Assessing Danish and Chinese Business Professionals' Pragmatic Competence in Global English

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1. Introduction

Global English is the lingua franca of global business communication. However, few studies have assessed business professionals' pragmatic competence in global English. Pragmatic competence refers to the ability to use language appropriately in the socio-cultural context of a foreign language. Comparing different varieties of global English will make it possible to identify the regularities and differences, thereby avoiding intercultural communication pitfalls (Thomas, 1983). In this article I will provide an assessment of Chinese and Danish business professionals' pragmatic competence in global English (Zhang, 2019), as part of the large-scale Danish research project of Global English Business Communication (2012-2019) funded by the Carlsberg Foundation. On the basis of this, I will then discuss the pedagogical implications for foreign language and intercultural communication educators.

2. Major findings in the Global English Business Communication Project

The data collection was carried out in a Danish multinational company, including its headquarters and Chinese and British subsidiaries. 121 Danish, Chinese, and British business professionals took part in closed role plays in their mother tongues and in English. Respondents were presented with illustrative cartoons and performed immediately after an instructor read scenario descriptions. Scenarios were designed according to the conceptual framework of imperative frames (Durst-Andersen, 1995, 2009), with variations on power and social distance (Brown & Levinson, 1987), as well as formality of the social context (Van Dijk, 1977). Imperative frames involve societal rule-focused deontic modality, such as permission, prohibition, obligation and cancellation of an obligation (Durst-Andersen, 1995, 2009). The aim was to uncover similarities and differences in cultural norms in the problem-solving situations. The data in this article were generated from the scenarios involving the imperative frame of *Cancellation of an obligation,* which presuppose a prior conversation consisting of a *Request and a Promise.* Table 1 shows the scenario descriptions and illustrative cartoons respectively. The data analysis shows some interesting results with regard to choice of emotional expressions, message structure, and meta-reflection utterances.

Moving Scenario

Instructor: Imagine that you are at home. You have asked your good friend, John, to help you move into a new apartment tomorrow. He has happily agreed to do so and even taken the day off from work. But then your family surprises you by arriving to help you move. This now makes John's help unnecessary, so you have to call him and say: _____

Meeting Scenario

Instructor: Imagine that you are at work. The manager of the Carlsberg IT department in England, Mr. Johnson, has arrived at your work this morning. You would like his opinion on a project and ask him if he could possibly attend your meeting this afternoon. The time does not suit him too well, but he agrees to come anyway. Unexpectedly, the meeting is cancelled. You have to call Mr. Johnson on his mobile to inform him about the situation, so you say: _____
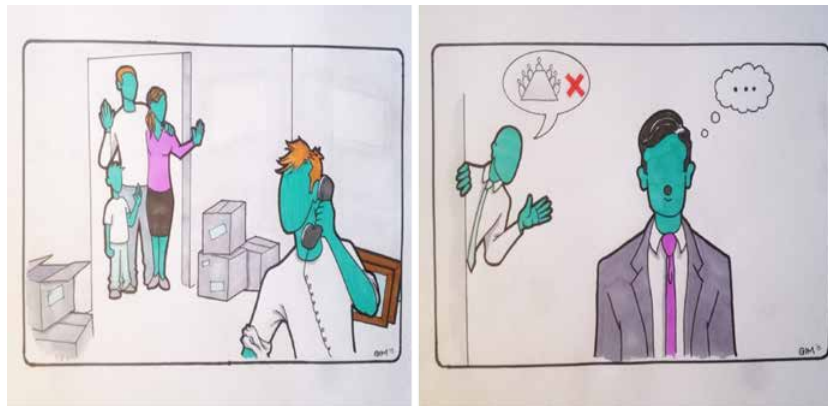
Table 1: *Descriptions of the two scenarios involving Cancellation of an obligation*

Meeting Scenario

In the Meeting Scenario, an unexpected result is the notable difference in the percentage of respondents choosing apologies across the groups (see Figure 2.). It seems that it was regarded as more face-threatening to cancel the meeting by the Chinese and British groups than by the Danish groups.
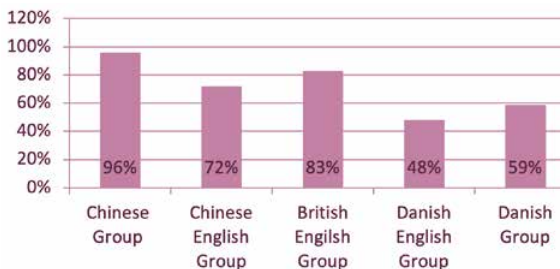

Figure 1: *Illustrative cartoons for the Moving Scenario and the Meeting Scenario*

The Chinese respondents have a tendency to apply a twofold strategy in both Chinese and Chinese English: an apologetic expression at the beginning and a thanking expression at the end (see [1] and [2]). The twofold strategy is in agreement with Scollon and Scollon's (1994) description of Chinese conversational patterns consisting of "facework + topic + facework". Further, intensified apologetic attitude in Chinese English seems to be transferred from the choice of formal apologetic word duibuqi ("apologize") in the Chinese mother tongue data.

