

PRAGMATIC APPROACH TO CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN THE BUSINESS WORLD

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ABSTRACT

To enhance effective cross-cultural communication in spoken business contexts, the communicators should have socio-cultural, socio-pragmatic and pragma-linguistic information/competence to be able to identify the pragmatic content of the message. If the communicators cannot go beyond the conceptual meaning of the utterances, serious misunderstanding may come into being at the pragmatic level (This is called pragmatic failure). This paper discusses the difficulties in cross-cultural communication at cultural, socio-pragmatic, and pragma-linguistic levels and suggests practical solutions as to how to overcome such difficulties when communicating with people from different cultures in the business relations.

PRAGMATIC MEANING AND COMMUNICATION

Conversations involving culturally different speakers are more likely to go wrong than those involving people who share the same cultural background. Gumperz & Cook-Gumperz (1982: 14) explain this as follows:

Many of the meanings and understandings, at the level of ongoing process interpretation of speaker's intent, depend upon culturally specific conventions, so that much of the meaning in any encounter is indirect and implicit. The ability to expose enough of the implicit meaning to make for a satisfactory encounter between strangers or culturally different speakers requires communicative flexibility.

Sometimes we might misinterpret our interlocutor's utterance - even in our own language if we fail to get the indirect meaning. For instance,

A: Have you got a match?

B₁: Yes, thank you.

B₂: Yes, here you are. (The expected answer)

In the above dialogue, the speaker B cannot understand the speaker A's remark or intended meaning, which has a function of request (Koç and Bamber 1997). If we cannot go beyond the conceptual meaning of utterances, serious misunderstandings may come into being at the pragmatic level and this is called 'pragmatic failure'. Such a pragmatic failure

may occur when the utterance “You haven’t said much” (in Turkish we say, “Sen fazla konuşmadın”) is misinterpreted by the hearer. It may imply both a criticism when it is uttered with a rising tone and a gentle invitation when uttered with a falling tone.

As we know, there are three layers of meaning

- i) *the conceptual meaning*: the meaning that the sentence/utterance has in isolation
- ii) *the contextual meaning*: the meaning that a sentence/utterance takes on, in a particular context
- iii) *the pragmatic meaning*: the meaning that the sentence/utterance takes on only due to the interaction between the speaker and the listener. (Koç and Bamber 1997)

Both semantics and pragmatics deal with meaning, but the difference lies in two different uses of the verb MEAN (Leech 1996:5-6). The answer to the question “What does X mean?” gives semantic meaning while the answer to the question “What did you mean by X?” takes us to pragmatic mean. Meaning in semantics is abstracted from particular situations, speakers, or hearers but meaning in pragmatics is defined relative to the users of the language. Pragmatics deal with the interpretation and use of utterances/sentences with reference to the interaction between the speaker and the listener and the communicative function meaning, we need to move from the conceptual meaning to the pragmatic meaning.

IMPORTANT PRAGMATIC FACTORS IN CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN THE BUSINESS WORLD

We, communicators, should be aware of the difficulties facing us in cross-cultural communication at three distinct levels; (1) at socio-cultural level, (2) at socio-pragmatic level (3) pragma-linguistic level. Let us have a brief look at these levels:

(1) At socio-cultural level of the language

Culture is defined as a shared set of beliefs, values, and patterns of behaviour common to a group of people. We know that since every country has its own culture, cultural differences are inevitable.

Doing business in a foreign country poses a special communication challenge for the visiting businessman. Not only must deals be negotiated often they must be negotiated through very different ways of interacting, gesturing, entertaining, and speaking. Increasingly, business travellers are discovering that they must acquaint themselves with the cultural ‘rules’ of the countries they visit or suffer the consequences. Socially or professionally inappropriate behaviour - even if unintentionally so - can jeopardise business opportunities (Schermerborn Jr, 1993: 487).

