Background

Learners of foreign languages often share similar experiences. One common experience is to discover that what you learned about a foreign language at school or university is not enough to speak to and understand native speakers when at last you encounter them in real life. This was my own experience in France many years ago. I had studied French for five years in secondary school and for one year at university. When I arrived in Paris I found my language skills were quite inadequate to cope in this new environment. I could not understand spoken French and I could not find the words or grammar to express myself clearly. It took almost six months before I broke through a communication barrier and discovered the magic of conversing in a language different from my mother tongue. Even then, however, I was prone to inadvertently putting my 'foot in my mouth' when speaking, due to a lack of pragmatic competence.

This paper is concerned with such communication barriers apparent when we leave the language classroom and venture out into the real world of 'language in use' communication. In particular, the paper explores the role pragmatics can play in improving our understanding of communication and miscommunication between native and non-native speakers of English. Such an understanding is vital given that native speakers seem to have a much lower tolerance for pragmatic failure than for any other type of linguistic failure (e.g., of pronunciation, grammar or vocabulary).

Introduction

Thomas has identified three kinds of potential failure in cross-cultural communication: linguistic; pragma-linguistic and socio-pragmatic (Thomas, 1983). Linguistic failure arises when the speaker or hearer does not have control of the linguistic code. Their language ability is too low to process the sound system and the grammatical system, and their vocabulary lacks the necessary range. In other words, they don't have enough basic language skills to make themselves understood or to understand other speakers. Pre-intermediate level learners fit this category of miscommunication.

Pragma-linguistic failure results from a mismatch between what is said by the speaker and what is understood by the hearer. The hearer might experience this misaligned meaning as mistaken, puzzling, inappropriate or even rude. (And, the speaker may have no idea that this is happening). Pragma-linguistic failure is often the result of a transfer of L1 speech act strategies (i.e., which are familiar and habitual) to L2 encounters. Intermediate level learners often make these sorts of miscommunication.

Socio-pragmatic failure is concerned with more basic (i.e., fundamental) contrasts in cultural values between L1 and L2 cultures. Here, even if the hearer correctly decoded and interpreted the speaker's intention, the result would still be puzzlement, misunderstanding or conflict because the listener's cultural definitions, attitudes and values may disagree with (and quite possibly even disapprove of) the reality conveyed by the message. An example of socio-pragmatic failure is the seeming inability of many Asian students to address their Western university professors by their first name, even when requested to do so. Upper-intermediate learners often continue to suffer these sorts of miscommunication.

This paper will introduce six examples of cross-cultural miscommunication. It will then consider three pragmatic approaches to understanding language in use, namely Speech Act Theory, Cooperative Principle and Politeness Theory. We will return to each example of cross-cultural miscommunication, grouped in pairs by reference to the kind of failure occurring, to see what explication the pragmatic theories can offer. We will then consider the teaching implications of each kind of miscommunication for teachers of English in Taiwan. Let us now begin by introducing the data, consisting of six brief encounters between native and non-native speakers of English in Australia.

Six instances of cross-cultural miscommunication

1. A is an elderly Chinese student; B is her overweight English teacher.

A: You are fat. **B: Oh, no!**

2. A is a married woman from the Middle East; B a Western native English-speaking woman.

A: Are you married? **B: No, I'm single.** **A: Why? Why are you single?**

3. A is a native English speaker; B is a Polish adolescent.

A: Would you like to open the window, B? **B: No, thank you**.

4. A is an ESL teacher; B is a student from Chile.

A: Did you have a good time visiting your family in Chile? **B: No, my father had cancer and he didn't want to have any operation and he died.** **A: Good!**

5. A is a young man from Vietnam; B is a native English-speaking bus driver.

A: What time is this bus leaving, mate? **B: I'm not your mate!**

6. A is a Laotian factory worker; B is his native English-speaking boss.

A: Boss, what's wrong with this f*ing machine? It took me a bloody long time to get the work done.** **B: You aren't going to talk to me like that!**

These data have been foregrounded to emphasise that they represent communication problems for which we are seeking a clearer understanding of what has gone wrong. We shall return to analyse these data in a moment, after first considering three important pragmatic theories that may point towards suitable 'solutions' by way of more clearly explicating the problems.

Speech Act Theory

Speech Act Theory (SAT) was first introduced by John Austin and later developed by his protégé John Searle (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). Essentially the theory states that language is used to 'do things' rather than just communicate information or maintain social relations. Austin described three types of 'force' that utterances can have: (1) locutionary; (2) illocutionary; and (3) perlocutionary. The first is the force of the literal meaning (consisting of phonetic and lexicogrammatical precision resulting in "sense" and "reference"); the second is the force of a pragmatic meaning (i.e., what the speaker intended to mean by saying what he/she said); and the third is the force of achieving a certain effect (i.e., an action taken by the hearer according to his/her interpretation of the speaker's utterance). Illocutionary force is the most important of these three forces, and it is often synonymous with SAT.

