

Study on the Pragmatic Failures of the Apology Speech Act of Chinese College Students

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Abstract: Pragmatic competence, as a concept, has been widely recognized in language teaching in recent years. And acquiring pragmatic competence is one of the important goals of language teaching and learning. This thesis is to investigate the pragmatic failures in apology-making speech act committed by Chinese college EFL students. The discussion of the findings indicates that the causes accounting for the pragmatic failures are cultural differences, negative pragmatic transfer and inappropriate language input. Analysis of the behaviors of apology of Chinese college EFL students can give pedagogical implication for our college English teaching aiming at promoting communicative competence, such as teachers need to use the materials as authentic as possible, introduce pragmatic knowledge about target language when teaching linguistic knowledge. What's more, the training of teachers should be emphasized. If students can interact with such kind of input under the proper guidance of teachers, they may become more sensitive in interpreting different speech acts.

1. Introduction

With the development of globalization, people need to communicate cross-culturally. Accordingly, there is an unprecedented demand for mastering more than one language and effective communication with people of other countries and cultures. It is often found out that second language learners who have acquired enough linguistic knowledge often go through international communication breakdowns when speaking with native speakers. Apology is a speech act which happens with high frequency in our daily life. In order to achieve successful cross-cultural communication, it is necessary to learn about realization patterns of apology in different cultures.

An apology or a remedy (Goffman, 1971) ---a speech act whose primary purpose is redressive action---is one such speech strategy which pays attention to the face needs of interlocutors. It is basically aimed at maintaining or enhancing their face or restoring decorum (Goffman, 1967).

Over the past two decades, empirical investigations of apologies have been carried on by numerous scholars. Blum-kulka and Olshtin (1983) conducted a project: Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Patterns (CCSARP) which aimed at investigating the realization patterns of two speech acts---requests and apologies across a range of languages and cultures in order to explore both the similarities and differences of these two acts. This study is intended to explore the results of an empirical study on apology-making strategies by Chinese college EFL learners and native English speakers. In designing the investigation, they employed Discourse Completion Tests (DCT)—an instrument commonly used to compare the speech act realization patterns of subjects in given contexts.

Many scholars have done a large number of studies on classifications of apology strategies. As the present study is a comparative study on apology strategies employed by both native Chinese and native English speakers with the goal to investigate the Chinese college EFL learners' pragmatic failure. The model thus is borrowed from Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's CCSARP which is of the similar purpose with my survey. What's more, Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's CCSARP is the most functional and systematic classification of the realization pattern of apologies, which is most frequently used to date. Therefore, this dissertation adopts their classification of strategies: IFID, An

explanation or account, Taking on responsibility, An offer of repair, A promise of forbearance, Intensifier, Downgrading.

2. Investigation and Discussions

2.1 Subjects and Instrument

100 subjects participated in this study, namely 80 native Chinese speakers (NNS) and 20 native English speakers (NS-E).

The 80 NNS are divided into two groups. The first group consists of 40 first-year college EFL students (NNS-1), the other one involves 40 third-year college EFL students (NNS-2). The members for these two groups are the main subjects of the present research for their responses in the DCT will be analyzed in detail.

The third group involves 20 English native speakers who are foreign workers in outsourcing division of CVIC SE (a software company). We will take their responses to the questions as the standard to analyze that of the native Chinese subjects.

As the present study focuses on the production data, the data will be collected by means of DCT. The Questionnaire in the present study is based on the DCT questionnaire used by CCSARP project. It is a written questionnaire including eight brief situational descriptions, followed by a short dialogue with an empty slot for the speech act under study. The content of the questionnaire for native English speakers and for Chinese EFL learners are identical.

3. Results and Analysis

3.1 An Overall Analysis on Apology Strategies

The strategy which is most frequently employed by the three groups is IFID. That is to say, this strategy is more universal while other strategies are more or less situation-specific. The second most frequently used strategy is taking on responsibility which is used by 43% of first-year students, 45% of third-year students and 48% of native English speakers. In addition, the following three strategies: offer of repair, intensifier and explanation or account also occur in relatively higher frequency. The apology strategy of downgrading is of low occurrence, with 10% of first-year students, 9% of third-year students and 8% of native English speakers. The strategy of promise of forbearance is least frequently chosen.