We must be aware of the fact that socio-cultural differences might have business and managerial implications. Schermerborn (1993: 55) reports a good example of how a businessperson can lose when he/she is not aware of the cultural meaning of behaviours:

In Riyadh an American exporter once went to see a Saudi Arabian official. After entering the office he sat in a chair and crossed his legs. With the sole of his shoe exposed to the Saudi host. an insult had been delivered. Then he passed the documents to the host using his left hand. which Muslim consider unclean. Lastly he refused when offered coffee. suggesting criticism of the Saudi’s hospitality. The price for these cultural miscues was the loss of a \$ 10 million contract to a Korean better versed in Arab ways.

This indicates that success in conducting business across cultural boundaries depends on the ability to understand and deal with cultural differences. The businessmen must be self-aware and cross-culturally sensitive. They must be willing to deal with cultural differences in the areas such as language (verbal and non-verbal), time, space, and religion.

(i) Time

For cross-cultural communication to be effective, we need to understand the language of time. People from different cultures view time and the use of time differently. For instance, in the US, assigning a dead line to something is accepted practise; elsewhere in the world it may convey rudeness. In Latin America it is normal to wait in someone's office for a visit; in the US being kept visiting is viewed as disrespect or disinterest (Schermerborn 1993: 487).

The anthropologist E. T. Hall makes a distinction between "mono-chronic cultures" and "poly-chronic cultures". In the former people tend to do one thing at a time - such as, schedule a meeting and give the visitor one's undivided attention for the allotted time. This is standard American business practice. In the latter by contrast, time, is used to accomplish many different things at once. The American visitor to an Egyptian client may be frustrated by continued interruptions as people flow in and out of the office and various transactions are made (Schermerborn 1993: 487).

(ii) Space

Proxemics is an important aspect of non-verbal communications. Another case in point involves cross-cultural differences in the people use space during conversations. An American business traveller may be quite surprised at how close a counterpart from the Middle East may stand when engaged in serious business talk (Schermerborn 1993: 487).

(iii) The Politeness

In many languages pragmatic distinctions of formality, politeness, and intimacy are spread through the grammatical, lexical and phonological systems, ultimately reflecting matters of social class, status, and role. One of the best example is the pronoun system that denotes pragmatic force (Crystal 1989 :120).

German has a distinction between the du/Sie distinction in German, where grammatically there is a 'singular you' (du) and a plural 'you' (Sie) the former are sometimes describe as 'familiar' form and the latter as the 'polite' one. Other languages with similar distinction are Turkish (sen/siz), Czech (ty/vy), Italian (tu/lei), Swedish (du/ni) Greek (esi/esis) and English (itself once had such a distinction, the thou\you distinction).

The use of *Sen* 'singular you' in Turkish is a solidarity marker for those who use distinction as it is for speakers of other languages. English has no such a distinction, but speakers of English can make use of other means to show power and solidarity between languages.

Through our choice of pronominal forms when a "du/Sie" distinction exists, and of address terms, we can show our feelings toward others - solidarity, power, distance, respect, intimacy and so on. Politeness is socially prescribed. It does not mean that we must always be polite, because there may be some occasions we may be quite impolite to others. However, one could not be so if there were no rules of politeness to be broken.

In English there are different structures used to express polite requests, such as Can you...?/Could you...?/Would you...?/Will you...?/Please do this/that?/Would you mind doing...? In formal and polite requests in Turkish we use ‘plural you’ ending(iz) as in Lutfen kapıyı açar mısınız? (Will you open the door, please?)

In French, longer utterances are considered to be more polite than shorter ones in certain circumstances.

(iv) Addressing

There are different ways of addressing people: address people by title (T), by first name (FN), by last name (LN), by a nick-name, by some combination of these, or by nothing at all, so deliberately avoiding the problem. The address process may be non-reciprocal: that’s, if I call my interlocutor Mr Brown, he calls me Dinçay, or it may be reciprocal so that Mr Brown leads to Mr Köksal or all kinds of combinations are possible in English.

The asymmetric use of title, last name, and first name (TLN-FN) indicates inequality in power and mutual TLN indicates inequality and unfamiliarity while mutual FN indicates equality and familiarity (Wardhaugh 1990: 251-274).

