

Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Failure

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Most of our misunderstandings of other people are not due to any inability to hear them or to parse their sentences or to understand their words . . . A far more important source of difficulty in communication is that we so often fail to understand a speaker's intention.

(Miller 1974)

I have given the term 'pragmatic failure' to the inability to understand 'what is meant by what is said'. In this paper I argue that pragmatic failure is an area of cross-cultural communication breakdown which has received very little attention from language teachers. I suggest that there is one area of pragmatic failure ('pragmalinguistic failure') which is fairly easy to overcome. It is simply a question of highly conventionalized usage which can be taught quite straightforwardly as 'part of the grammar'. The second area ('sociopragmatic failure') is much more difficult to deal with, since it involves the student's system of beliefs as much as his/her knowledge of the language. I argue that it is essential to avoid prescriptivism in this very sensitive area of language in use. To do so we must draw on insights from theoretical pragmatics and develop ways of heightening and refining students' metapragmatic awareness, so that they are able to express themselves as they choose.

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper I discuss the nature of pragmatic failure and ways in which students may be helped to acquire pragmatic competence. I refer frequently to 'cross-cultural' pragmatic failure, which may give the unfortunate impression that pragmatic failure is restricted primarily to interactions between native and non-native speakers, and which further implies that there exists in (for example) British society a single system of pragmatic values. This is by no means the case. Regional, ethnic, political, and class differences are undoubtedly reflected as much by a diversity of pragmatic norms as they are by linguistic variations. I have made no attempt to make this variety explicit, since I am concerned here to make only the most general points. While acknowledging that the norms I describe are by no means *the* norms of British society, but rather, those of the culturally dominant strata, I feel with Scollon and Scollon (1981:13) that:

... the patterns we are describing hold true in a general way and are the patterns on which people have developed ethnic stereotypes.

I use the term 'cross-cultural', then, as a shorthand way of describing not just native–non-native interactions, but any communication between two people who, in any particular domain, do not share a common linguistic or cultural background. This might include workers and management, members of ethnic minorities and the police, or (when the domain of discourse is academic writing) university lecturers and new undergraduate students.

I do not use the term 'pragmatic competence' as a synonym for 'communicative competence' as Candlin (1976:246) and Schmidt and Richards (1980:150)

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appear to do. I use it to refer to one of several levels of knowledge (cf. Hymes 1972:281) which might also include grammatical, psycholinguistic, and what Bell (1976) calls 'social' competences:

... communicative competence might be thought of as a kind of 'mixer' which performed the function of balancing available linguistic forms chosen by drawing on the linguistic competence of the user, against available social functions housed in some kind of social competence.

(Bell 1976:210-11)

A speaker's 'linguistic competence' would be made up of grammatical competence ('abstract' or decontextualized knowledge of intonation, phonology, syntax, semantics, etc.) and pragmatic competence (the ability to use language effectively in order to achieve a specific purpose and to understand language in context). This parallels Leech's (1983) division of linguistics into 'grammar' (by which he means the decontextualized formal system of language) and 'pragmatics' (the use of language in a goal-oriented speech situation in which S [the speaker] is using language in order to produce a particular effect in the mind of H [the hearer]). Leech (1983) suggests that the semantics/pragmatics distinction can be equated, at least in part, with the distinction between 'sentence meaning' and 'speaker meaning'—a useful definition which unfortunately obscures the fact that there are several levels of 'speaker meaning'. This point has been well made and extensively discussed by, for example, Bach and Harnish (1979), Wilson and Sperber (1979 and 1981) and Akmajian *et al.* (1980), who all argue, rightly in my view, that while the *range* of possible senses and references of an utterance is explicitly provided by semantic rules, pragmatic principles are needed in order to

- a. assign sense and reference to the speaker's words (this I call 'level 1 speaker meaning');
- b. assign force or value to the speaker's words ('level 2 speaker meaning').

As Corder (1981:39) has pointed out, almost all sentences are ambiguous when taken out of context and examples of surface ambiguity ('biting flies can be troublesome', etc.) are legion and greatly beloved of linguists. However, instances of sentences being genuinely ambiguous in context are, I would argue, rather rare. Although one friend of mine insists that when told to write an essay on 'euthanasia' she produced four sides on the Red Guard, most stories of this kind are apocryphal. The unfortunate cricket commentator, for example, who is supposed to have enlivened an otherwise unremarkable Test Match by announcing 'the bowler's Holding, the batsman's Willey', is likely to have amused rather than bemused the cricketing fraternity—particularly since the match was being televised.

It is one's grammatical (particularly semantic) knowledge which provides the range of possible meanings of multiply ambiguous sentences such as:

1 she missed it

in which the verb *miss* has at least three senses and *she* and *it* an indefinite number of possible referents.

At level 1, pragmatic principles, particularly the Gricean maxim of relevance, allow one to assign sense and reference to the utterance in context. For example, if (1) were uttered in reply to

2 why didn't Elsie come on the earlier train?

pragmatic inferencing would allow one to determine that *she* referred to *Elsie*; *it* referred to *the earlier train*; and *missed* had the sense *failed to catch*; whereas in reply to:

3 How did Grandma manage without the car?

she would refer to *Grandma*; *it* would refer to *the car*; and *missed* would have the sense *felt the lack of*.

At level 2, pragmatic principles would allow one to assign force to the utterance, e.g. 'criticism' or 'disapproval' or 'commiseration', or perhaps a combination of all three for, as Leech (1977) and Brown and Levinson (1978:216) point out, the pragmatic force of an utterance is frequently ambivalent, even in context, and often intentionally so. For reasons of politeness or expediency, both speaker and hearer may deliberately exploit ambivalence:

... the rhetoric of speech acts often encourages ambivalence: 'Would you like to come in and sit down?' ... depending on the situation could be an invitation, a request, or a directive. Or more important, it could be deliberately poised on the uncertain boundary between all three. It is often in the speaker's interest, and in the interests of politeness, to allow the precise force of a speech act to remain unclear.

Leech (1977:99)

It follows, therefore, that H would fail to perceive S's communicative intent if (at level 1) from the range of possible senses and references the hearer chose that/those which the speaker had not intended; and/or (at level 2) the hearer failed to perceive the intended illocutionary force of the speaker's utterance. The following (authentic) examples may serve to illustrate my point.

Example 1

Misunderstanding at level 1 (Failure to understand which proposition S has expressed)

A (to fellow passenger on a long-distance coach): Ask the driver what time we get to Birmingham.

B (to driver): Could you tell me when we get to Birmingham, please?

Driver Don't worry, love, it's a big place—I don't think it's possible to miss it!

In this case, the driver understood that *B*'s utterance was a request for information, but misunderstood the intended sense of *when*.

Example 2

Misunderstanding at level 2 (Failure to understand the intended pragmatic force of S's utterance)

A Is this coffee sugared?

B I don't think so. Does it taste as if it is?