What's more, we find that native English speakers use the strategies of IFID, taking on responsibility and offer of repair more frequently than Chinese subjects. The first-year students employ the strategies of explanation or account, promise of forbearance, intensifier and downgrading more frequently than native English speakers and third-year students.

4. Distribution of Apology Strategies

4.1 IFID

The percentage of IFID strategy the three groups employ in eight situations. From this table, it can be concluded that there are some similarities and differences in the use of IFID among the three groups. It is easily noticed that IFID is frequently used by the three groups, and NNS-1 and NNS-2 groups employ this strategy similarly in all situations.

As for the similarities, there is a preference for IFID strategy among the three groups to similar degrees in situation 2, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8.

As for the differences, the three groups behave differently in situation 1 and 3 where native English speakers employ more IFID than nonnative English speakers do.

4.2 Taking on responsibility

The IFID strategy alone is not enough to repair the infraction. In many situations, the offender's taking on responsibility is important for the offended. What's more, when a speaker makes an

apology with the strategy of IFID, he/she, in fact, indirectly and implicitly takes on responsibility for the offence.

It can be obviously noticed that in situation 4, 5, 7 and 8, the three groups have a similar level of preference for taking on responsibility. For example, in situation 4, where the waiter brings the wrong order to the guest, the subjects in the three groups choose a comparatively low percentage of taking on responsibility. This phenomenon proves that acknowledgement of responsibility will need the waiter's compensation which would be a high cost for him and it explained the low percentage of this strategy.

As for the differences, the three groups behave comparatively different in situation 1, 2, 3, and 6. In situation 1 and 3, the nonnative English speakers show lower tendency for this strategy than native English speakers. The case in situation 2 and 7 is just the opposite with that in situation 1 and 3. Compared with native English speakers, Chinese subjects prefer to acknowledge the responsibility of failing to return the professor's book on time which can be interpreted as the awareness of the professor's authority. They desire to restore harmony with the professor again by doing so.

4.3 Explanation or Account

A common reaction to the need to apologize is a search for self-justification via explaining the source of the offense as caused by external factors over which the speaker has no control.

The strategy of explanation or account is not equally used in all situations. In situation 1, 3, 5, 7 and 8, all the subjects tend to choose the strategy of explanation or account more frequently while in situation 2, 4 and 6, all the subjects use this strategy at a very low percentage, which proves that the strategy of explanation or account is more or less situation-specific.

As for the similarities, there is a similar preference for the three groups to explain the reason causing the offense in situation 2, 5 and 8. For example, in situation 5, it is necessary for the speaker to explain to the hearer that his/her being late is caused by some specific and relevant events over which the speaker has no control. Therefore, the explanation may serve as a better way to mitigate the offense and retrieve their harmonious friendship.

As for the differences, in situation 1, 3 and 7, nonnative English speakers explain more than native English speakers. As we all know, Chinese are unwilling to make an apology directly to the person whose social position is lower than him/her. Therefore, they may choose other strategies like giving explanation or account to express their regret. Native English speakers are just the opposite. They believe it is necessary to apologize explicitly and directly instead of giving explanation or account. As a result, to a certain degree, the native English speakers and nonnative English speakers share little in common under such circumstances.

4.4 Offer of repair

Offer of repair is related to the remedial function of apology and is situation-specific, which can only be employed when physical injury or incurred damage has resulted. It is an offer to try to make the situation right as if the offense had not occurred.

All the subjects show their preference for offer of repair in situation 1, 2, 4 and 6. For example, in situation 2, the three groups all use a high percentage of the strategy of offering repair. They attempt to use the expressions such as "I will return the book tomorrow" to placate the professor and repair their breaking promises. But Chinese subjects show a comparatively higher preference of this strategy than native English speakers. The reason lies in the hierarchical society in China where we believe it is necessary for the offender whose social position is lower than the offended to offer repair.