Cooperative Principle

The Cooperative Principle (CP) was developed by Paul Grice (Grice, 1975) to account for how speakers and hearers seem able to communicate relatively easily despite the vast potential for miscommunication and misunderstanding of one another's intentions. Grice's theory is essentially that interlocutors 'cooperate' through following four maxims when they speak: (1) quantity; (2) quality; (3) relation; and (4) manner. Quantity refers to giving the right amount of information – not more or less than is needed. Quality refers to the truthfulness of what is said – do not say what you believe to be false or for which you lack adequate evidence. Relation refers to being relevant in your speech. Manner refers to being perspicuous through avoiding obscurity of expression; avoiding ambiguity; being brief; and being orderly.

Grice argues that it is only by assuming that people are trying to be cooperative that we can work out from these maxims how a given utterance is to be interpreted. In other words, language users resolve apparent breaches of the maxims by appeal to the cooperative principle. The maxims' explanatory power derives from what happens when they are not observed. Thus, "implicatures" of flouted maxims can explain how utterances are used to convey more than they literally denote.

Politeness Theory

Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson first presented their Politeness Theory (PT) in 1978 (later published as Brown & Levinson, 1987) and Ron and Suzanne Scollon further developed it in relation to cross-cultural encounters in Scollon & Scollon (1983). The theory describes positive and negative (linguistic) politeness and the notion of "face threatening acts" (FTAs) as a way of explaining why people often use indirectness in their speech. In essence, linguistic politeness can be seen as the coding of our awareness of other people's sensitivities and their power (and status) in relation to us, into how we say what we say to them. Face threat is continuously a potential source of upset to our and others' feelings and intentions, and so influences our every act. In framing our actions (including utterances) we naturally seek to minimise the threat to face.

FTAs in any interaction result from the combination of interpersonal power (of the hearer over the speaker); the social distance (of the hearer from the speaker); and the attributed size or ranking of the perceived imposition – burden or threat of upset – (potentially offered to the hearer by the proposed act as judged in that circumstance and in that culture). In general, the weightier the act, the more politeness will be needed in order to mitigate its apparent threat to face.

Positive (or 'solidarity') politeness is concerned with showing closeness, intimacy and rapport between speaker and hearer. Negative (or 'deference') politeness is concerned with maintaining the appropriate social distance between speaker and hearer (Richards et al. 1985).

Applying pragmatic theories to data

Having reviewed three key theories in pragmatics we are now ready to turn our attention back to the previously introduced examples of cross-cultural miscommunication in order to see how useful each theory is in explicating the communication problem encountered.

1. TABOO 'LITE'

It is well known that native English speakers usually do not feel comfortable talking about religion, politics or sex unless they know their interlocutor well. Thus, these three subjects are generally considered "taboo" areas in English speaking cultures. There are other subjects, however, that approach being "taboo", and these fall within a category I shall refer to as "taboo lite". Examples 1 and 2 from the data exemplify taboo lite, as they are concerned with the issue of appropriate topic, or **what** can be said. (As we shall see, other examples are grouped according to **how** something needs to be said, and **who** can say what to whom).

Example 1:
A is an elderly Chinese student. B is her overweight English teacher.

A: You are fat. **B: Oh, no!**

SAT draws attention to the illocutionary force of an utterance. In this example Speaker A intends a compliment (as per Chinese custom), whereas Speaker B hears the utterance with surprise and, given that the topic of being overweight is a sensitive one (i.e., taboo 'lite'), possibly interprets the comment as an insult. The result of this miscommunication is that Speaker B is likely to be confused and disappointed by Speaker A's comment, while Speaker A is likely to be confused and disappointed by Speaker B's response. There are two issues conflated at the heart of the problem: (1) Speaker A's initiation of a taboo 'lite' topic; and (2) Speaker A's pragma-linguistic failure in using an L1 speech act strategy that is misaligning in L2 usage.

CP indicates that if any of its four maxims are flouted, then there must be an implicature for this departure from the CP. In this example Speaker B must quickly determine whether or not Speaker A has said enough; been truthful; been relevant; and been clear. If not, then Speaker B must implicate what is meant by the flouting of any of these maxims. Given that Speaker B is an English teacher and somewhat familiar with cross-cultural communication errors, she will no doubt quickly implicate that Speaker A has made a pragma-linguistic error and is not intending a joke or insult.