In this case, *B* interprets *A*'s utterance as a genuine request for information rather than, as *A* intended, a complaint (Gloss: As usual, you've forgotten to sugar it!), the intended effect of which was to elicit an apology and an offer to fetch the sugar.

The two levels are, of course, closely linked, and H's failure at level 1 to understand which proposition has been expressed may make it impossible for him/her to understand the intended illocutionary force:

Example 3

Lecturer (addressing me): Have you seen Leo?

I was not able, even in context, to decide whether he was using *seen* in the sense of:

- a. *set eyes on*, in which case the force of the utterance would probably have been a request for information (Gloss: Which way did Leo go?/Where is Leo?);
- b. *seen* in the sense of *spoken to*, in which case the force would have been something between criticism and a reproach requiring an explanation or an apology (Gloss: Have you spoken to Leo as I told you to do, and if not, why not?).

Strictly speaking, it would be logical to apply the term 'pragmatic failure' to misunderstandings which occur at either level one or level two, since both levels involve H in pragmatic inferencing; but I reserve the term exclusively for misunderstandings which arise, not from any inability on the part of H to understand the intended sense/reference of the speaker's words in the context in which they are uttered, but from an inability to recognize the force of the speaker's utterance when the speaker intended that this particular hearer should recognize it.

We can say, then, that pragmatic failure has occurred on any occasion on which H perceives the force of S's utterance as other than S intended s/he should perceive it. For example, if:

- a. H perceives the force of S's utterance as stronger or weaker than S intended s/he should perceive it;
- b. H perceives as an order an utterance which S intended s/he should perceive as a request;
- c. H perceives S's utterance as ambivalent where S intended no ambivalence;
- d. S expects H to be able to infer the force of his/her utterance, but is relying on a system of knowledge or beliefs which S and H do not, in fact, share. For instance, S says 'Pigs might fly!' to an H unaware that they do not, or S says, 'He's madder than Keith Joseph', to an H who believes Joseph to be perfectly sane.

I use the term 'pragmatic failure' rather than 'pragmatic error' advisedly (cf. House and Kasper 1981:158, Rintell 1979:101). It is legitimate, in my view, to speak of *grammatical* error, since grammaticality can be judged according to prescriptive rules (prescriptive for language-teaching purposes, at least), whereas pragmatic competence, as Candlin (1976:238) has observed, 'entails probable rather than categorical rules'. The nature of pragmatic ambivalence is such that it is not possible to say that the pragmatic force of an utterance is 'wrong'. All we can say is that it failed to achieve the speaker's goal. My interest lies in revealing why it might fail.

Very often, of course, it is not pragmatic failure which leads non-native speakers to misinterpret or cause to be misinterpreted the intended pragmatic force of an utterance, but an imperfect command of lower-level grammar. For the purposes of this paper, however, I am excluding from consideration 'grammatical error' and 'covert grammatical error' (but for a detailed discussion of these see Thomas 1981:16–20). I do not in any way underestimate the importance of these factors, but they have already been dealt with extensively in the literature of error analysis, of contrastive analysis, and of language teaching generally. Nor do I believe that 'grammatical' processing or 'level 1 pragmatic' processing of information are necessarily prior to the interpretation of pragmatic force. Indeed, research into information-processing (e.g. Adams and Collins 1979), suggests that although (pragmatic) comprehension does depend on successful mastery of lower-

level skills (from the ability to recognize sounds/letters to the assignment of meaning in context), different levels of processing are carried on simultaneously, constantly feeding into and reinforcing each other. It may often happen that one or more levels is by-passed completely. Separating the levels in this rather artificial manner, however, enables me to focus more sharply on pragmatic failure, a very important area of cross-cultural communication breakdown which has received very little attention.

For language-teaching purposes I also exclude from the bailiwick of pragmatic failure 'blurts', 'flouts', and 'lects'.

The 'blurt' is the pragmatic equivalent of the grammatical slip of the tongue or pen, which Boomer and Laver (1973:123) define as:

... an involuntary deviation in performance from the student's current phonological, grammatical or lexical competence.

A blurt, like a slip of the tongue, represents a temporary lapse by a normally pragmatically competent person. Often it manifests itself in unfortunate intonation, when, for example, an utterance intended as a request comes out as an order. Often, as with slips of the tongue, a blurt is occasioned by strong emotion, such as fear, excitement, or anger, which causes the speaker to be more direct than s/he intended. At other times it represents an inopportune lapse into truthfulness (the Freudian blurt). Blurts, like slips of the tongue/pen, are by no means the preserve of the non-native speaker, and although they may have unwelcome consequences they do not reflect the pragmatic competence of the speaker and should not, therefore, concern the language teacher. Indeed, in view of the number of blurts produced by apparently competent native speakers, one should be extremely cautious about ascribing pragmatic incompetence to non-native speakers on the basis of a few utterances produced under conditions egregiously unlike any they encounter outside the classroom (cf. Rintell 1979).

'Pragmlects' are similarly excluded from the current study. Lakoff (1974:26) points out that:

There may well be different idiolects of politeness: what is courteous behaviour to me might well be boorish to you, because we have slightly differently formulated rules, or because our hierarchy of acceptability is different.

There is something of the Humpty Dumpty in all of us and within a given language variety the individual does seem to be allowed a certain amount of latitude before being labelled as 'blunt' or 'impolite' (just how much latitude one allows a particular S probably depends on how much one likes him/her). Certainly, as people become better acquainted, they seem to become increasingly tolerant of each other's 'pragmlects', just as they become more tolerant of other forms of idiosyncratic behaviour. Nevertheless, I think that in order to be considered pragmatically competent, one must be able to behave linguistically in such a manner as to avoid being unintentionally offensive, for most of the time, to strangers who speak the same language or variety of language as oneself.

'Flouts' perhaps demand more detailed consideration before being excluded. Pragmatic principles are normative rather than prescriptive. Whereas a grammatical error puts one outside the grammatical system of English, one can, as Leech (1980:10) points out, flout pragmatic principles and yet remain within the pragmatic system of English. It is possible, in other words, to be extremely impolite, untruthful, and uninformative and at the same time 'speak perfect

English'. All too often, however, language teachers and linguists fail to admit the possibility of a foreign student's flouting conventions, in the same way as they fail to allow her/him to innovate linguistically. In fact, the foreign learner is usually expected to be 'hypercorrect', both grammatically and pragmatically. Schmidt and McCreary (1977:429) have pleaded the cause of the foreign learner, obliged to speak a 'superstandard English' which native speakers rarely use:

Superstandard English, however admired and perhaps admirable, is simply not functional in all situations.

In none of the articles on 'pragmatic competence' which I have read has the possibility of a flout been considered—all deviations from the expected norm are attributed to pragmatic failure (see, for example, Rintell 1979, Scarcella 1979, House and Kasper 1981 and Fraser *et al.* 1981). The non-native speaker who says anything other than what is expected often finds it difficult to get her/his views taken seriously. It is easier to explain away what s/he says as stemming from a lack of linguistic competence than to consider the possibility of her/his expressing divergent opinions.