4.5 Promise of forbearance

The strategy of promise of forbearance is the least frequently employed strategy by both native English speakers and nonnative English speakers which ranges from 0% to 28%. The frequency of promise of forbearance is quite low in all the situations except situation 5 and 7 which proves that this strategy is also situation-specific.

The three groups have a comparatively high preference of the use of promise of forbearance in situation 5 and 7 and the difference is not obvious between nonnative English speakers and native English speakers. The utterance is often signaled by the performative verb “promise”. Examples of such expressions are as follows: “I promise I won’t be late again”, “I promise it will never happen again”, etc. In these situations, promising that the offense will never happen again would convey to the friend/coworker that they have been aware of their fault and would try to avoid the offense next time, thereby to placate the friend/coworker and regain the confidence on them.

4.6 Intensifier

Generally speaking, the use of intensifier can strengthen the offender’s apology and show their sincerity.

The strategy of intensifier is not equally used in all situations and percentage of the use of intensifier is comparatively low in situation 1 and 3, which proves that this strategy is also situation-specific.

In situation 2, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8, the three groups tend to use intensifier more frequently. In situation 5, 7 and 8, lower percentage of nonnative English speakers use intensifier than native English speakers. For example, in situation 5 where a chronically unpunctual student is late again, native English speakers may consider it very serious, therefore, they employ more intensifier. As we all know, time-consciousness and punctuality are what the native English speakers value very much. Therefore, it is easily understood that they use more intensifier to mitigate the offense and retrieve their harmonious friendship.

A comparison can be made between situation 1 and 2, where preference of this strategy in situation 2 by the three groups is much higher than that in situation 1 within our expectation. The subjects in the three groups prefer to make their apology more polite and sincere for their professor.

4.7 Downgrading

Besides intensifier, an apology can also be downgraded. Downgrading of an apology is used to deny that a serious offence has actually taken place and has the purpose of diverting attention of the offended from the offense by minimizing the offense.

Like the strategy of offering repair and promise of forbearance, downgrading is used only in limited situations, which proves that this strategy is also situation-specific.

All the three groups only have a comparatively higher percentage of the use of downgrading in situation 3 and 5 while in the rest situations, the subjects in the three groups seldom choose this strategy or use it at very low percentages. In situation 3, the difference among the three groups is the biggest. Nonnative English speakers downgrade their apology more frequently than native English speakers.

4.8 Identification of Pragmatic Failures Committed by Chinese Subjects

All pragmatic failures in apologies are categorized into seven items, i.e., “IFID”, “Taking on responsibility”, “Explanation or Account”, “Offer of repair”, “Promise of forbearance”, “Intensifier” and “Downgrading”.

The results report that the pragmatic failures of apology strategies with the highest frequency committed by the two Chinese subjects’ groups were the expressions related to “IFID” strategy with about 15% and 12.5%. The pragmatic failures of “Intensifier” strategy ranked at the second one with about 7%. The Chinese subjects didn’t commit pragmatic failures in strategies of “Promise of forbearance” and “Downgrading”.

Pragmatic failure falls into two classifications: pragmalinguistic failure and sociopragmatic failure. To give a more comprehensive analysis on the pragmatic failures by the Chinese subjects, this study is going to investigate the identified pragmatic failures in terms of pragmalinguistic failures and sociopragmatic failures with the discussion of some typical examples.

Pragmalinguistic failure is the wrong use of language itself including incorrect use of target language and using target language with semantics and structures of mother language.

The pragmalinguistic failure observed in this study includes:

- (1) Native Chinese often confuse “sorry” and “excuse me”.
- (2) The multi-occurrence or repetition of IFIDs in one response which can’t be found in native English speakers’ responses.”
- (3) Giving no exact time in some responses which seldom occurs in native English speakers’ responses.
- (4) Giving no clear reason in some responses.
- (5) Chinese subjects often translate Chinese expressions mechanically into English without consideration of its appropriateness in English context.

Sociopragmatic failures occurs when people do not have full understanding about each other’s cultural differences in cross-cultural communication thus they choose an improper linguistic form and cause a communication breakdown.