PT distinguishes between solidarity and deference. In this example we see immediately that Speaker A is drawing upon 'solidarity' politeness to be friendly towards Speaker B. Although it is possible to interpret this approach as inappropriate given the status of student and teacher positions, this is offset by the reversed status of the interlocutors by reference to age.

Example 2:
A is a married woman from the Middle East; B is a Western native English-speaking woman.

A: Are you married? **B: No, I'm single.** **A: Why? Why are you single?**

SAT: Speaker A's first utterance is simply a request for information. Her second utterance, however, is a request for an explanation (to which she is not entitled in Western cultures generally, but which is normal in Speaker A's culture). This is a good example of socio-pragmatic failure, i.e., where cultural values differ, in this case, regarding the acceptability of discussing marital status with a woman one does not know well.

CP: Speaker B's response (in the mind of Speaker A) is flouting the maxim of manner and, therefore, Speaker A is entitled to ask a follow-up question to clarify the response.

PT: Speaker A is relying on 'solidarity' politeness to encourage Speaker B to share personal information with her. Speaker B, on the other hand, is likely to feel that a 'deference' politeness strategy is much more culturally appropriate to deal with such a personal subject. Speaker B would expect to be allowed freedom *not* to answer rather than be forced to confront the question. A 'deference' politeness strategy would be "Do you mind if I ask why you haven't married?" as this would allow Speaker B to save face by being able to say "Well, yes, I'd rather not talk about it".

TEACHING IMPLICATIONS FOR TABOO 'LITE' PROBLEMS

Examples 1 and 2 indicate the risk that social relations are subjected to when pragma-linguistic and socio-pragmatic failure occur. Taiwanese teachers are fortunate to be teaching largely homogenous groups of students sharing a common culture (socio-pragmatics) and language (pragma-linguistics). Thus, any 'deviations' in the value systems of English-speaking cultures or the use of speech act strategies in English can be contrasted directly with just one set of cultural values and speech act strategies – those found in Taiwan. Teachers would be well advised, therefore, to keep a record of differences between English and Taiwanese cultural values and speech acts, and regularly update it with examples from which students can learn these differences and thereby avoid these kinds of miscommunications arising.

2. ILLOCUTIONARY FORCE

The second pair of examples, 3 and 4, draws attention more to **how** something needs to be said to avoid misunderstandings, rather than to just what is said. They are grouped together because of the sense of dislocation in the minds of the interlocutors caused by the misinterpretation of the illocutionary force of the utterance.

Example 3:
A is a native English speaker; B is a Polish adolescent.

A:	**Would you like to open the window, B?**
B:	**No, thank you**.

SAT: Speaker A has made a request for action while Speaker B has interpreted it as a request for information about preferences. The intended illocutionary force has therefore been missed by Speaker B, resulting in no action taken by Speaker B to open the window. Speaker A is likely to be annoyed, while Speaker B might not detect the reason for any annoyance on the part of Speaker A.

CP: The maxim of relation has been broken by Speaker B, and the relevance of Speaker B's response would be implicated by Speaker A.

PT: Speaker A was relying on 'deference' politeness rather than 'solidarity' politeness in order to achieve the perlocutionary force of getting the window opened. Speaker A might have misjudged the imposition of the request (i.e., it was greater than Speaker A had assumed) or perhaps a request relying on solidarity and friendliness would have succeeded in achieving the goal (e.g., "Isn't it terribly stuffy in here? We're going to suffocate if we don't get some air! How about opening the window?").

Example 4:
A is an ESL teacher; B is a student from Chile.

A: Did you have a good time visiting your family in Chile? **B: No, my father had cancer and he didn't want to have any operation and he died.** **A: Good!**

SAT: Speaker B's turn has the illocutionary force of a request for sympathy (i.e. , commiserations that his father had died). Speaker A's second turn, therefore, seems highly inappropriate and offensive.

CP: Speaker A's second turn flouts the maxim of quantity (i.e., it is too short); quality (be true – it is unlikely that Speaker A is 'being true' in making such an insensitive comment); and relation (complimenting misfortune is unusual and brazenly face-threatening). In fact, the explanatory implicature here is that Speaker A's second remark is a comment on Speaker B's English language performance (i. e., grammatically flawless), rather than on the content of what was said (i.e., the death of the father).

PT: Speaker A's second turn is relying on 'solidarity' politeness in its friendliness. But, as the comment refers to the grammatical quality of Speaker B's utterance, the politeness strategy is unlikely to be correctly interpreted by Speaker A.