Harder (1980:268) has discussed this severely circumscribed role which is assigned to 'the foreigner':

Since people, through speaking with foreigners, have more or less the experience of them outlined above, according to a well-known psychological mechanism they adjust their own behaviour and their interpretation of the foreigner's contributions accordingly, so that even if you do succeed in finding words for your clever remarks, you are likely to be politely overheard (*sic*). A foreigner is not permitted to go beyond a certain limited repertoire; if he starts swearing fluently, for instance, he is unlikely to achieve the conventional communicative effect, i.e. underlining the serious objections he has against the situation in question.

My own observations concur with those of Harder, that learners are rarely permitted the luxury of a flout (of being either 'overpolite' or 'impolite'), but are condemned to the 'reduced personality' outlined above, allowed only banal and conventional opinions. As one foreign colleague put it:

When I speak English, I feel I always have to occupy the middle ground.

It is not the responsibility of the language teacher *qua* linguist to enforce Anglo-Saxon standards of behaviour, linguistic or otherwise. Rather, it is the teacher's job to equip the student to express her/himself in exactly the way s/he chooses to do so—rudely, tactfully, or in an elaborately polite manner. What we want to prevent is her/his being *unintentionally* rude or subservient. It may, of course, behove the teacher to point out the likely consequences of certain types of linguistic behaviour.

Having argued in favour of allowing foreign students of English the right to flout, it may seem perverse of me to confuse the issue by pointing out that it is probably more often the case, particularly outside the classroom, that what is perceived as a flout is in reality pragmatic failure. Grammatical errors may be irritating and impede communication, but at least, as a rule, they are apparent in the surface structure, so that H is aware that an error has occurred. Once alerted to the fact that S is not fully grammatically competent, native speakers seem to have little difficulty in making allowances for it. Pragmatic failure, on the other hand, is rarely recognized as such by non-linguists. If a non-native speaker appears to speak fluently (i.e. is grammatically competent), a native speaker is likely to

attribute his/her apparent impoliteness or unfriendliness, not to any linguistic deficiency, but to boorishness or ill-will. While grammatical error may reveal a speaker to be a less than proficient language-user, pragmatic failure reflects badly on him/her as a *person*. Misunderstandings of this nature are almost certainly at the root of unhelpful and offensive national stereotyping: 'the abrasive Russian/German', 'the obsequious Indian/Japanese', 'the insincere American', and 'the standoffish Briton'.

Pragmatic failure, then, is an important source of cross-cultural communication breakdown, but in spite of this, teacher and textbook writers alike have almost completely ignored it. It is not difficult to understand why this should be so, and why they should prefer to remain on the more solid ground of grammar. Firstly, as Widdowson (1979:13) has pointed out, pragmatic description has not yet reached the level of precision which grammar has attained in describing linguistic competence. Secondly, pragmatics—language in use—is a delicate area and it is not immediately obvious how it can be 'taught'. It is on these two problems that I shall concentrate.

2. THE TEACHING OF PRAGMATIC APPROPRIATENESS

Although I welcome the fact that pedagogical grammars such as the *Communicative Grammar of English* are beginning to spill over into pragmatics and to address themselves to questions of use as well as to problems of well-formedness, I do not think that judgements of appropriateness can ever be spelt out sufficiently to be incorporated in grammars or textbooks as other than fairly crude rules of thumb.

Attempts have been made by, for example, Walters (1979a and 1979b) and by Fraser (1977, 1978) to determine the pragmatic force of an utterance relying solely on its surface grammatical form. Walters (1979a:289) defines his interest as being 'to investigate how much politeness could be squeezed out of speech act strategies alone', and again (1979b), in a methodologically very rigorous experiment to investigate the perception of politeness by native and non-native speakers of English and Spanish, uses a 'standard lexical context' in order to establish a 'hierarchy of politeness', instructing his informants to ignore context as much as possible. In a somewhat similar experiment cited by Rintell, Fraser (1977) asked informants to rate for deference forms of request (*would you . . .?*, *could you . . .?*, *can you . . .?*, *do . . .?*, etc.) for which no context whatever was supplied.

The results of such experiments, while of great interest in, for example, writing a probabilistic grammar, have, in my opinion, neither validity nor relevance in the assessment of pragmatic failure. Such hierarchies may indicate probabilistically which grammatical form is 'more polite', all other factors being equal, but in natural language other factors rarely are equal, and it would be fatuous to suppose that there is any absolute 'politeness quotient' which can be assigned unambivalently and out of context to a particular linguistic structure. It would be very easy to find a counterexample where an elaborately polite form of request is used, but where the propositional content remains unalterably impolite (*I wonder if I might respectfully request you to stop picking your nose?*) and vice versa (*Do have another drink*).

A further problem with hierarchies of the type developed by Walters is that as one moves from 'formal' to 'informal' situations, one may need to invert the

'politeness ranking'. Thus, between wife and husband an utterance beginning *I wonder if I might ask you ...?* would be likely to be perceived as sarcastic or hostile rather than polite. The imperative form, rated by Walters's judges as extremely impolite (1979a:295), accounted for more than a third of my corpus of spontaneously-occurring requests within a peer group (Thomas 1981:61). It would not be accurate to say that within peer groups people are 'less polite'. Rather, they are appealing to different forms of politeness (cf. Brown and Levinson 1978, Leech 1983:174–6).

Scales of politeness and indicators of use such as 'vulgar', 'formal', or 'rare' are all relative and can serve as only the most general guide to appropriateness. It would be of far greater benefit to the learner if teachers attempted to make explicit the types of choices which underlie pragmatic decision-making. It is at this point that we must turn for help to pragmatic theory.

Van Dijk (1977b:199) sees the goal of pragmatic theory as being to:

... formulate the general and particular conditions determining the full Intention-successfulness of illocutionary acts.

For an illocutionary act to succeed, the speaker must judge his/her position relative to his/her interlocutor by assessing:

- a. positions (e.g. roles, status, etc.)
- b. properties (e.g. sex, age, etc.)
- c. relations (e.g. dominance, authority)
- d. functions (e.g. 'father', 'waitress', 'judge', etc.)

(van Dijk 1977a:221)

Brown and Levinson (1978:81–7) suggest that in order to compute the weightiness of a face-threatening act one must assess the social distance between S and H, the relative power of H over S, and the degree to which X is rated an imposition in that culture. Leech (1977:24) proposes almost identical criteria for gauging the amount of tact required in a given situation:

- a. the more power H holds over S,
- b. the more socially distant H is from S,
- c. the more costly X is to H,

the more tact is required by the situation.