In this study, there are also some examples of sociopragmatic failure due to different social and cultural beliefs, norms and pragmatic principles. For example, the Chinese subjects perform some apology strategies at lower percentages especially in situation 1 and 3. In these two situations, native Chinese speakers, compared with native English speakers, believe that the social power is higher and the offence is less severe. Therefore, they use the strategy of IFID and taking on responsibility less frequently than native English speakers. For those Chinese natives, a professor/manager seems to have higher social status, so when he/she breaks a promise or does something offending, he/she thinks it is not necessary to apologize explicitly.

It is worthwhile to note that the two nonnative English speaker groups both have the pramalinguistic failures and sociopragmatic failures. Since the pramalinguistic failures are chiefly related to the grammatical level of language, it is relatively easy to identify and overcome. However, sociopragmatic failures put forward a more difficult task for the language teaching because they invlove the contrast of social norms and values between mother tongue society and target language society which is related to the communicative and cultural aspects of a language. Thus, it is highly necessary to help students get rid of the pragmatic failures and achieve successful pragmatic performance.

5. Results Discussion

5.1 Cultural Differences

As we all know, the relationship between language and culture is mutual. Language is a part of culture and plays a crucial role in culture and vice versa. Language and culture are intricately interweaved so that one can’t separate them without losing the significance of either language or culture. In cross-cultural communication, cultural difference is one major cause of pragmatic failures, which may include differences in value systems, thought patterns, etc.

5.2 Different Value Systems

Values, are a learned organization of rules for making choices and for resolving conflicts. The values that try to permeate into the cultures are called cultural values. The western value systems cherish individualism, equality and privacy, while the Chinese value systems appreciate collectivism, hierarchy and harmony.

5.3 Collectivism Versus Individualism

Chinese culture is typical of collectivism which distinguishes between in-groups and out-groups. Chinese people stress a “we” consciousness because they think that their social identity are from their group memberships. In contrast, Western tradition makes clear distinctions between personal views and group views in their language. In communication, they tend to use the pronoun “I” because they believe the individual is the single most important unit of the society which highly appreciates the uniqueness of each individual.

5.4 High-context Versus Low-context

Edward T. Hall (1976) categories cultures as being either high or low context, depending on how much meaning their members attach to settings.

In high-context cultures, like Chinese, Japanese, etc., little information is contained in the message which may be implicit and transmitted as “ambiguous and fragmentary clues” (Maley, 1989: 23). In low-context cultures, like English-speaking countries, people deliver messages that are highly explicit and contain most of the information while little is embedded in the context or senders.

5.5 Different Concepts of Face

Face system can be divided into positive face and negative face (Levinson, 1983). Positive face refers to approval and support of other people while negative face is avoidance of imposition.

Face system is much affected by value, cultural conventions and social norms, so it differs from culture to culture and from language to language. From an individualistic point of view, face is an image that intrinsically belongs to the “self” which primarily concerns the individual’s desires, i.e. it is a matter of private affairs. However, from a collectivistic point of view, face is considered as a public image that not only depends on but is determined by the participation of others (Mao, 1994). Thus, the different concepts of face may cause the pragmatic failures by Chinese when performing the compliment speech act in English.

5.6 Negative Pragmatic Transfer

Pragmatic transfer can be classified into positive transfer and negative transfer. Positive transfer is produced by the similarities between the native language and the target language, which facilitates the comprehension and production of the target language. In contrast, negative transfer occurs when foreign language speakers improperly apply the pragmatic rules of native language to the learning of target language

Kasper in his “Pragmatic Transfer” (Kasper, 1992) points out that negative transfer includes both pramalinguistic level and sociopragmatic level.

Sociopragmatic transfer is operative when the social perceptions underlying language users’ interpretation and performance of linguistic action in L2 are influence by their assessment of subjectively equivalent L1 context (Kasper, 1992: 209). Among the two types of negative transfer, sociopragmatic transfer is more frequently committed than pramalinguistic transfer, which is proved by Liu’s study. What’s more, the sociopragmatic transfer tend to result in misunderstanding in cross-cultural communication because “sociopragmatic transfer, always the negative, may be considered as the social etiquette or even ethic issues of the addresser rather than a pure linguistic issue” (He, 2003).