Address by title alone is the least intimate form of address in that titles usually designed ranks or occupations as in Doctor devoid of ‘personal’ contents. Doctor Hopkins is more intimate (warm and friendly) than Doctor alone. Knowing and using our interlocutor’s first name is a sign of considerable intimacy. A nickname or pet name is used to indicate an even greater intimacy.

We can encounter some possible dangers in cross-cultural communications when expressing different relationships through what appears superficially at least, to be the same address system. The dangers are greater when we fail to appreciate how the terms in a new address system are related to one another. Ervin-Tripp (1972: 23 1) provides the following examples:

Suppose the speaker, but not the listener has a system in which familiarity, not merely solidarity is required for use of a first name. He will use TLN in the US to his new colleges and be regarded as aloof; or excessively formal. He will feel that first name usage from his colleges is brass and intrusive.

Then use of a person’s first name in Turkey does not necessarily indicate friendship or respect. In certain circumstances, the use of a first name by one person to another without reciprocity can be heavily marked for power.

In English when we are in doubt as to how to address our interlocutor it is possible to avoid the difficulty by not using any address term at all. We can say ‘Good morning’ as well as ‘Good Morning Sir- Mister...’. In other languages such avoidance may be either impolite or deficient. In France one cannot say ‘Bonjour, Merci’ or ‘Pardon’ without using an address term (Wardhaugh 1990: 261).

(2) At the socio-pragmatic level (i.e. The social conditions of language use)

Our choice of terms is usually determined by a variety of social factors: the particular occasion; the social status, or rank of the other sex; age; family relationship; occupational hierarchy; transactional status (i.e. a doctor-patient relationship); race or degree of intimacy (Wardhaugh 1990: 251-274).

Thus, pragmatics is related to *stylistics* and *sociolinguistics* in their study of social relationships existing between participants, and of the way extra-linguistic setting, activity, and subject matter can restrain the choice of language features and varieties (Crystal 1989: 121, Mezulánik 1998: 229-236).

Even though the construction of politeness expressions seems to be universal, there may be considerable room for cross-cultural misunderstanding: for instance, German speakers seem to be significantly more direct, or less polite than English speakers. In every society people can interpret politeness differently, so we have to relate pragmatic descriptions ultimately to specific social conditions.

In spite of the fact that in theory we can say anything we like, in practice we must follow the social rules that constrain the way we speak (Crystal 1989: 120). In other words, socio-pragmatics is the sociological interface of pragmatics.

(3) At the pragma-linguistic level

At the linguistic level, we focus on the specific lexical, phonological and grammatical realisations of the text as devices that maintain cohesion and coherence, such as discourse markers 'well', 'then', 'thus', or 'whereas'.

However, at the pragma-linguistic level we need to understand what the speaker is trying to do with the language, the speaker's choice of the language in social interaction and the effects of that choice on the listener. As mentioned earlier, pragmatic factors always affect our choice of sounds, structures and lexical items from the sources of the language in social interaction.

While we interpret and use utterances, depending on the shared knowledge of the real world, it is also necessary for us to use and understand the speech acts, i.e. utterances as functional units in communication. In speech act theory, utterances have three meanings:

- (i) *Propositional (locutionary speech act)*: the literal/conceptual meaning conveyed by the particular words and structures which the utterance contains.
- (ii) *Illocutionary meaning (illocutionary force)*: the effect the utterance has on the hearer. The act is performed as a result of the speaker's utterance, i.e. saying = doing (betting, promising, warning, etc.)
- (iii) *Perlocutionary act*: the particular effect the speaker's utterance has on the hearer, who might feel amused, persuaded, warned, etc.

Here it is important to bear in mind that illocutionary force of an utterance and its perlocutionary effect may not exist simultaneously. If you warn someone against a particular course of action, he may or may not take heed of your warning.

Here is a case from the real life story. A businessman from Istanbul, planning to start a business in co-operation with another person in Çanakkale, visits a friend of his to learn how trustworthy or reliable his future partner is, and says:

A: Do you know Mr Yılmaz? We are planning to start a new business here and we would like to co-operate with him. He is said to be doing good business in Çanakkale.