Pragmatic failure, as I have already remarked, is not immediately apparent in the surface structure of utterances and can be revealed only by discussing with students what force they intended to convey. But first they must be given the tools to make such discussions possible. What I am proposing, then, is that teachers should develop a student's metapragmatic ability—the ability to analyse language use in a conscious manner—a process which Sharwood-Smith (1981:162–3) terms 'consciousness-raising'. This might be achieved by discussing language use in the light of the pragmatic parameters outlined above, or by doing as Candlin (1976:251) has suggested and taking a leaf from the ethnomethodologists' book and using 'glossing' as a teaching/learning procedure. Short (1981:200) proposes the discussion of drama to make pragmatic analysis explicit:

The discussion of what is meant, implied, etc. by characters in dramatic dialogues can also be used in class to make students explicitly aware of the communicative nature of discourse. Mastery of the Gricean maxims would seem to be essential if the foreign learner is going to be able to understand English well and fit in socially

when using English himself. This factor is extremely important as without it the confidence so important for good linguistic performance is likely to be undermined.

For the language teacher, however, the descriptions offered by theoretical pragmaticists are inadequate. It is not enough simply to make explicit the parameters within which pragmatic choices are made. House and Kasper (1981:184) have indicated the need for teachers to alert their students to possible cross-cultural pragmatic differences:

It seems also to be advisable for the teacher to explicitly point out to the learner that politeness markers are an integral part of the foreign cultural system, and should neither be used nor interpreted by reference to the learner's native system. More effective teaching of the behavioural component may minimize native cultural interference and prevent impolite, ineffective, or otherwise inappropriate behavior on the part of the learner.

In the second half of this paper, I shall argue that for those engaged in the teaching of English to people from other cultures, pragmatic failure raises issues which make it essential to distinguish two types of pragmatic failure:

- a. *Pragmalinguistic failure*, which occurs when the pragmatic force mapped by S onto a given utterance is systematically different from the force most frequently assigned to it by native speakers of the target language, or when speech act strategies are inappropriately transferred from L₁ to L₂.
- b. *Sociopragmatic failure*, a term I have appropriated from Leech (1983:10–11), which I use to refer to the social conditions placed on language in use.

I shall argue that while pragmalinguistic failure is basically a *linguistic* problem, caused by differences in the linguistic encoding of pragmatic force, sociopragmatic failure stems from cross-culturally different perceptions of what constitutes appropriate linguistic behaviour.

2.1 *The need to distinguish pragmalinguistic from sociopragmatic failure*

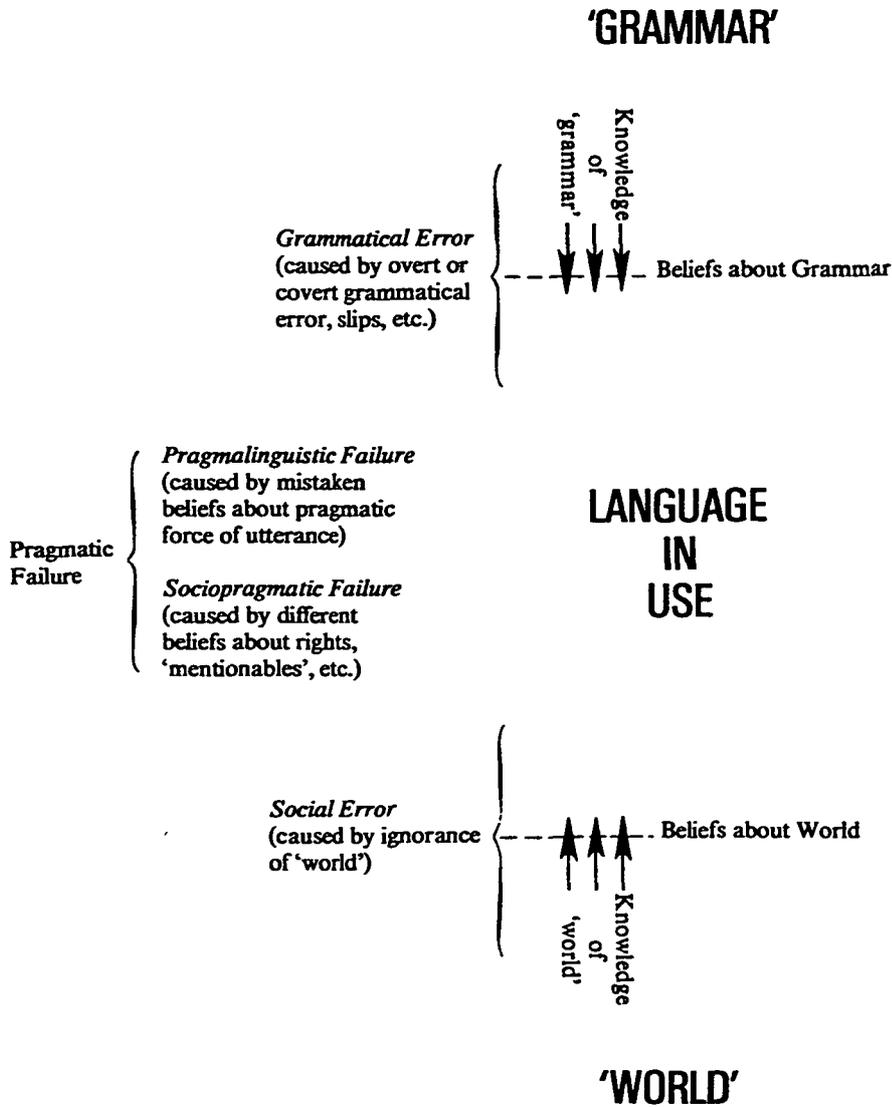
As most linguists are at pains to point out, it is no part of their job to pass moral judgements on the way language is used, but simply to record what they observe as objectively as possible:

Hopefully I will not get the advocates of human freedom and theological free-will upset. We're not, as everyone should know by now, setting up prescriptive rules for the way people are supposed to behave, any more than the rules in *Syntactic Structures* told people how to form nice sentences. We are describing what we see, reducing the apparent chaos of human interaction, linguistic and otherwise, to predictability . . . We graciously leave you your autonomy.

(Lakoff 1974:15–16)

The language teacher, however, is in the less fortunate position of having to be prescriptive, at least to a degree, whether s/he likes it or not. Correcting errors of any sort—grammatical or pragmatic—demands care and tact on the part of the teacher, but some areas are particularly sensitive. Pragmatics, 'language in use', is the place where a speaker's knowledge of grammar comes into contact with his/her knowledge of the world. But both systems of knowledge are filtered through systems of beliefs—beliefs about language and beliefs about the world.

In order to interpret the force of an utterance in the way in which the speaker intended, the hearer must take into account both contextual and linguistic cues. Often, context alone will determine what force is assigned to an utterance. That



[N.B. The diagram is misleading, in that the dividing line between the different types of error is too clear-cut. It would be better if the different causes and types of error were seen as shading into each other.]

