

# A cross-cultural pragmatic investigation : discussion using the film *The Last Samurai*

映画ラスト・サムライに見る異文化間語用論上の問題点

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## Abstract

Communication across cultures is often a very difficult undertaking and requires pragmatic and socio-pragmatic competence. The field of pragmatics incorporates the study of speaker meaning, contextual meaning and how more is communicated than merely what is said. Cross-cultural pragmatics focuses on the processes involved in the production of language across cultures, the producers of language within various contexts in addition to the interpretation of utterances and the aims of the utterances. This paper explores the cross-cultural pragmatic issues that arise from interactions between characters in the film *The Last Samurai*. The aim of this paper is to identify and discuss these issues and relate them to various cross-cultural pragmatic theories to ascertain how various cultural factors can influence context, language and interpretation of meaning in these contexts. In addition, opportunities for facilitating pragmatic competence in the classroom are presented.

## 要約

異文化間コミュニケーションは、語用論（プラグマティクス）、日常的語用論の能力が必要になってくるほど難しい課題になる時が多くある。語用論の分野には、話者が意味するところ、文脈からの意味合い、単に言われた言葉以外にどのような方法で意志が伝わっていくかという研究が含まれる。異文化間の語用論では、発話行為の意図とその解釈や、多様な文脈中での発話者に加え、異文化間の話者の発話プロセスに焦点を当てている。この論文では、映画「ラスト・サムライ」の登場人物の交流から発生する異文化間の語用論に関する問題を探求する。これらの問

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題を明確にし、検討を加え、各種理論と関係づけることにより、種々の文化的要素が、文脈、言い回し、そしてその文脈における解釈に対してどのように影響するか確認するのが本論文の目的である。さらに、講義室内で語用論の理解を高めるための機会も提供される。

## Introduction

Communication that characterises everyday spoken interactions between speakers is a far more onerous task than most people realise. In today's globalized world, interpreting communication across cultural boundaries requires not only an understanding of the speaker's aims within a given context but understanding of how culture can and does influence these types of interactions (Barron, 2003). Cross-cultural pragmatics is concerned with the production of language across cultural contexts to promote understanding of the producers of language within their cultural contexts and the influence of culture on how utterances are produced and interpreted (Mey, 2006).

Blum-Kulka (1997) stated that language is the primary means that people use to communicate, however, simply knowing the words and grammar of a language and how to use these to produce utterances does not ensure successful communication. To understand cross-cultural communication it is imperative to understand the culture and cultural contexts in which utterances are produced, in addition to the cultural schemata of the interactants (Wierzbicka, 2003). This type of cross-cultural pragmatic awareness facilitates an understanding of how the culture, the knowledge structures within individuals and the cultural contexts influence the production and interpretation of utterances, the intended meaning or purpose of these utterances and the effect of these utterances (Kecskes & Zhang, 2009). These are the fundamental goals of pragmatics and cross-cultural pragmatics as they facilitate communication in everyday life within and across various cultural contexts (Goddard, 2009).

## Background

The cross-cultural interactions chosen for discussion are taken from four dialogues from the film *The Last Samurai*. The two main characters of the film are Captain Nathan Algren, an American veteran of the Civil War and the Indian Wars, and Samurai Lord Moritsugu Katsumoto, a Japanese warrior-poet who was once Emperor Meiji's most-trusted teacher. Other characters include Nobutada, Katsumoto's son, who is lord of the village where the Samurai live and who befriends Algren, Lieutenant

Colonel Bagley, Captain Algren's commanding officer, Mr. Omura, an industrialist and pro-reform politician who dislikes the old samurai, Emperor Meiji, the emperor of Japan during the Meiji period and Samurai Ujio, the most dedicated samurai under Katsumoto. Simon Graham is a British interpreter for Captain Algren, Taka is Katsumoto's sister and the wife of Samurai Hirotaro, who Nathan Algren kills in the opening scenes of the film.

