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## **Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Failure and Language Teaching**

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### **Abstract**

Cross-cultural pragmatic failure occurs when interlocutors from different speech communities have communication difficulties. The purpose of this paper is to identify three factors causing cross-cultural pragmatic failure based on previous research. The factors identified were: pragmatic transfer, different realizations of speech acts cross-culturally, and inadequate pragmatic knowledge. It is my hope that through understanding these factors and by both raising pragmatic awareness and through the teaching of pragmatic routines in the L2 classroom, language teachers in Japan can potentially assist their students in avoiding cross-cultural pragmatic failure.

### 異文化間コミュニケーションの問題点と語学教育

異なる文化背景をもつ人々がコミュニケーションに困難を感じるとき、社会語用論の観点からの疎外要因が働いていると考えられる。本論の目的は、コミュニケーションを疎外する要因を考察するものである。その要因として、**1) pragmatic transfer**, **2) 異文化間における speech acts の違い**, **3) pragmatic knowledge の不足**、の**4**点を取り上げる。**L2** クラスにこのような社会語用論の知識を与えてコミュニケーションを疎外する要因を理解させることによって、日本の語学教師は異文化間におけるコミュニケーションの失敗を回避させることができると思うわれる。

## **Overview**

Pragmatic failure is the inability to understand the meaning of an utterance. (Thomas, 1983). This occurs when two speakers of the same speech community misunderstand one another. Cross-cultural pragmatic failure, on the other hand, involves pragmatic failure between interlocutors from different native speech communities. An example would be an American speaking Japanese who interprets the answer “that will be a little difficult” to his or her request as a potential acceptance, while in fact the Japanese speaker is giving a refusal. The current paper will identify three factors causing cross-cultural pragmatic failure and discuss their resulting implications to language teaching in Japan. Previous studies (e.g. Takahashi 1996, Takahashi & Beebe, 1987, Takahashi & Beebe, 1993) have emphasized the effect of L1 pragmatic transfer leading to cross-cultural pragmatic failure. The current paper will suggest that we need to look beyond solely pragmatic transfer as a potential cause of pragmatic failure. The factors to be discussed are: pragmatic transfer, different realizations of speech acts cross-culturally, and a lack of complete and adequate pragmatic knowledge.

## **Pragmatic Transfer**

Pragmatic transfer involves utilizing the sociolinguistic rules of speaking in one’s native speech community when interacting within the host speech community (Wolfson, 1989). Sociolinguistic rules of speaking are the norms and values that inform what is appropriate to say to whom and under what conditions (Wolfson, 1989). Wolfson termed these sociolinguistic rules the “social rules of speaking”, which can vary greatly cross-culturally.

Beebe and Takahashi (1989) conducted a comparative study of the face-threatening speech acts of expressing disagreement and the conveying of embarrassing information by Japanese speakers of English and native American English speakers. The authors used a Discourse Completion Test (DCT) to elicit their data. A DCT is a written role play where the participant is asked to respond as he or she would in a spoken conversation. The researcher is attempting to elicit how his/her participants might respond to certain speech acts such as: apology, refusal, expressing disagreement, or the giving of embarrassing information. Beebe et al. (1989) collected data from four groups of participants: (1) Japanese speaking Japanese in Japan; (2) Japanese learners of English in Japan; (3) Japanese speakers of English in the United States; (4) American native English speakers. Differences in the responses of the four groups were

found related to status. For example, most of the Japanese ESL students that played the part of the corporate executive were apt to openly criticize the proposal. Because status is conceptually different in American society, mitigation is often utilized prior to expressing a criticism. For example, "I can see you put a lot of work into this proposal, but I have a few suggestions." Mitigation is important in the United States because Americans assume that closeness and hierarchy are mutually exclusive (Tannen, 1994). For American English speakers, expressing disagreement without mitigation could be interpreted as rude.

The conveying of embarrassing information was also realized differently between the Japanese and American participants. For example, in a situation where the participants took the role of student, the student had to tell a male professor that he had mustard on his cheek. The Japanese participants tended to use a hinting strategy, to lead the professor to self discovery, which is very common in Japanese. For example, a participant said: "Professor, where did you eat your lunch? You must have gone to Callahan's. I like their hot dogs, too. Most Americans would be puzzled by such an off record hint (with no direct mention that something was amiss); some Americans, for example, directly used the word 'mustard,' while others were more indirect, but still said the professor had 'something' on his cheek.