Figure 1: Possible Causes of Communication Breakdown

Good luck! is interpreted as 'I wish you well', while *Bad luck!* is assigned the force of 'commiseration' rather than 'malediction', has nothing to do with the linguistic form, but with what force is conventionally assigned to it and with what is a plausible interpretation in context. We live in a world in which it is unusual to ill-wish someone, or, at least, to do so openly. Consequently, if we want to curse

someone in English we must make the illocutionary force more explicit: *I hope you have bad luck!* Though I would not wish to make more than a weak claim for this, it seems to me that the ability to determine what is 'likely' in context is to some degree 'universal', just as the 'politeness principle' (see Leech 1983: 79ff.) is universal. It does not, on the whole, require explicit formalization and need not concern the language teacher unduly.

The point at which the student does need help is in interpreting the *linguistic* pragmatics. The types of information conveyed by pragmatics include:

At level 1, the attitude of the speaker towards the *information* (relative newness of information, topicalization and focusing of information, connotation, and presupposition);

At level 2, (a) the speech act or communicative intent of the utterance; (b) the attitude of the speaker towards the *hearer* (the degree of deference intended, perceptions of relative power, rights and duties, social distance, etc., existing between speaker and hearer).

As one moves from 2(a) to 2(b), one is moving from the pragmalinguistic to the sociopragmatic end of the continuum and at the same time from what is *language-specific* to what is *culture-specific*.

3. PRAGMALINGUISTIC FAILURE

Pragmalinguistic failure, as I have already stated, occurs when the pragmatic force mapped on to a linguistic token or structure is systematically different from that normally assigned to it by native speakers. Pragmalinguistic failure may arise from two identifiable sources: 'teaching-induced errors' and 'pragmalinguistic transfer'—the inappropriate transfer of speech act strategies from one language to another, or the transferring from the mother tongue to the target language of utterances which are semantically/syntactically equivalent, but which, because of different 'interpretive bias', tend to convey a different pragmatic force in the target language.

Psycholinguistic research (see, e.g., Kess and Hoppe 1981) has shown that in interpreting grammatical ambiguity there is almost always 'bias' (by which they mean that one meaning is usually seen first by most people), and it seems to me that this is equally true in processing pragmatic ambiguity. It can be shown, for example, that native speakers fairly predictably assign certain pragmatic force to certain utterances. Thus *can you X?* is a highly conventionalized politeness form in British English, likely to be interpreted by native speakers as a *request* to do X, rather than a question as to one's *ability* to do X. In other languages, French and Russian, for example, the opposite is true. Similarly, the utterance *X, would you like to read?*, which in an English classroom would be a highly conventionalized polite request/directive to do so, in a Russian classroom often elicited the response *no, I wouldn't* (from students who had no intention of being rude, but who genuinely thought that their preferences were being consulted). Notice that theirs was not an impossible interpretation, but simply a less likely one.

Examples of the pragmatically inappropriate transfer of semantically/syntactically equivalent structures would be:

1 In Russian *konešno* (of course) is often used instead of *da* (yes) to convey an enthusiastic affirmative (cf. *yes, indeed, yes, certainly*, in English). *Of course* can be used in this way in English:

A Are you coming to my party?

B Of course. [Gloss: Yes, indeed/it goes without saying/I wouldn't miss it for the world!]

Often, however, *of course* implies that the speaker has asked about something which is self-evident, so that *konešno*, transferred from Russian to English in answer to a 'genuine' question, can sound at best peremptory and at worst insulting:

A Is it a good restaurant?

B Of course. [Gloss (for Russian S): Yes, (indeed) it is. (For English H): What a stupid question!]

A Is it open on Sundays?

B Of course. [Gloss (for Russian S): Yes, (indeed) it is. (For English H): Only an idiotic foreigner would ask!]

2 Po moemu (in my opinion) and *kazetsja* (it seems to me) are often used in Russian much as we use *I think* in English. Normally, these expressions are used to deliver considered judgements ('St Sophia's is, in my opinion, the finest example of Byzantine architecture in the Soviet Union'; 'It seems to me you have misunderstood the situation'). Russian speakers of English tend to use them for rather less weighty opinions ('It seems to me there's someone at the door'; 'In my opinion the film begins at eight').

The inappropriate transference of speech act strategies from L1 to L2 is a frequent cause of pragmalinguistic failure (e.g. using a direct speech act where a native speaker would use an indirect speech act or 'off-record' politeness strategy (cf. Brown and Levinson 1978:216). Thus, polite usage in Russian permits many more direct imperatives than does English. The usual way to ask directions, for example, is simply to say (in Russian!), *Tell me (please) how to get to . . .*, and to use a more elaborate strategy, such as *Excuse me, please, could you tell me . . .?*, is completely counterproductive, as it often means that your interlocutor is half way down the street before you finish speaking. Transferred into English, such direct imperatives seem brusque and discourteous.

Some teaching techniques may actually increase the likelihood of pragmalinguistic failure. Kasper (1981) in a most interesting and comprehensive survey, has identified many examples of what she terms 'teaching-induced errors', some of which fall into my category of pragmalinguistic failure. Some she attributes to teaching materials (inappropriate use of modals), others to classroom discourse (lack of marking for modality, complete sentence responses and inappropriate propositional explicitness). Complete sentence responses violate the textual pragmatic 'principle of economy' (see Leech 1983: 67-8) and it is easy to see how they can create an unfortunate impression. To answer the question *Have you brought your coat?* with *Yes, I have brought my coat!*, sounds petulant or positively testy! The same is true of inappropriate propositional explicitness. To say: *I was sorry to hear about your Grandma killed herself* is rather less tactful, and: *I was very sorry to hear your Grandma tripped over the cat, cartwheeled down the stairs and brained herself on the electricity meter* seems downright unfeeling.

Another source of teaching-induced pragmalinguistic failure has been indicated

by many linguists. Candlin (1979), Rutherford (1980:68), Clyne (1981) and Sharwood-Smith (1981:163), have all pointed out that it is a mistake to place too much emphasis on metalinguistic knowledge. It frequently leads the student to assume that there exists, for example, an isomorphism between the grammatical category 'the imperative' and the speech act 'ordering'. As Ervin-Tripp (1976) and Brown and Levinson (1978) have pointed out, imperatives are scarcely ever used to command or request in formal spoken English.

There are doubtlessly other sources of pragmalinguistic failure which I have not mentioned, and certainly there is a great deal of overlap between the categories I have defined. It is not possible, for example, to say whether 'pragmatic overgeneralization' (Schmidt and Richards, 1980:148) stems from 'teaching-induced error' or pragmalinguistic transfer. Pragmatic overgeneralization is particularly likely to occur where a narrow range of structures in the mother tongue has a wider range of possible 'translations' in the target language.

A good example of this is the Russian *možete* or *možet byt'* which are invariably expressed in English by the semantically equivalent *perhaps (you could) . . .*, when often it would be more appropriate to use *Do you think you could . . .?* or *Could you possibly . . .?* In English, the expressions are not always pragmatically interchangeable. Thus, whilst it might be acceptable to say to one's students *Perhaps you could read through this for Friday*, it might be more politic to say to one's supervisor *Could you possibly read through this by Friday?* Native speakers seem to interpret *perhaps you could* as an imposition rather than a request and as either somewhat authoritarian or else sarcastic.