### **Dialogue One: Discussion**

Dialogue one, is characterised by cross-cultural pragmatic and pragmatic issues that are related to the cooperative principle, politeness, face-threatening acts (FTAs) and conversational implicature. These can be better understood by different cultural schemata, or the pre-existing knowledge structures we have as a result of the culture in which we live (Wierzbicka, 2003). The first issue relates to the cooperative principle as a result of Algren failing to respond to Katsumoto's request in line one.

*L1 Katsumoto: What is your name*

*L2 Algren: (3) [silence]*

*L3 Ujio: Burei mono - kotaero!! {You insolent so and so answer!}*

Grice (1975) identified that most speakers follow certain conventions when conversing in order to reach a common goal. The philosopher noted that those involved in conversation wish for it to work out and will cooperate together to facilitate reaching a common goal. The cooperative principle posits that when using language, speakers will often adhere to the cooperative principle or over-arching assumptions related to the use of language. The cooperative principle guides and influences conversations as speakers tend to follow four maxims that include quantity, manner, quality and relevance. Interactions are more effective and successful when both interactants adhere to these social conventions. It is the first maxim that Algren has flouted by failing to respond to Katsumoto's request.

Yule (1996) emphasised that in a conversation there is an assumption by both parties that the other will provide an appropriate amount of information. Levinson, (1983), noted that when speakers flout any or all of Grice's maxims, then conversation and communication can sometimes break down. Algren, in line two, by not providing an appropriate amount of information, flouts the maxim of quantity and deliberately

creates an implicature. Implicatures are created when politeness maxims are purposefully flouted or ignored and this often results in additional meaning being conveyed. Totman (1993) highlighted the importance of introductions in Japanese culture, especially between warriors during feudal times. By flouting the quantity maxim and choosing not to respond, Algren is portraying himself as a very rude person according to samurai culture. Proper introduction of oneself and the answering of questions from someone of higher social status are important elements of Japanese cultural etiquette (Kindaichi & Hirano, 1989). This issue can be best described as a difference in cultural schemata, which are like knowledge templates that are comprised of pre-existing knowledge structures developed at the cultural level of cognition, rather than at a psychological level (Bowe & Martin, 2007). Algren's cultural schemata influence his behaviour and his utterances, or in this case, his non-production of an utterance in accordance with his cultural knowledge. He views it as normal not to engage in discourse with his enemies. On the other hand, Katsumoto and the other samurai are outraged by such insolence and state that in Japanese culture this is considered rude, even among enemies. Algren's insolence results in Ujio's face threatening act (FTA) in line three. Yule (1996) defined a FTA as an utterance that can threaten a person's public self-image.

The second issue in this dialogue is the FTA resulting from Ujio's command to Algren to answer Katsumoto's question. Cutting (2008) notes that it is a universal characteristic to respect each other's self-image and where possible avoid FTAs. FTAs can be redressed with negative and/or positive politeness. Ujio does not redress the FTA because of his status and because of Algren's insolence. Social status is very important in Japanese culture and social hierarchy demands that the appropriate forms of Japanese language are used (Fukada & Asato, 2004). People of the same or higher social status will use both polite and honorific language and will redress FTAs to ensure their requests or remarks save face (Imaeda, 2004). People of lower social class or those being commanded will be spoken down to, as illustrated by Ujio's utterance in line three. The use of the verb *kotae*, to reply, in the command form *kotaero* produces the FTA and signifies the use of a strong command because of Algren's insolence and because of his lower social status (Kasper, 1992). FTAs are usually redressed as they can negatively influence a hearer's self-image and result in communication breakdown (Cutting, 2008).

In lines four and five, Katsumoto is communicating more than what is actually

said, a conversational implicature, which Thomas (1995) outlined as an important pragmatic concept.

