

Who is Afraid of an Englishman?

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Once an Englishman asked a Chinese female visitor alone in England, “Are you going out tonight?” She ran away from him because she thought of it as an indirect invitation to a night of fun. What would you think? Would you take it as small, innocent social talk or treat it as a case of sexual harassment? What does pragmatics, the theory of contextual appropriateness, have to say in this case? The writers of this paper believe that if a conversation is between people from different cultures, it is very complicated to decide what context it is in. This is a dilemma for intercultural pragmatics as well as for those who are involved in the conversation. This paper is going to study the case of risk-taking in intercultural communication from a pragmatic perspective.

As is widely acknowledged, it is improper for a Chinese individual to greet his or her English acquaintance with greetings like, “Have you eaten your meal?” or “Where are you going?” Consider under what circumstances it is proper for an Englishman to put the question “Are you going out tonight?” to a Chinese woman.

Situation 1. They are roommates. E asks because C told him she was going to go somewhere that night. E checks it because he wants to make sure that he can keep the house to himself and entertain his friends.

Situation 2. They are husband and wife, and the wife has been going out a lot recently, and the husband is feeling uneasy about it. He asks, “Are you going out tonight?” to show his feelings, distrust, despair, or possibly to mean a threat.

But if they are strangers, usually such a question is not a proper initial exchange of communication. This incident actually happened once between an Englishman and a Chinese woman. When the former put the question to the latter, she was afraid that he was extending an ill-intentioned invitation.

A Case of Intercultural Communication Failure

Englishmen boast about being gentlemen and this has been widely recognized. However, some foreign visitors (especially female ones) may still fear them, as one of the authors of this article once did in England.

It was a late afternoon in June. A Chinese female visitor was strolling along one shopping lane in Hillsborough, Sheffield, UK. She went into a women’s clothes shop and expected to have a leisurely look around. She didn’t pay much attention to the middle-aged male shop-owner (or shopping assistant), who was sitting by the door reading a newspaper. She saw him but chose to leave him to his reading and began to examine some blouses and dresses.

“Are you going out tonight?” she heard the man ask, as he put down his paper and came up to her.

She became alert. *What does the man mean? Is he hinting at something? Like going out for fun? Does that amount to sexual harassment?*

“No, I am not.” She turned and got out and hurried away.

Why did the Chinese woman react that way? Is this reaction proper under such circumstances? How would a native react?

These questions are not easy to answer. And it is here that we need pragmatics.

Contextual Appropriateness and its Inability to Interpret this Intercultural Communication Case

It is universally acknowledged that communication is successful only when the hearer recognizes the speaker's communicative intention, but this is a complicated process. Various pragmatics theories have attempted to handle this within the concept of contextual appropriateness.

The Message Model sees linguistic communication as a process of encoding and decoding and predicts that communication is successful when the hearer decodes the same message that the speaker encodes; as corollary, this predicts that communication breaks down if the decoded message differs from the encoded message. One problem with this model is that many expressions are linguistically ambiguous – the hearer must determine the possible meaning of an expression that the speaker intended as operative on that occasion. To overcome ambiguity, the hearer presumes the speaker's remarks to be contextually appropriate (Levinson, 1983).

The Inferential Approach to communication believes that linguistic communication works because the speaker and the hearer share a system of inferential strategies leading from the utterances of an expression to the hearer's recognition of the speaker's communicative intent. The approach is composed of a series of strategies and a set of steps with which to determine whether a certain speech is contextually inappropriate. But what is it to be contextually appropriate? Many things contribute to this, but the most important are shared beliefs about the nature, stage, and direction of the talk-exchange that we will call Conversational Presumptions. The violation of any of these presumptions, when they are thought to be in effect, can constitute a case of contextual inappropriateness. How does the hearer know that the speaker is not speaking directly? How does the hearer know to seek an indirect use of language as well as a direct one? But if the conversation happens between people from different cultures, the task to decide what the implication is can be quite tricky and sometimes even impossible, because the two parties may understand the situation (or context) quite differently, thus what one sees as an appropriate context may mean something totally opposite to the other (Levinson, 1983).

This is what happened in the incident introduced in the beginning of this article. The Chinese woman and the English man, although they were physically in the same conversational context, were not interpreting things similarly. That's why their communication broke down.