B: I myself had a give and take affair with him only once.

The speaker B expresses his experience with the man in question but does not explain whether he is a reliable businessman or not. Here he implies that he had a bad experience in business when he co-operated with Mr Yılmaz in the past and that he wouldn't be a reliable

partner in business life. The speaker B's utterance implies a warning and the speaker A might feel warned. However, it does not mean that the speaker A will take notice of that warning.

What is clear is that we need to understand our interlocutor's intended meaning to achieve a pragmatic communication inter-culturally and intra-culturally in the business world as well as in any aspects of life.

Leech (1996: 7) introduces into pragmatics not only Co-operative Principle but also Politeness Principle. Politeness principle operates variably in different cultures or language communities in different social situations, among different classes. Politeness expressions may vary in frequency and meaning. Many European languages do not use their word for *please*.

In business meetings and discussions it is easy to sound impolite without intending to (Bernard and Cady 1994: 59):

a) *when interrupting:*

A: So our turnover is down last year **by**...

B₁: (impolite) You haven't included the July Sales figures

B₂: (polite) I'm sorry to interrupt, but have you included the July sales figures.

b) *when correcting*

A: So we sold 49000 CD players last month.

B₁: (impolite) That's wrong! It was 59000.

B₂: (polite) Actually, I don't think that's quite correct I think the correct figure is 59000.

c) *when disagreeing*

A: Last month's fall in sales isn't particularly important

B₁: (impolite) you are wrong It is very important

B₂: (polite) I am afraid I disagree I think it is very important.

d) *when asking for repetition*

A: Sales increased by 30% in the first quarter and ...

B₁: (impolite) What did you say?

B₂: (polite) I am sorry, but could you repeat that?

From the pragmalinguistic point of view, it is also necessary to take into consideration the four maxims of Co-operative Principle when we are communicating in the business life. These are Maxims of Quality, Quantity, Relevance, and Manner (Grice 1975). It is important that a businessman

a) give the right amount of information when introducing to his counterpart in the foreign country the products and services that his company or firm offers (Maxim of Quantity).

b) try to make his contribution one that is true (Maxim of Quality). Here a businessman who says what he believes to be false to persuade his counterpart will lose all his credibility when his counterpart finds out that it is false.

- c) be relevant or contribute appropriately to immediate needs at each stage of the transaction (Maxim of Relation).
- d) make it clear what contribution he is making, and execute his performance with a reasonable dispatch (Maxim of Manner).

Therefore, in any conversation we must act in accord with a general principle that we are mutually engaged with our interlocutor(s) in an activity that is of benefit to all, that benefit being mutual understanding. We also must keep in mind that the maxims of Co-operative Principle and Politeness Principle apply differently to different contexts to variable degrees. They may be used for the purpose of implicature. They may compete with one another (Leech 1996: 69).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

To *understand our interlocutor's utterance semantically, and pragmatically*, we must take into account such notions as

- (i) the intentions of the speaker,
- (ii) the effect of utterance on listeners,
- (iii) the implications that follow from expressing something in a certain way, and
- (iv) the knowledge, beliefs, and presuppositions about the world upon which speakers and listeners rely when they interact.

To sum up, it is very important to identify the pragmatic (implicit or indirect) meaning of our interlocutor's utterance when we are communicating cross-culturally. We need cross-cultural comparisons of communicative behaviour at socio-pragmatic and pragma-linguistic levels because we might encounter potential areas of misunderstandings arising from the assumption that a construction in the target language will have the same implicatures, presuppositions, illocutionary force, perlocutionary effect and conversational uses as some analogous construction in our own language. Misinterpretation of our interlocutor's intended meaning will lead to misunderstanding or miscommunication. Pragmatic failure in communication would mean pragmatic loss in the business world. Thus, to increase linguistic and cultural awareness, it would be very useful to arrange programmes of business, commercial and industrial visits to other countries, short-term exchange programmes of managers or administrators.

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