*L4 Katsumoto: Ujio leave him be (3) this is my son's village (1) we are deep in the mountains*

*L5 and the winter is coming*

*L6 Algren: uuhh [slumping to the ground]*

Cutting (2008) states that in conversations, speakers and hearers assume that they each wish to convey some meaning through what is directly said and through conveying meaning indirectly through the use of implying. Conveying more than what is directly communicated in a particular context of the utterance is known as conversational implicature (Yule, 1996). Katsumoto implies that Algren will not be able to escape and expects that Algren will be able to work out on his own the meaning he wishes to convey through the utterance that he produces in lines four and five. This becomes evident when Algren realises what is implied and that he cannot escape because of their location and the imminent change in the weather so he slumps to the ground and surrenders.

## **Dialogue Two: Discussion**

The issue in this dialogue results in communication breakdown occurring because of socio-pragmatic failure, which Thomas (1983) defines as the failure to perform the correct illocutionary act that the situation requires. In this context, this can be defined as the link between the offering of food to Algren by Taka and Algren's subsequent communicative actions. Algren deviated with regard to appropriateness of meaning (Ellis, 2008). These failures can stem from perceptions of what is considered appropriate linguistic behaviour across cultures and are determined by our pre-existing cultural schema (Wierzbicka, 2003). In Algren's culture, upon receiving something, a person should express gratitude, therefore producing the utterance thank you; however, this is inappropriate in Japanese culture. Instead of uttering an expression of gratitude, Algren should have uttered an expression of apology.

Long (2010) states that in place of gratitude expressions Japanese can and often use apology expressions. This phenomenon is explained by Coulman (as cited in Long, 2010) as the use of such expressions being derived from a shift in interpretation as the object of gratitude is viewed as an object of regret. A cultural value of indebtedness, which is

a central aspect of politeness in Japanese culture results in the utterance *sumimasen* or excuse me, which is an apology expression, rather than *thankyou* or *arigatou*, which is a gratitude expression, being used in situations resembling the situation in dialogue two, to facilitate socio-linguistic competence and to avoid socio-pragmatic failure (Ide, 1998).

L1 Nobutada: {*Kochira e kochira e dozo dozo*} *this way this way please please*

「*Algren is passed a bowl of food by Taka*」

L2 Algren: *Thank you*

L3 Taka: 「*speaking to Nobutaka in Japanese*」 *I want him out of my house?*

L4 *He is rude and he stinks (2) I can't put up with it anymore*

*Sumimasen* or excuse me is the more appropriate utterance as it conveys to the interlocutor that the speaker is indebted to them for their kindness and offering (Long, 2010). The use of *sumimasen* rather than thank you is the more appropriate form as it symbolically marks the discourse with indebtedness (Ide, 1998). Because Algren is not aware of the appropriate linguistic behaviour and does not show indebtedness to Taka, she is offended and this results in communication breakdown, as she believes he is rude.

### Dialogue Three: Discussion

In dialogue three, the issues relate to the pragmatic concept of politeness and influence the utterances that are produced and the communication event as a whole. The communication event takes place in a highly formal situation, in which soldiers are being introduced to the Emperor Meiji in front of his military and political advisors. The Emperor in Japan is considered divine and the situation therefore requires appropriate language and conduct (Totman, 1993). The Emperor wishes to ask Algren directly about the Indians, against whom he fought. Despite his experiences and having fought against the Indians, Algren avoids a FTA, using positive politeness, tact and generosity to produce appropriate linguistic behaviour (Cutting, 2008). Algren attempts to claim common ground with the Emperor by agreeing with his statement and possibly attending to his interests by agreeing that the Indians are brave. Brown and Levinson (1987) outline this type of strategy as one of the main types of positive politeness strategies. Through his utterance in line nine, Algren also adheres to the politeness maxims of tact and generosity, as he minimises the cost to the other and maximises benefit to the other and minimises benefit to self and maximises cost to self respectively

(Yule, 1996).