[1] 约翰逊先生，真的对不起，今天临时有事，取消今天的会议，谢谢你! Mr. Johnson, **I really need to apologize.** The meeting is cancelled due to some suddenly announced reasons. **Thank you!)**
[2] Hello Johnson, **I'm sorry** that the meeting is cancelled for some reason. **I'm terribly sorry that** I booked your time but cannot make it. **Sorry and thank you**

In comparison, Danish speakers tend to start with an account of the new situation (46%) with an optional *desværre* ("unfortunately") (see [3]). However, Danish English speakers tend to start with "I'm sorry to…" (44%) (see [4]). It indicates the information focus with a situational regret adverbial is sufficient to redress the situation in Danish, yet a

Figure 2: *Percentages of respondents using apologies*

first-person apology is preferred by Danish English speakers.

[3] Hej, det bliver desværre ikke til noget det møde som jeg nævnte for dig tidligere i dag. Så du behøves ikke deltage alligevel, men tak fordi du ellers tog dig tid til det.

[4] Mr. Johnson, I'm sorry to tell you, but the meeting we talked about earlier today got cancelled. Therefore there won't be any need for you to drop by. I'm sure we'll have another meeting where I would appreciate, if you would drop by.

Interestingly, the attitude difference between the Chinese English and Danish English groups could be traced in the choice of apologetic words in the mother-tongue groups. Table 1 illustrates an overview of the frequencies of Danish and Chinese apologetic expressions. 42% of the Chinese apologetic words are verbs *duibuqi* ("apologize"), whereas 50% of the Danish apologetic words are adverbials *desværre* ("unfortunately"). It indicates that Chinese respondents tend to take more responsibilities for the meeting cancellation than the Danish respondents. It is necessary to acknowledge that the perceived power distance of the subordinate-superior relationship in the institutional context might also play a role, because Danish culture is acknowledged to be more egalitarian than Chinese culture (Hofstede, 1991). However, the same tendency is also found in the Moving Scenario with friend-friend relationship.

Apology Intensity	Frequency of Danish apologetic expressions (n=30)		Frequency of Chinese apologetic expressions (n=24)	
Low	*Desværre* ("unfortunately")	50%	*Buhaoyisi* ("unfortunately")	33%
Middle	*være ked af* ("be sorry")	23%	*Baoqian* ("be sorry")	25%
High	*beklage* ("apologize")	23%	*Duibuqi* ("apologize")	42%
	Undskylde ("apologize")	3%		

Table 1. *Frequency of Danish and Chinese apologetic expressions*

Moving Scenario
In the Moving Scenario, most Chinese respondents found it difficult to cancel their promise-based mutual agreement, whereas the British and Danish respondents experienced it as a release for the hearer. The release attitude is observed in British English Example [5] and Danish English Example [7], because of the reference to "off duties" and the use of option-giving, respectively. A prototypical Danish English response consists of a combination of account and option-giving, which prioritize information and hearer's self-autonomy (see [7]). The meta-reflection utterance *"Det tror jeg Martin vil være glad for"* in example [6] is interesting to mention, because it illustrates the Danish speaker's expectation of the hearer's thought. Interestingly though, 52% of the Danish group preferred thanking expressions and none of them used apologizing expressions.

[5] I'm so sorry, but mama and papa have just arrived, and I am so grateful but it's ok you can officially stand down from duties, but a million thank yous and I owe you a beer. And go and have an amazing day off.

[6] Hej Martin, virkelig mange gange tak for du gad hjælpe i dag, men min er familie trådt til, så du behøver ikke at komme og hjælpe alligevel. (Det tror jeg Martin vil være glad for)

[7] John, my whole family has showed up now, if you want to come, I will be really happy, but if you don't, it's OK.

In strikingly sharp contrast, 48% of the Chinese group used apologies, indicating a strongly perceived severity of the offence of cancellation. The Chinese meta-reflection utterance in [8] exemplifies the socio-cultural logic: the apology and dinner compensation are related to the *mafan* (inconvenience) he caused for the hearer. Pragmatic transfer of such a combined strategy of apology and compensation is found in Chinese English (see [9]). However, Chinese English speakers did not necessarily translate this structure, as 92% of them preferred thanking rather than apologizing (13%).