Potential L1 transfer was also found in a study done by Cohen and Olshtain (1981). The researchers investigated the realization of the speech act of apology between native Hebrew and English speakers. Data was collected from the results of 12 native English speakers, and 32 native Hebrew speakers (12 in Hebrew to serve as baseline data and 20 to give nonnative English responses). The researchers gave their participants eight situations to which they were asked to respond. Like Beebe et al. (1989), they conducted a comparative speech act study. However, unlike Beebe et al. (1989), Cohen et al. (1981) tape recorded their subject's responses. This increases the likelihood for what Labov (1972) terms the vernacular to emerge. While significant differences between the two groups were not found, there was some evidence that suggested transfer. The nonnative speakers tended to use explicit apologies, acknowledgements of responsibility, and intensifications of the apology less frequently than their native speaking counterparts. The fact that the researchers were able to gather evidence that suggests transfer utilizing a tape recorder, versus written responses, further suggests this might occur in actual situations. Clearly, deviating from what is considered the norm in a given culture could lead to a communication breakdown. Both of these studies show the potential for pragmatic transfer to lead to a

breakdown in communication.

Takahashi (1996) examined whether or not the transfer of Japanese request strategies was influenced by proficiency level and the perceived degree of imposition involved in a request. Takahashi and Beebe (1987) found that advanced learners are more likely to transfer complex pragmatic strategies from their L1 due to a high degree of linguistic proficiency. They termed this “the rope to hang yourself with.” This differs from Takahashi (1996) who did not find a significant overall proficiency effect operative in the learners’ transferability perception of English request strategies. She did find that the strategies *would you please* and *would you* were most transferable due to their conventionality in Japanese. She did not find a significant proficiency effect regarding the transferability of the *would you please* and *would you* strategies; however, she did find that lower proficiency learners tended to transfer the *want* strategy more. In addition, she did find that the Japanese strategies had a higher degree of transferability in high imposition situations than low ones. Nevertheless, she suggested that a learner’s lack of familiarity with an English context may be a more crucial factor influencing pragmatic transfer than their proficiency. Therefore, according to Takahashi, a low proficiency learner has the same chance of mastering requesting strategies as a more proficient learner. According to the author, situational knowledge, coupled with being able to linguistically style shift based on their interlocutor’s status and the extent of imposition are both extremely important for EFL learners. Her participants who did not possess sufficient contextual knowledge tended to fall back on L1 request strategies.

The previously discussed studies illustrate ways in which pragmatic transfer can cause communication difficulties to occur. In addition to meaning differences between pragmatic strategies, there is also cross-linguistic variation in the illocutionary force of those utterances which non-native speakers are often not conscious of. This, too, can contribute to breakdowns in communication which can ultimately lead to cross-cultural pragmatic failure. The next section will illustrate that in addition to pragmatic transfer, inadequate pragmatic knowledge can also be a factor potentially leading to cross-cultural pragmatic failure.

### **Inadequate Pragmatic Knowledge**

Lack of complete and appropriate knowledge of the social rules of speaking (pragmatic knowledge) may also lead to cross-cultural pragmatic failure. In recent years, efforts

have been made to raise pragmatic awareness in the EFL classroom; however, acquiring these pragmatic norms is a difficult task.

Moreover, because the typological distance between Japanese and English is large, this further complicates the task. Residence abroad alone does not guarantee successful pragmatic acquisition. Hansen, Kasper, Kondo, Matsumura, Tanaka, & Yamashita (2003) have found that without planned support to maximize pragmatic development, learners do not fully reap the benefits of the experience. In other words, interlanguage (second language) pragmatic knowledge is not automatically acquired even when living in the target speech community.

Lack of knowledge of the social rules of speaking is evident in a study by Takahashi and Beebe (1993). The authors used DCTs to elicit responses between status unequals in the speech act of correction. In one hypothetical situation, the professor cites a wrong date in his or her lecture, and the participant is asked to take the role of the student. The difference between the Japanese and American responses lays in the frequency of softeners used and the semantic formulas. Native American English speakers are more likely to mitigate while their Japanese counterparts utilized short formulaic responses. Especially in this type of face-threatening situation, it is essential to incorporate target language social rules of speaking. Using short formulaic responses in lieu of mitigation such as, "I seem to recall a different date, but I could be wrong" could lead to a communication breakdown and ultimately be deemed offensive.