*L1 Omura: The divine emperor Meiji bids you welcome he is grateful*

*L2 for the assistance your country offers*

*L3 we hope to accomplish the same national harmony you enjoy in your homeland*

*L4 Emperor: Did they fight against the Indians?*

*L5 Bagley: We have your highness (1) the red man is a brutal adversary*

*L6 Emperor: I want to ask and hear from Algren*

*L7 Omura: The Emperor wishes to ask Captain Algren if it is true that the Indians wear eagle*

*L8 feathers and paint their faces before going into battle and that they have no fear*

*L9 Algren: (3) They are very brave*

*[Emperor moves forward]*

*L10 Graham: and bow*

*L11 Emperor: thank you (1) very much*

*[Everyone bows except the Emperor as he returns to his throne]*

By adhering to the tact maxim, Algren ensures the Emperor is shown to be correct in front of all present, thus preserving the Emperor's face. In addition, Algren maximises cost to himself by stating the Indians are brave and not discussing himself or his heroics which shows remarkable character, since Algren was praising his former enemy. It may have been the Emperor's intention all along, to test Algren and see what type of person he was and determine whether he was capable of such gestures.

#### **Dialogue Four: Discussion**

Paltridge (2006) states that key aspects of the context regarding the production and interpretation of utterances include the situational context, background knowledge context and the co-textual context. Situational context is comprised of information regarding the immediate physical environment and interpretations of it. The immediately preceding utterances form the co-textual context and general cultural and interpersonal assumptions contribute to the background knowledge context and play a major role in interpretations of what the speakers know about each other (Sperber & Wilson, 1995). Despite speakers from particular cultural backgrounds displaying considerable variation in their interpretations, they will nevertheless form assumptions based on the situational

and co-textual contexts and share interpretive assumptions based on experiences within a socio-cultural context and will draw on these to interpret and convey meaning (Kasper, Nguyen & Yoshimi, 2010).

Katsumoto is attempting to establish himself and Algren as members of the same group. He is producing utterances that communicate that they are both warriors through his utterances in lines one, three and nine and that they are both students of war, which he states in line nine.

*「Both speakers are dressed in military attire. Algren in a blue cavalry uniform, Katsumoto is samurai hakama and carrying a katana (sword)」*

*L1 Katsumoto: You fought against the red Indians?*

*L2 Algren: (3) yes*

*L3 Katsumoto: tell me of your part in this war*

*L4 Algren: why-*

*L5 Katsumoto: I wish to learn*

*L6 Algren: read a book-!*

*L7 Katsumoto: I would rather have a good conversation*

*L8 Algren: why*

*L9 Katsumoto: because we are both students of war (3) uh*

*L10 Algren: don't you have a rebellion to lead*

*L11 Katsumoto: who was your general*

Cutting (2008) noted that interlocutors will attempt to establish themselves as members of the same group for the purpose of assuming mutual knowledge of everything that members of that group know. Katsumoto is producing utterances to facilitate the sharing of interpersonal knowledge in order to gain access to privileged personal knowledge regarding Algren. Katsumoto produces such utterances as his purpose for detaining Algren and engaging him in discourse is for the purpose of knowing his enemy.

Whether or not Algren believes that they share any background knowledge is debatable. However, in line ten Algren produces an utterance to facilitate non-breakdown of the communication experience. Lines four and six were very direct, abrupt and somewhat hostile utterances, whereas the utterance in line ten is a little more engaging and accommodating. Cutting (2008) stated that speakers often modify their



expressions and accommodate their attitudes. Speakers often modify their attitudes to appear less hostile and to sustain the interaction. This may have been Algren's purpose in producing the utterance in line ten.