For the Chinese female visitor, her schema of shopping, which mainly comes from her shopping experience in China, does not involve any discussion about things other than the clothing items themselves. The relationship between the shopping assistant and the customer is of a quite business-to-business type. Besides, it is very often that women go window-

shopping when they actually have no intention of buying anything, but they won't turn down a good bargain. In such cases they would consider hospitable acts from the shopping assistant too pushy and prefer to be left alone. The woman might have applied her schema of a broader social contact: the one of talking with strangers. A typical schema in China is like this: You meet tens, if not hundreds, of people in an evening walk around your residence (unless you live far away from any living community), and usually you won't speak to any of them if they are not an acquaintance, let alone talk to them personally. Also consider the woman's recent knowledge of the security situation in Sheffield and some dos and don'ts for a young woman living there. She has been informed that in England there are rare cases of rape, but women (especially Asian women) may encounter strangers and be asked to go out to have fun. Hillsborough is one of the roughest areas in Sheffield, which is known for its football hooligans.

For the English shopping assistant, things are different when it comes to talking to a female customer. Firstly, from a broader view on social talk, it is quite natural to talk to unfamiliar people, even to strangers in public places like in the garden or in the street. In England, you may meet no one during an hour walk – people simply don't walk that much (they do walk quite a lot in the open countryside), but they drive. People will greet each other more often than not when they meet in the street. They ask about time, make small talk about the weather, or simply offer a smile and a casual "hello." Secondly, from a shopping assistant's point of view, initiating small talk with his or her customer is both natural and necessary (as it may increase the possibility of promoting sales). The shopping assistant may give certain advice on what to buy if the customer looks hesitant. Many customers shop for something special for a certain occasion like a party. So the assistant may ask about the purpose of a certain buying act. And questions like "Are you going out tonight?" may mean "Are you looking for a proper dress for this occasion?"

Cognitive Environment and Selection of Assumptions

According to Sperber and Wilson (2001), it is not the traditional context that enables the hearer to deduce the speaker's intention. Instead, it is the cognitive environment that actually decides the result of communication. An individual's cognitive environment is a set of assumptions available to him or her. And the process that the hearer interprets what he or she hears is a process of selection of assumptions. Usually there would be more than one assumption available and the selection process would yield different outcomes based on which assumption comes to the top of the selection list.

In their book, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* (2001), Sperber and Wilson provide a few devices that help us understand why a certain assumption beats others and comes out as the decisive one:

1. You hear what you can afford to hear. Ranciere's Scene is more than just a context, understood as a common background, or platform, of conversation. Rather, the question is about the underlying presuppositions making this very context possible. This context of common possibilities is a "scene," on which the actors can perform within the limits of their roles and the action of the play. Their entire rationality in acting rests on the affordable (What can I do, given the context?) rather than exclusively on the thinkable and cognizable (What can I say and understand,

given the context?).

2. Certain speech is prescribed on some institutionalized activity. Indirect speech acts derive their force not just from their lexico-semantic build-up, but from the situation in which they are appropriately uttered. Speech acts, in order to be effective, have to be situated. That is to say, they both rely on, and actively create, the situation in which they are realized. Thus a situated speech act comes close to what is called a speech event in ethnographic and anthropological studies: speech as centered on an institutionalized social activity of a certain kind, such as teaching, visiting a doctor's office, participating in a tea-ceremony, and so on. In all such activities, speech is, in a way, prescribed: only certain utterances can be expected and will thus be acceptable; conversely, the participants in the situation, by their very acceptance of their own and other's utterances establish and reaffirm the social situation in which the utterances are uttered and in which they find themselves as utterers (Sperber & Wilson, 2001).

If we combine these two theories and apply them to the communication we are talking about, we can explain why the Chinese woman, who has been studying and teaching English for 20 years and understands to a certain high degree the rather institutionalized occasion of shopping, chose the assumption that the man had bad intentions and responded accordingly: she ran away from the potential danger. That was her first response and the safest option for her. She guessed that the man could have meant no harm, and his question could have been an institutional activity; i.e., to socialize with his customer. The writer of this article once told this experience to an English acquaintance and consulted his opinion on the intention of the shop-owner. His first response was that the man was trying to be polite. When asked about the possibility that the man was extending an indirect invitation for fun, he said he could be, and the chance for either possible intention was 50/50.

But under those circumstances, she had to take the safest course, and she could not afford the result if she chose the second assumption.

Conclusion and Implication for Foreign Language Learning

Some intercultural misunderstandings are due to the presence of a non-acknowledged, and hence not shared, pragmatic presupposition. The presuppositions of a dialogue constitute the indispensable link between the spoken words and the world of their users that is needed to form the appropriate pragmatic act. To learn a foreign language always involves getting accustomed to the institutional speech, which might be quite different than one's native language. And to use a foreign language in real communication to do things is always a process of negotiation, through which the ambiguity of the utterances can be reduced so that the real intention can get through.

References

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 Levinson (1983). *Pragmatics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.