For example:

(Situation 2: You borrowed your professor’s book and promised to return it today, but forgot to bring it.)

-Your professor: Did you bring me the book?

-Your answer: _____.

Chinese and English-speaking countries have different cultural values which is also the case in the speech act of apology. As we have analyzed before, we find that native Chinese tend to employ more IFID strategy than native English speakers. As we all know, Chinese are living in a society of hierarchy. Therefore, for the sake of leaving a good impression on and showing the respect for the professor, it is necessary for the student to make an apology directly to the professor whose social power is higher than him/her. But it is not the typical way of native English speakers when responding to the apology for the western culture puts emphasis on equality and individuality. Thus, the negative sociopragmatic transfer leads to a pragmatic failure.

6. Inappropriate Language Input

6.1 Inappropriate Teaching Input

Stenson (1975) and Cohen (1997) put forward that teachers' teaching techniques may be a source of student errors. As we all know, in China, traditional English teaching attaches too much importance to metalinguistic knowledge, such as pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, etc. while how to use the language is ignored. The case is that the forms of Chinese students' sentences are absolutely correct, but they lack cultural appropriateness. Therefore, pragmalinguistic failures occur. Deng Yanchang and Liu Runqing (1988: 15) analyze this with the following example:

rest room ≠ 休息室

In English, "rest room" is a polite form for bathroom or toilet. It is a room in public places which is equipped with toilets and washbasins, so it is convenient for the customers and employees. It is quite different from "休息室" in Chinese, which refers to a room where people can have a rest.

What's more, the grammar-translation method focuses on normative language and rigid memorization. For example: students are always told that they should use interrogative sentences to ask a question and imperative sentences to express order or command. However, sentences having similar structures are not necessarily to be used in the same way while those of different structure may be used to perform the same function in certain circumstances and with certain intonations, thus give the opportunities for pragmatic failures to take place as in:

A: Pass me the book, please.

B: I want you to pass me the book.

C: Can you pass me the book?

D: Would you mind passing me the book?

It is obvious that Chinese teachers of English tend to let students know what is the correct forms and rules of language but don't consider how to apply the forms and rules in the appropriate occasion or time. Thus knowledge of language and context are isolated from each other which result in such a consequence that students can apply proper grammar, analyze sentence structure and translate the literature but they still find it difficult to communicate with others in English.

6.2 Inappropriate Teaching Materials Input

Students' textbooks are the major material of language input to Chinese learners of English in present-day China. In order to build up a very standard system of English, the authors only select the grammatically correct expressions, neglecting the necessary explanation of the situations, which lead to the students' pragmatic failures. For example: from textbooks we learn to know that both "how do you do" and "hello" can be used to greet people and have the same interpretation as "你好" in Chinese. In fact there is a distinct difference between the two expressions, i.e. they are used in different sociopragmatic situations: "How do you do" can only be used the first time people meet while "hello" has no such restriction. This is why most Chinese learners of English misapply the forms in many occasions.

The classroom setting is very limited in providing pragmatic input and opportunities for productive language use. And classroom discourse of teachers also fails to set up a pragmatic model of authentic communication because of the unequal status between teachers and students (Kasper, 2001). In terms of unequal status in classroom, Chinese teachers whose social status is higher than students often address students with "You, answer my question please", which is impolite for native speakers.

To sum up, the pragmatic competence of Chinese college EFL learners in non-target language environment develop mainly by means of formal instruction. Therefore, teaching techniques and input factors must be improved to meet these requirements.

7. Suggestions

7.1 Providing Authentic Materials

Making students learn the target language naturally means that the students have opportunities to come into contact with real and authentic materials. From the perspective of foreign language teaching, “authentic materials” refer to those that are used in real communicative situations and non-pedagogic communication, as opposed to the prefabricated artificial language of textbooks and instructional dialogues.

