communication usually has a strong purpose, in order to carry out the communication smoothly, both parties in the communication divide should acquire each other's cultural-linguistic knowledge and use of common sense. If the content is unknown, it is difficult to carry on the communication smoothly. The results and findings suggest that any English language teaching model should incorporate intercultural communication skills and intercultural awareness to avoid intercultural conflicts.

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