Similarly, foreign learners, bewildered by the large number of possible ways of expressing obligation in English (*must, ought, should, have to*, etc.), often select one which they then use in all contexts. For no very obvious reason, Russian speakers seem to favour *to be to (you are to be here by eight)*, an unfortunate overgeneralization, since pragmatically *to be to* is largely restricted to very unequal power relationships, such as military commands, directives from parents to small children, etc. Computer corpora of English readily reveal these pragmatic restrictions, and should enable teachers and textbook writers to help students make more informed generalizations.

I do not think it is important to draw any clear distinctions between the categories of pragmalinguistic failure. I am more concerned to indicate possible sources of such failure. In any case, as Beniak and Mougeon (1981) have pointed out, it is difficult to attribute error to any one particular source; the same writers have shown that 'where errors reflect L1 interference and L2 overgeneralization, they reinforce one another and are more difficult to overcome'. In general, I would suggest that the foreign learner is not noticeably more sensitive about having pragmalinguistic failure pointed out to him/her, than about having grammatical errors corrected. Insofar as s/he is prepared to learn the language at all, s/he is usually willing, if not able, to try to conform to the pragmalinguistic norms of the target language.

4. SOCIOPRAGMATIC FAILURE

For an utterance to be pragmatically successful, I have suggested, involves two types of judgement: the basically grammatical ('pragmalinguistic') assessment of the pragmatic force of a linguistic token, and 'sociopragmatic' judgements con-

cerning the size of imposition, cost/benefit, social distance, and relative rights and obligations.

Candlin (1981) reproaches Leech for being culturally biased and with operating 'within a specific cultural and ethnographic frame: his "general principles of human cooperative behaviour" seem Western European, even Anglo-Saxon in their orientation'. I would say that while it seems plausible to assume that Leech's axes are 'universal' in that they do seem to capture the types of consideration likely to govern pragmatic choices in *any* language, the way in which they are applied varies considerably from culture to culture.

If pragmatic expectations and assessments are indeed culture-specific, it is likely that a foreign S will assess size of imposition, social-distance, etc. differently from a native-speaker. This is what leads me to suggest that correcting pragmatic failure stemming from sociopragmatic miscalculation is a far more delicate matter for the language teacher than correcting pragmalinguistic failure. Sociopragmatic decisions are *social* before they are linguistic, and while foreign learners are fairly amenable to corrections which they regard as linguistic, they are justifiably sensitive about having their social (or even political, religious, or moral) judgement called into question.

At this point I must interpolate a brief discussion as to whether linguistically inappropriate behaviour in an unfamiliar situation constitutes pragmatic failure (thereby bringing it within the purview of the linguist) or whether it is a manifestation of lack of 'social competence'. Fraser, Rintell, and Walters (1981:79) have suggested that:

... although the inventory of speech acts and performing strategies may be basically the same across languages, two languages (i.e. language-culture pairings) may differ significantly in terms of what you do, when and to whom.

For them, 'what you do, when and to whom' is part of a speaker's pragmatic competence. For van Dijk (1977a: 216) it is equally clearly not:

... when I congratulate somebody I should assume that something pleasant occurred to him, but our more general world knowledge will have to tell us *what* is pleasant, for *whom* in what *circumstances*. Pragmatics itself will not make explicit the latter conditions—which belong to a representation of our cognitive semantics.

In other words, whether the necessary conditions for the appropriateness of speech acts are actually satisfied must be decided by our knowledge of the world and its frame-like mental organization.

For the purposes of this paper, I shall take an intermediate position and argue that while the ability to make judgements according to the social scales of value is part of the speaker's 'social competence', the ability to apply these judgements to linguistic utterances—knowing how, when, and why to speak—comes within the field of pragmatics. It is cross-cultural mismatches in the assessment of social distance, of what constitutes an imposition, of when an attempt at a 'face-threatening act' should be abandoned, and in evaluating relative power, rights, and obligations, etc., which cause sociopragmatic failure.

Illustrations of sociopragmatic failure stemming from such cross-culturally different assessments are legion, and rather than multiply examples needlessly, let three suffice:

4.1. *Size of imposition*

Goffman's (1967) notion of 'free' and 'non-free' goods provides a useful frame-

work within which to discuss one cause of sociopragmatic failure. 'Free goods' are those which, in a given situation, anyone can use without seeking permission, for example, salt in a restaurant (providing, of course, that you are having a meal in that restaurant and have not simply wandered in from the street with a bag of fish and chips). Generally speaking, what an individual regards as 'free goods' varies according to relationships and situation. In one's own family or home, most things (food, drink, books, baths) are free goods. In a stranger's house they are not. Cross-culturally, too, perceptions of what constitutes 'free' or 'nearly free' goods differ. In Britain, matches are 'nearly free', and so one would not use a particularly elaborate politeness strategy to request one, even of a total stranger. In the Soviet Union cigarettes are also virtually 'free' and a request for them demands an equally minimal degree of politeness, such as *Daite sigaretu [give (me) a cigarette]*. A Russian requesting a cigarette in this country and using a similar strategy would either have wrongly encoded the amount of politeness s/he intended (covert grammatical or pragmalinguistic failure) or seriously misjudged the size of imposition (sociopragmatic failure).

Lakoff (1974:27) has pointed out that 'free' and 'non-free' goods are not necessarily material—the concept can be extended to information:

Clearly there are some topics that one may ask about freely and others that are 'none of your business'—that is, non-free goods.

Again, cultures differ greatly as to what is considered 'freely available'. The British bourgeois(e) considers it intrusive to inquire directly about a stranger's income, politics, religion, marital status, etc., whereas in other countries such information may be sought freely and without circumlocution.

4.2. *Tabus*

Closely related to the concept of 'free' and 'non-free' information are tabu topics. Typically sexual or religious, tabus are by no means universal, and a second source of serious sociopragmatic failure is making reference in L2 to something which is tabu in that culture, although it may be capable of being discussed perfectly politely in L1.

Consider, for example, the furore accompanying the recent royal wedding. It was noticeable that the only details the British press spared us were the time, place, and manner of the actual consummation. It was not a question of the delicacy or otherwise of the language used (itself a pragmatic decision)—it would have been considered prurient and distasteful, a sociopragmatic miscalculation of gigantic proportions, to have alluded to it at all. Other cultures, in contrast, consider the ceremonial rupturing of the royal hymen a legitimate topic for public comment, providing, of course, that it is done in suitably reverential, deferential, and pragmatically appropriate tones.