*Learning to Bow* (1992) is an autobiographical account of an American who taught English in a Japanese junior high school. Feiler (1992) had previous Japanese language study before going to Japan. In an attempt to mimic Japanese humility, at the start of his introductory speech, he asked his colleagues to speak English with him due to his poor Japanese ability. What followed was the audience erupting into laughter, and Feiler feeling utterly confused. Based on some broad stereotypes about Japanese culture, he was attempting to mimic Japanese humility. Hansen et al. (2003) have discussed the need to urge students not to see the target language community as "exotic" or "different", and thus let go of commonly held stereotypes about the target language speech community. In the past, pragmatic instruction did not play a significant role in second and foreign language classrooms. Fortunately, the field of second language teaching has made much progress and instruction of the social rules of speaking is gradually helping to expunge commonly held stereotypes such as the ones previously mentioned.

## **Different Realizations of Speech Acts Cross Culturally**

Speech acts are realized differently cross-culturally. Japanese speakers tend to give very vague excuses when refusing invitations. An example is, "I'm sorry, but I am busy." American English speakers, on the other hand, tend to give very concrete excuses. An example is, "I'd love to go, but I have to attend a wedding on that day." These are just a couple of common examples that illustrate that speech acts are often realized quite differently cross-culturally.

Olshtain (1989) found that speakers did not apologize the same cross-culturally. She investigated apology strategies in: Hebrew, Australian English, Canadian French, and German. One of the most startling differences between the Hebrew and American speakers was that Hebrew speakers did not give a promise of forbearance (for example, "I won't let it happen again). In English, a promise of forbearance is both common and expected in some apology situations. It is difficult for a second language learner to conceptualize the notion that not only do they have to learn the lexical items and syntactic structure of a speech act, but the whole conceptualization of what that speech act is may differ between the two languages.

Another example (Thomas, 1995) illustrates differences in the degree of directness of speech acts. An American who was visiting Israel was offered a drink by a friend. Her reply was, "Well, I've been on whisky all day" (p. 121). The American woman was attempting to indicate that she would prefer to keep drinking whiskey; however, her host interpreted her reply as a request for a drink besides whiskey. This is just one example that further illustrates the fact that Americans are not always "direct" and that even with the best intentions in mind, due to differing conceptualizations of speech acts, instances of miscommunication can occur.

## **Discussion**

Wolfson (1989) suggested that native speakers of a language are easy to forgive an error in grammar or pronunciation; however, a pragmatic one can cause offense. Perhaps a more accurate depiction of the current situation is that grammatical or pronunciation errors are more recognizable as "nonnative" to native speakers, while many people are not consciously aware of their language's social rules of speaking. Thus, a pragmatic error can sometimes cause offense. Traditionally, language teaching materials have focused on lexical, syntactic, and phonetic development. However, this

is only a portion of the complete picture. Especially in an EFL context, it is difficult to have access to authentic input of the target speech community. As Hansen et al. (2003) discussed, even living in the target speech community does not guarantee increased pragmatic development.

There are ways in which language teachers in Japan can aid their students' pragmatic development. Students' pragmatic awareness can be raised by viewing DVDs and studying the different ways that speakers perform speech acts in the target language community. Moreover, the positive impact of the instruction of pragmatic routines both explicitly and implicitly has been cited in recent studies (see Rose & Kasper, 2001).

Pragmatic development is just as much a part of language development as lexical, syntactic, and phonetic and needs to begin at the very beginning of language learning. Advanced learners who have not had pragmatic instruction, in an attempt to utilize more complicated structures, can fall back on their L1 (Takahashi et al., 1987). Therefore, pragmatic instruction is not a supplement to the other aspects of language development, but in fact a necessary complement that needs to begin at the early stages of language learning. Recent classroom materials have been created with this in mind (Yoshida, Kamiya, Kondo, & Tokiwa (2000).

## **Conclusion**

There is some overlap in the factors causing pragmatic failure identified in this paper. However, an awareness of these factors causing cross-cultural pragmatic failure can provide language teachers with vital information. The sources of cross-cultural pragmatic failure go well beyond pragmatic transfer. Moreover, through both raising pragmatic awareness coupled with the instruction of pragmatic routines, language teachers in Japan can assist their students in avoiding communication breakdowns that ultimately can result in cross-cultural pragmatic failure.

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