TEACHING IMPLICATIONS FOR ILLOCUTIONARY FORCE PROBLEMS

Examples 3 and 4 indicate the risk that social relations are subjected to when speech acts are misinterpreted. The consequences may be easily remedied (as in example 3) or may require significant tact to rectify (as in example 4). What should be clear is that the teaching of speech acts and their illocutionary force should be a priority in the communicative language teaching classroom. Taiwanese teachers would be well advised, therefore, to teach samples of dialogues where speech acts have unintended results (i.e., through misinterpreted illocutionary forces) along side the typical text book examples of 'felicitous' speech acts. It is through exposing language learners to instances of such miscommunication that they can best learn how to avoid them in real-life interactions.

3. REGISTER

The final pair of examples, 5 and 6, highlights the issue of using the correct register in spoken interactions. In other words, it is concerned more with **who** gets to say what to whom (rather than with topic or illocutionary force). When the register is misjudged, the consequence is often an immediate flaring of indignation on the part of the 'aggrieved' interlocutor, and disbelief and confusion on the part of the other speaker.

Example 5:
A is a young man from Vietnam; B is a native English-speaking bus driver.

A: What time is this bus leaving, mate?
B: I'm not your mate!

SAT: Speaker B has interpreted Speaker A's utterance as a kind of insult rather than as a request for information.

CP: There must be an implicature for Speaker B's response, which has broken the maxim of relation (i.e., the response is not relevant in addressing the request for information).

PT: Speaker B has probably taken offence at the use of the tag "mate" at the end of the request. Such a tag is an indicator of 'solidarity' politeness, and Speaker B (the bus driver) seems to think that such familiarity is inappropriate in the circumstances. Speaker B would seem to have preferred a more deferential politeness strategy (i.e., without such overtones of friendliness). In fact, Speaker A was shocked that Speaker B reacted as he did, and felt that Australians were not, after all, as friendly as he had been taught in his home country.

Example 6:
A is a Laotian factory worker; B is his native English-speaking boss.

A: Boss, what's wrong with this f*ing machine? It took me a bloody long time to get the work done.**
B: You aren't going to talk to me like that!

SAT: Speaker A is requesting information from his boss and, quite possibly, seeking praise for working successfully with faulty equipment. Speaker B has ignored these speech acts and focused instead on the issue of the manner in which

Speaker A has spoken, especially the use of taboo words.

CP: Speaker B has flouted the maxim of relation by not responding in a relevant way to the illocutionary force of Speaker A's turn.

PT: Speaker A has assumed 'solidarity' politeness to be appropriate (whereas Speaker B has assumed the opposite). This is evidenced by the use of "Boss" as a form of address rather than the boss's name. The main problem revolves around the use of the taboo words "f***ing" and "bloody", and their appropriateness in the context. Speaker A has misjudged that what is commonly heard on the factory floor can be equally used just as commonly in dealing with management. Speaker B expects factory workers to use more deference in their spoken interactions with him.

TEACHING IMPLICATIONS FOR REGISTER PROBLEMS

Examples 5 and 6 indicate the risk that social relations are subjected to when non-native English speakers misjudge the appropriate register in which to speak to native English speakers. This is a difficult area in which to advise language teachers because it is the case, for example, that some bus drivers and some factory managers would not have taken the offence that was taken by people in those positions in examples 5 and 6. In any case, it is important that Taiwanese teachers help their language learners gain an appreciation of a culture's general sense of 'customer relations', as in the case of example 5, by noting that workers in Australia's service industries tend to see themselves as equals of those whom they serve. With regard to manager/worker relations, as in the case of example 6, students would be well advised to use 'deference' politeness strategies when in doubt and only use 'solidarity' politeness strategies if they are familiar with the person they are dealing with and, preferably, have witnessed other people of similar status to their own use those same strategies with success.

Summary and Conclusion

This paper has focused on the issue of cross-cultural miscommunication. It has taken, as its point of departure, six examples of native English speaker and non-native English speaker interactions in which miscommunication occurred. Through applying the pragmatic theories of Speech Acts, Cooperative Principle and Politeness, we were able to better understand the miscommunications. This in turn provided insights for the teaching of English by teachers in Taiwan. While it is true that no one pragmatic theory seems capable of explaining everything that occurs in cross-cultural miscommunication, a combination of approaches, as evidenced in this paper, can make a useful contribution to increasing our understanding of this issue. The more that is known about cross-cultural miscommunication, the more that can be fed into teacher training programs and language teaching classrooms in Taiwan and indeed throughout the English-learning world.

Cross-cultural communication is increasingly a fact of everyday life for millions of people. As language teachers or language teacher trainers, we have a responsibility to equip our learners with up-to-date knowledge of English-speaking cultures, values and practices as well as to provide them with the best set of strategies for communicating successfully in this complex, intercultural and increasingly English-speaking world. This paper has attempted to show how linguistic theories can usefully contribute to this process.

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