4.3. *Cross-culturally different assessments of relative power or social distance*

One final illustration of sociopragmatic failure may be provided by the not infrequent phenomenon of a foreign speaker's judging relative power or social distance differently from a native speaker. In a student's own culture, for example, teachers may have a rather higher status than they do here (a social judgement), leading the student to behave more deferentially than would normally be expected (sociopragmatic failure).

It is important to remember, however, that:

Demeanor images . . . pertain more . . . to the way in which the individual handles his position than to the rank and place of that position relative to those possessed by others.

(Goffman 1967:82-3)

As Glahn (1981) pointed out, an asymmetrical power relationship exists between native and non-native speakers (whether the native speaker is conscious of it or not). Non-native speakers may sometimes appear to be behaving in a pragmatically inappropriate manner (e.g. by being unexpectedly deferential) because they (rightly) perceive themselves to be at a disadvantage.

4.4. *Sociopragmatic failure and value judgements*

Without doubt, the most difficult type of pragmatic failure the language teacher has to deal with occurs when pragmatic principles, such as politeness, conflict with other, deeply held values, such as truthfulness or sincerity.

But one thing that cannot be denied is that (pragmatic) principles introduce communicative values, such as truthfulness, into the study of language. Traditionally, linguists have avoided referring to such values, feeling that they undermine one's claim for objectivity. But so long as the values we consider are ones we suppose, on empirical grounds, to be operative in society, rather than ones we impose on society, then there is no reason to exclude them from our enquiry.

(Leech, 1983: 9-10; my brackets)

I would go further than Leech and say, not only is there no *reason* to exclude values, but in language-teaching in particular, there is also, unfortunately, no *possibility* of doing so. Even the descriptive pragmaticist cannot, in my opinion, *objectively* observe the values which operate in any given society; the language teacher is in the still less happy position of imposing, or appearing to impose, those of his/her own.

It is important to remember that in speaking of 'values' we are not in any way dealing with moral absolutes such as 'Truth' or 'Justice'. Presumably no-one would claim that any one nation or culture has a monopoly of such virtues or even that they are observed to a greater degree in one society than in another. I think it is equally fatuous to suggest that an entire people, the Japanese, for example, is actually 'more polite' than another, say, the British, simply because they use more elaborate linguistic formulae. We are not dealing with moral or spiritual qualities, only with the linguistic encoding of certain attitudes and values. What I want to suggest is that cross-culturally two things may occur which appear to involve a fundamental conflict of values, but in fact stem from socio-pragmatic mismatches:

- 1 In different cultures, different pragmatic 'ground rules' may be invoked.
- 2 Relative values such as 'politeness', 'perspicuousness', may be ranked in a different order by different cultures.

A third possibility is that the conflict of values is real, in which case it is a problem for the moral philosopher, not the linguist.

4.4.1. *Cross-culturally different 'pragmatic ground rules'*

Every competent native speaker knows that there are times when what is said cannot be taken at face value but must be interpreted according to different 'ground rules'. Thus, when S says, 'Have you heard the one about . . .?', H knows that what follows must be interpreted as a joke. Just as children have to learn not

to interpret everything as the literal truth, so people need to be taught that pragmatic ground rules do not necessarily operate in the same way in other languages.

Over the centuries, the British traveller or colonist, tired of being told that the village was just over the hill, when it was really ten miles distant, or that work would be done *mañana*, when there was really no possibility of its being completed before the following week, has inveighed against the 'untruthful', 'unreliable' native. Yet it was surely not the case that the natives had any less regard for the truth, but rather that they were operating according to slightly differently formulated pragmatic principles; they no more expected to be taken literally than I, when I inquire solicitously how you are, want to hear about your hammer toes and haemorrhoids. While, however, a speaker who is not operating according to the standard grammatical code is at worse condemned as 'speaking badly', the person who operates according to differently formulated pragmatic principles may well be censured as *behaving* badly; as being an untruthful, deceitful, or insincere person.

It is not always easy to distinguish between moral principles and pragmatic principles. What (for me) was a painful illustration of this fact came when I was teaching in Russia. At the end of each semester, the Rector of the University called a meeting of each department to discuss how well the teaching staff had fulfilled its plan. This particular semester—my first—had started six weeks late because the students had been despatched to the state farms to help bring in the potato harvest. Nevertheless, the Rector criticized each teacher individually for having underfulfilled his/her norm and, ludicrous as the situation seemed to me, each teacher solemnly stood up, said that s/he accepted the criticism and would do better next time. I felt particularly aggrieved, since not only had I taught every class I had been scheduled to teach, but a number of others besides. I might, perhaps, have accepted in silence what I saw as totally unfair criticism, but to say I accepted it was more than I could bear. The anger I aroused, by saying quite politely that I did not think I was to blame, was quite appalling and the reverberations lasted many months. What offended my Soviet colleagues so deeply was that they felt I was being intolerably sanctimonious in taking seriously something which *everyone* involved knew to be purely a matter of form; behaving like the sort of po-faced prig who spoils a good story by pointing out that it is not strictly true. I, for my part, had felt obliged to sacrifice politeness in the greater cause of (overt) truthfulness!

This type of situation arose frequently, and all the British and Americans I knew in the Soviet Union reacted as I had, bristling with moral indignation. Yet, if it is inconceivable that an entire people is actually less truthful than another, we must look for different pragmatic principles in operation. In my view, every instance of national or ethnic stereotyping should be seen as a reason for calling in the pragmaticist and discourse analyst!

Candlin (1981) has pointed out that a surface level lack of cooperation may conceal a deeper level cooperation, and that is certainly what was happening in this case. However, even when we realized that we were simply witnessing another version of what Morris (1977:107) terms 'the Cooperative Lie' (the 'white lie' which plays such a major role in many social situations), a sort of Anglo-Saxon scrupulosity made us feel very uncomfortable about uttering a direct lie. The falseness of our position was, however, revealed by the consummate skill with which

we executed the 'indirect' or 'oblique' lie (Carrell, 1979:299). A topical example: last year, asked directly the date by which my dissertation had to be submitted, I replied, knowing perfectly well that it was the 1st September, that my supervisor was coming back on the 17th. Whilst I would have hesitated to have said *directly* that the deadline was the 17th, I had no qualms at all about implying it. My justification would have been that my interlocutor knew the 'rules of the game' as well as I did, and was quite capable of deducing that I was prevaricating.

That Anglo-Saxons seem, on the whole, to find indirect lies less scandalous, is a curious social fact and pragmatically interesting, but it does not indicate any moral superiority over those people who favour the direct variety!

One task of the pragmaticist, then, should be to make explicit the 'deep level rules of the game'. Wolfson (1979 and 1981) showed how this might be done when she identified 'insincerity' on the part of Americans as a source of considerable irritation and frustration to non-Americans. She gives examples of Americans using expressions such as *We really must get together sometime*. For an American, these are simply 'polite, meaningless words', but the non-American often interprets them as genuine invitations and is hurt to find later that they were not intended as such. Of the hundreds of instances Wolfson recorded, fewer than a third were 'genuine' invitations, but those which were were clearly marked by some mention of time, place, or activity. Once the non-native speaker understands the 'pragmatic ground rules', something which at first appeared to be a cross-cultural conflict of values may be shown not to be so.