[8] 不好意思，亲戚朋友过来帮我搬家，然后,可能就不需要你了　[为表歉意，我还是下次请他吃饭，做个赔罪，毕竟还是麻烦到他] I'm sorry. My family and friends have come to help me move. So maybe, there is no need for you anymore. **[In order to show my deep apology, I will next time invite him for dinner and apologize. After all I have troubled him].**

[9] Sorry John. My family is coming to help me to move house. I am sorry for calling for your help, but now it is not needed. **Maybe I can buy you dinner for this. Sorry**

Discussion

Since Brown and Levinson's (1987) seminal work on politeness, scholarly debate has centered on the conceptualization of face and the universality of politeness. In Brown and Levinson's theory, positive face (the want to be desirable to others) and negative face (the want to be unimpeded by others) are used to explain linguistic polite behaviors. However, Chinese scholars (Gu, 1990; Mao, 1994) point out that Chinese politeness is prescriptive. Moral face *lian* and social face *mianzi* are closely linked with societal norms of Confucianism.

What is going on in these situations, when the Chinese speakers apologize more frequently than the Danish speakers across the two scenarios? One possible interpretation is that apologies in Anglo-Saxon cultures are associated with a legal sense of responsibility in contrast to remorse and moral responsibilities in Asian cultures

(Goddard & Wierzbicka, 1997). According to Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, a prototypical situational interpretation process of the two scenarios would be in accordance with the following three steps: (1) the speaker's request is an imposition on the hearer; (2) the hearer's promise is an impingement of the hearer's autonomy and (3) the act of cancelling is to remove the imposition from the hearer. So, it is a release for the hearer.

In the Chinese context, a favour-based social debt *(renqing)* was already established when the hearer promised to help. The favour means that the hearer has given face to the speaker. So the speaker has troubled the hearer twice, firstly by requesting and secondly by cancelling. Cancelling obligations therefore damages relations with the hearer. The Chinese apology is an important brick to restore interpersonal harmony (Ran, 2018) and to show the speaker's trustworthiness, an important virtue in Confucian ethics.

The results point further to different perceptions of obligation. The sense of obligation is fundamental in Chinese Confucianism. Obligations can reflect and reinforce warm and lasting human relationships in collectivist cultures (Yum 1988). Fulfilling obligations in different relations is important for gaining Chinese moral face *lian* (Hu, 1944). However, in the western context, obligations have been pictured as "burdensome or irksome things, to be fulfilled, if at all, by gritting one's teeth in conscious determination" (Goffman, 1967, p.49).

Despite the normative divergence, it is necessary to be aware that there are also minor convergence tendencies in the data in the Meeting Scenario, moderated by other factors, such as different power distance and institutional expectations (Drew and Heritage, 1992).

3. Recommendations for practice

One central element of successful intercultural communication is the pragmatic competence in a foreign language. Misunderstandings or conflicts are likely to occur if interactants from different cultures are unaware of the implicit cognitive and sociocultural differences underlying language use. In the following I will give some recommendations for educators.

First, it is vital to engage students in reflecting on situational contexts. For instance, if the teacher decides to discuss the cultural-specificity of apologies, it is useful to find crisis or conflict communication video clips to introduce the contrast. How serious is the offence? Who has the obligation to apologize? Which apologetic expression is mandatory to manage the crisis? How do recipients with another cultural background evaluate the apology in terms of politeness, sincerity and effect? In communication situations in organizations, it would be beneficial to discuss and reflect on the impact of institution contexts, such as power distance, institutional expectations, standardized communication procedures, etc.

Second, more attention should be paid to appropriate

formulations of emotions in a foreign language, because they are important linguistic resources for managing relations. The Chinese preference for apologizing and Danish preference for thanking is identified as a potential source of intercultural miscommunication. Further, it would be beneficial to distinguish the degree of apology intensity and how different combinations could be used in contexts.

Third, it is necessary to raise awareness of politeness theory, and how different societal norms and cultural values influence the way we interact with others in social practices. A more nuanced understanding of the East-West divide of politeness is also needed in different situational contexts. For pedagogical interventions in the classroom, it would be interesting to ask students to perform in both English and mother tongue and reflect on how we do things differently or similarly in different language modes.

Finally, be aware of ethnocentric judgment and cultural resistance from students, when the cultural values and politeness principles embedded in a foreign language are different from those of their mother tongue. Scholars find that Danish students resist using polite form of German address Sie in the CLIL classroom because it violates the cultural value of egalitarianism, causing cultural cognitive dissonance (Blasco & Ørsnes, 2018). Such cultural cognitive dissonance was also found with Danish and Chinese professionals in relation to the pragmatic conventions of apology use in my study. When another group of

Chinese interviewees were presented with a Danish prototypical utterance from the Moving Scenario, an immediate response was "I didn't know Danes are so impolite. Why don't they apologize?" When Danish interviewees were presented with a Chinese prototypical utterance, their reaction was "why should they apologize?"

To sum up, scenario-based assessment and learning would allow educators to focus on the intertwined relationship between language use, cognition and culture in specific communication situations. It is hoped that scenario-based learning could be used to foster trust and collaboration in various intercultural communication situations.

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