Chinese students have little opportunities to expose themselves to English environment and can't learn the target language by means of communicating with foreigners. What they can do is to follow their textbooks as the textbooks are the major media for students to learn a foreign language. However, the contents of the texts are often designed or selected to meet the demands of sentence patterns or grammatical points. Many materials are not real and will never occur anywhere except in the textbook. So English teachers are responsible for recommending more authentic materials to students to broaden their horizon towards the target language countries and promote their pragmatic competence. The materials can be literature works, foreign language magazines and newspapers, TV, radio, Internet, etc., because they provide natural language samples and contain the most vivid, valid and abundant information of social factors, culture, social norms and customs of English-speaking countries. If students come into contact with more native-like materials, their native-like competence will be developed.

7.2 Promoting Cultural Awareness of Students

Cultural awareness is a term used to describe sensitivity to the impact of culturally-induced behavior on language use and communication. Since language and culture correlate with each other, cross-cultural awareness must be made one of the goals in English teaching. What's more, in the cross-cultural communication, the appropriate use of language is more important than linguistic knowledge in the sense that it may lead to breakdown of communication.

The pragmatic failures in the present study have proved that there are some problems with the English of Chinese college EFL learners. In addition, although the third-year students have learnt English two years more than the first-year students, their pragmatic competence still remains at the similar level as the first-year students, which implies that culture is the key factor affecting the promotion of their pragmatic competence instead of their language proficiency. Therefore, promoting students' cultural awareness plays a crucial role in cultural understanding. In order to strengthen the students' pragmatic competence, it is necessary for teachers to enhance their cultural sensitivity when teaching English.

7.3 Introducing Pragmatic Knowledge about Target Language

Cultural differences may result in pragmatic failures in cross-cultural communication. Pragmatic failure happens when speakers violate pragmatic principles. Therefore, we can conclude that it is necessary for English teachers to introduce some important pragmatic principles to the students, among which Cooperative Principle (CP) (Grice, 1975) and Politeness Principle (PP) (Brown & Levinson, 1987) are universally applicable in the world. The knowledge of these maxims can help students to speak in the appropriate situation at the appropriate time. As Brown and Levinson remark: “The application of the principle differs systematically across cultures.” (Brown & Levinson, 1978: 283). This accounts for why there are pragmatic failures when Chinese college EFL learners communicate with the native English speakers and decides the necessity of probing further into the differences in applying the CP and PP in Chinese and western cultures. It is advisable for teachers to point out the differences existing in pragmatic principles and the different application of the maxims in different cultures.

7.4 Teachers' Self-improvement

All the classroom strategies and culture teaching strategies are carried out by teachers of English. Their qualification plays a crucial role in English teaching. Only if the teachers themselves are

familiar with the cultural and pragmatic knowledge, can they aid students to develop their pragmatic competence. However, the fact is that not many of the foreign language teachers in China have the opportunity to study in the target language country. Therefore, teachers should be aware of their own weakness and limitation and try to improve their own knowledge and competence.

Firstly, the teachers should adjust their way of teaching by studying the latest approaches at home and abroad, absorbing the strong points of the counterparts. In the process of teaching, if more attention is paid to the combination of the communicative pedagogy and the traditional Chinese pedagogy, we may achieve a better result in developing the students' pragmatic competence.

Secondly, teachers of English should be familiar with the target language culture and Chinese culture and learn knowledge about cross-cultural communication. Culture is the root of language and it keeps changing with the society developing. Only in this way can teachers keep abreast of such changes.

Thirdly, the teachers should be equipped with adequate pragmatic knowledge and be conscious that pragmatic failures of Chinese students are mainly caused by cultural differences.

7.5 Cooperation of Chinese and Native Teachers

As we all know, native speakers have potentials to create a lot of languages. If non-native speakers want to communicate like natives do, they have to find more chances to expose themselves to the cultural background of the target language. By this can they learn to know what is appropriate in a given situation. As for Chinese teachers of English, it is impossible for everyone of them to have the opportunity to study in the target language country. Therefore, we should focus on the cooperation between the Chinese and native teachers for both of them have their own advantages and disadvantages in teaching. Both the Chinese and English native teachers should do researches on the cross-cultural studies. The cooperation of Chinese and native teachers will help students to learn both linguistic and cultural knowledge well and make them a competent communicators.

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