4.4.2. *Cross-culturally different assessments of the relative importance of pragmatic principles*

Pragmatic principles, as Leech (1980:4) has observed, 'can conflict with other co-existing principles'. This is as much a reflection of the human condition as of language: just as we must sometimes make moral choices between justice and mercy, so we must navigate linguistically between the Scylla of tactlessness and the Charybdis of dishonesty. In general, when two maxims or principles conflict, circumstances (such as urgency, the vulnerability of H) and the personality of the speaker dictate which principle prevails.

It may be, however, that in some cultures certain relative values ('relative' in the sense of how polite is 'polite'? how prolix is 'prolixity?') may systematically prevail over others. Thus, in culture X 'generosity' may be systematically valued above 'succinctness'; in culture Y 'approbation' may outweigh 'truthfulness'.

Again, I would stress that we are not concerned here with spiritual or moral values, but with communicative values. When we speak of one society's observing the 'generosity' principle to a greater degree than another, we are not suggesting that its members are necessarily in fact more open-handed than those of another. Thus, in the Ukraine, it may happen that a guest is pressed as many as seven or eight times to take more food, whereas in the UK it would be unusual to do so more than twice. For a Ukrainian, the 'generosity' maxim systematically overrides the 'quantity' maxim; for a British person it does not. Indeed, British recipients of such hospitality sometimes feel that their host is behaving *impolitely* by forcing them into a bind, since they run out of polite refusal strategies long before the Ukrainian host has exhausted his/her repertoire of polite insistence strategies.

5. SUMMARY

I have argued that in language teaching we have concentrated on 'what is said' to the detriment of 'what is meant'. I have suggested that it is necessary for language teaching purposes to distinguish two sorts of pragmatic failure. Descriptive linguists have not found it necessary to make the distinction I am making, because, as they are at pains to point out, they are interested only in *describing* phenomena. Language teachers, however, cannot afford to be satisfied with simply recording the fact of pragmatic failure. Rather, they must concern themselves with investigating its causes and doing something about it. It is at this point that the pragmalinguistic/sociopragmatic distinction becomes necessary.

I would not, of course, wish to claim that any absolute distinction can be drawn between pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic failure. They form a continuum and there is certainly a grey area in the middle where it is not possible to separate the two with any degree of certainty. Schachter and Celce-Murcia (1977:443–5) have pointed out that it is unwise to try to attribute grammatical error to any one cause, and this applies equally to pragmatics. Only by discussing the matter with the student would it be possible to establish, for example, whether an English speaker's overuse of *spasibo* (thank you) in Russian stems from:

- a. ingrained habit—part of a 'highly automatized system' inappropriately transferred from L1 to L2, and perhaps an example of covert grammatical error;
- b. S's not knowing the pragmatic force of *spasibo* in Russian, which might be an example of pragmalinguistic failure;
- c. cross-culturally different perceptions of when or for what goods or services it is appropriate to thank, which would be an example of sociopragmatic failure.

I would maintain, however, that at the extremes of the pragmatic failure continuum there is a very clear difference between, for example, failing to understand that *can you close the window?* usually carries the pragmatic force of a request in English, and having a different opinion from most British people as to what questions it is proper to ask. The first stems from uncertainty as to the pragmatic force attached to a particular utterance (i.e. it is basically a linguistic problem), whilst the second stems more from uncertainty as to what is socially appropriate linguistic behaviour (i.e. it is as much a cultural as a linguistic problem).

For the observer, the effect of the two types of pragmatic failure may be the same and their causes difficult to distinguish. But for the language teacher the distinction is essential, since the foreign learner may well equate sociopragmatic decisions with value judgements, and the language teacher needs to tread softly in this potentially explosive area. Pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic failure reflect two fundamentally different types of pragmatic decision-making. The first is language-specific and it should be possible for the teacher to correct it quite straightforwardly. The second is in part culture-specific, a reflection of the student's system of values and beliefs, and should not be 'corrected', but only pointed out and discussed.

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I would suggest that we do a grave disservice, even to those who are studying in the country of the target language, if we expect students simply to 'absorb' pragmatic norms without explicit formalization. Nor can we afford to regard the teaching of pragmatic appropriateness as the icing on the ginger-

bread—something best left until complete grammatical competence has been attained. Rintell (1979:104) has observed, and I would agree, that once a student is exposed to the target culture s/he rapidly begins to acquire pragmatic competence. However, I use the word 'begins' advisedly. My observations of adults who have come to Britain already speaking very fluent English, but who never attain a high degree of pragmatic competence even though they would like to, makes me think that pragmatic competence can never simply be 'grafted' on to grammatical competence, and leads me to wonder whether there is not a point beyond which it is very difficult to acquire different pragmatic norms ('pragmatic fossilization?').

Much effort is expended in writing nugatory texts explaining low-level rules of grammar, such as third person singular -s (which, since it is readily observable in the surface structure requires little explicit formalization). Pragmatic failure, meanwhile, like covert grammatical error, often passes unchecked by the teacher or, worse, it is attributed to some other cause, such as rudeness, and the student is criticized accordingly. I have argued that this problem can be overcome only by giving the student the tools to make the processes of pragmatic decision-making explicit.

Sensitizing learners to expect cross-cultural differences in the linguistic realizations of politeness, truthfulness, etc., takes the teaching of language beyond the realms of mere training and makes it truly educational. Helping students to understand the way pragmatic principles operate in other cultures, encouraging them to look for the different pragmatic or discursal norms which may underlie national and ethnic stereotyping, is to go some way towards eliminating simplistic and ungenerous interpretations of people whose linguistic behaviour is superficially different from their own. Such techniques, I would suggest, are desirable both pedagogically and politically. To give the learner the knowledge to make an informed choice and allowing her/him the freedom to flout pragmatic conventions, is to acknowledge her/his individuality and freedom of choice and to respect her/his system of values and beliefs. Students who feel that their view of the world is being dismissed out of hand or who feel unable to express themselves as they wish are scarcely likely to develop positive attitudes towards learning a foreign language. Forcing white, middle-class Britain down students' throats is probably not the most effective way of getting English out of their mouths!

Recognizing the pragmalinguistic/sociopragmatic distinction means allowing the foreign student the right to flout in exactly the same way as the native-speaker does, and acknowledging that 'speaking good English' does not necessarily mean conforming to the norms of the culturally hegemonic strata. Our only concern as *language* teachers is to ensure that the learner knows what s/he is doing. I believe that making the distinction between pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic failure removes much that non-Western learners, in particular, find objectionable in contemporary 'communicative' approaches to language teaching. Making EFL teachers and text-book writers sensitive to the distinction may prevent people who rightly wish to operate according to their own system of values from throwing out the English language baby with the British colonial bathwater!

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