Grundy (2000) posited that speakers form utterances that they believe are appropriate to the context and to those they are addressing to convey their intended meaning. As a result, Algren's utterances in lines 12, 14, 16, 18 and 20 become less accommodating and are somewhat hostile, indicating that he wishes to distinguish himself from Katsumoto (Cutting, 2008). The context played a vital role in the communication experience and contributed to the production of utterances that were aimed at assuming mutual knowledge regarding background cultural knowledge and utterances that would facilitate verbal interactions for gaining privileged interpersonal knowledge (Sperber & Wilson, 1995).

*L12 Algren: Lieutenant Colonel Custer*

*L13 Katsumoto: I know this name (1) he killed many warriors*

*L14 Algren: yes many warriors he was arrogant and foolhardy he fought against 2000 indians*

*L15 Katsumoto: 2000 indians! How many men for Custer?*

*L16 Algren: 211!*

*L17 Katsumoto: I like this General Custer*

*L18 Algren: he was a murderer who fell in love with his own legend his troopers died for it*

*L19 Katsumoto: I think this is a very good death*

*L20 Algren: well maybe you can have one just like it someday*

*L21 Katsumoto: If it is my destiny*

## **Conclusion**

Communication between interlocutors that do not share linguistic or cultural background can result in communication breakdown. Identification and understanding of the pre-existing knowledge structures humans have that are culturally determined can facilitate understanding of our cultural schemata that influence thought and behaviour and ultimately language. The application and understanding of cross-cultural pragmatics highlights the unfamiliarity of cultural schemata that contribute to miscommunication and misunderstanding in addition to pragmatic theories that facilitate identification and

understanding of the factors that contributed to the communication breakdown (Bowe & Martin, 2007).

The movie *The Last Samurai* was characterised by cross-cultural communication and the application of relevant pragmatic theories contributed to the identification and understanding of factors that contributed to communication breakdown in addition to the production of certain utterances. The discussion facilitates a greater understanding of reasons for communication breakdown involved in cross-cultural communication through the application of the pragmatic theories presented here.

### **Facilitating pragmatic competence in the classroom**

The issues in dialogue one relating to the cooperative principle and conversational implicature provide an opportunity to teach second language (L2) students about pragmatics. Instruction that shows students how speakers cooperate to reach a common goal by adhering to the cooperative principle and the four maxims that guide and influence conversations that include quantity, manner, quality and relevance can facilitate improved L2 use and understanding of cultural and linguistic norms. In addition, instruction regarding conversational implicatures can demonstrate to L2 learners how the deliberate flouting of the maxims can result in additional meaning being conveyed as well as assist in the acquisition of essential knowledge regarding the interpretation and conveying of implied meaning (Kasper, 2001).

The issues in dialogue two regarding socio-pragmatic failure relate to cultural knowledge structures that ultimately influence linguistic behaviour. Ellis (2008) notes that communication breakdowns resulting from socio-pragmatic failure are common for L2 learners in situations where an L2 learner apologizes when a native speaker would thank someone and when responding to compliments. To overcome these types of communication failures, teachers can teach L2 learners about appropriate cultural and linguistic knowledge and increase their socio-pragmatic competence by outlining situations in which socio-pragmatic failure can arise.

The third dialogue presents an ideal opportunity to instruct L2 learners about politeness. Students can increase awareness and understanding of politeness through instruction that outlines strategies that show awareness of another person's face, or public self-image (Yule, 1996). In addition, highlighting to students the importance of being aware of social distance or closeness and instructing students in how to preserve

other's self-image either through politeness or face saving acts can improve their pragmatic competence and their overall L2 communicative competence (Wierzbicka, 2003).

Dialogue four highlights the importance of context for L2 learners, as much of how language is used depends on context (Cutting, 2008). L2 learners require understanding of how the situational context and background knowledge context can lead to assumptions regarding speakers establishing themselves as members of different or the same groups. In addition, once speakers have established themselves, these assumptions will ultimately influence their perceptions of mutual knowledge and their perception of shared attitudes towards situational context, cultural contexts and co-textual contexts and their choices of language (Sperber & Wilson, 1995).

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