

Research on Ostensible Invitation and Impoliteness in Communication

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Abstract

Ostensible invitation is one form of ostensible speech act, which is also called deception, is a kind of speech acts. It has frequently been employed in verbal communication and has good effects on smooth interaction. However, it attracts attention mainly from ethics, philosophy, psychology, sociology, rhetoric, linguistic logic, etc., and the more frequent recent studies are done in the aspect of politeness, while, it is rarely studied for the negative aspect of using ostensible speech act, thus to neglect the study on the opposite side of the politeness—impoliteness. The present study tries to integrate impoliteness into ostensible invitation and attempting to provide description and explanation of the impoliteness in this language use based on politeness principle and cooperative principle, making effort to arouse people's attention in using ostensible speech act, for the misuse of ostensible speech act may bring with some discomfort or misunderstanding.

Keywords

Human relationship, ostensible invitation, impoliteness, speech act.

1. INTRODUCTION

Human relationship becomes more and more complex with the development of the society all over the world, especially in the high-context-culture countries, the selection of words, the connotation of the meaning or the way to express the sentences, etc. will have a great influence on communication.

Like an illocutionary act, inviting is a commissive act, whose point "is to commit the speaker to some future course of action" (Searle, 1969:14). When making an invitation, the speaker makes a commitment to provide a course of action that is beneficial to the hearer. In terms of benefit and cost, Leech (1983) and Wierzbicka (1985) characterized the act of inviting as a directive act involving benefits to the addressee and at the same time a cost to the speaker. Due to these interactive characteristics, Hancher (1979:13) calls an invitation a "commissive directive" speech act. Wolfson (1989) classifies invitations into two types, i.e., unambiguous and ambiguous invitations, and Isaac & Clark (1990) called this ambiguous invitation as "ostensible invitation". Because they believed that there were a lot of cases in which an invitation was made but was not necessarily followed by the conclusion of the arrangement under discussion, for they were not serious about the arrangement. These "ostensible invitations" share the common properties, i.e., pretense, mutual recognition, collusion, ambivalence and off-record purpose, which are used to distinguish ostensible invitation from genuine invitation.

2. THE REASONS THAT CAUSE IMPOLITENESS BY USING OSTENSIBLE INVITATION

We know that conflictive, verbally aggressive, non-socially cooperative, failure to meet others' face needs and impolite communication can and does take place. (Culpeper et al. 2003), and we also know that approaches to politeness are conceptually biased (Eelen 1999, 2001) and generally assume impoliteness to be "marginal" (cf. Leech 198:105), however, from the above examples, we can see that even though the speaker uses ostensible speech act with the purpose of trying to maintain others' face, but sometimes, these ostensible invitations do cause impoliteness mainly because of different culture contexts or the internal reasons of the interactants.

2.1 Cultural Context

Culture is all aspects of life, the totality of meanings, ideas and beliefs shared by individuals within a group of people. Culture is an "integrated system of learned behavior patterns which are characteristic of the members of a society and which are not the result of biological inheritance." (F. L. Acuff, 1993) Culture is learned, it includes language, values, norms, and customs.

Cultural context refers to the social cultural background related to verbal communication. It can be divided into two aspects: one is the cultural convention, which refers to the mode of life that people have inherited from the social life and transmitted from generation to generation, and is a collective habit in the language, behavior and mentality, and has the constraints to the members belonging to this group; the other is social norms, which refers to the various regulations and restrictions that a society made to the verbal communication activities. Each aspect of cultural context has a significant influence on people's behavior, and each one from one culture will have different understanding from the other that of a different culture, which affects the communicative performances.

2.2 Different Culture Value Orientations

Values fundamentally influence our behavior in the society. They do not describe how we act in a culture but dictate what we ought or ought not to do. Values tend to be the basis of all the decisions we make and provide standards for us to evaluate our own and others' actions. Thus, a value can be defined as "a conception, explicit or implicit, distinctive of an individual or characteristic of a group, of the desirable which influences the selection from available modes, means, and ends of action". (Kluckhohn, 1951:395)

In Hofstede's opinion, value dimensions have an important impact on the behaviors in all cultures, especially the dimension of individualism and collectivism. People in individual cultures define themselves primarily as independent individuals and make the elementary commitments to themselves. They focus on taking care of themselves and their immediate families and their goals exclusively on their own interests. In this culture, they tend to focus on "I" consciousness, competition instead of cooperation, personal goals instead of group goals. While collectivism tends to tight social networks, people consider themselves as members of their own groups and expect members of their particular group to protect and take care of themselves. Collectivism stresses group harmony and cooperation to achieve efficiency. They will try their best to maintain a harmonious relationship, and sometimes they can even say something unreal or ostensible to keep this relationship. In general, it has strengthened patterns that help to build and maintain an appropriate human relationship.

As can be expected, low-context cultures tend to engage in more face-threatening exchanges, while high-context cultures will focus more on face-honoring exchanges. Another way to look at this is to see it as "getting to the point," as opposed to "building relationships." As Ting-

Toomey reminded us, other “cultural variability factors, interaction event constraint factors, personality factors, and the perceived and actual communication exchanges between the inter-group negotiators all work simultaneously to influence the face-negotiation process.”

Take China for example, this collective behavior has its deep historical root in Confucianism. Confucius believed that speech could produce misfortunes, and proposed that people should be careful with their words, i.e., cautious talk and wary talk. So when they want to keep the harmonious and sound relationship, they are even inclined to utter some ostensible speeches when they face a clash between reviewing the truth or offending others’ faces or interests, which is quite different from the situation that in individualism.

So, when people from different cultures confront with each other, because of the differences above, even ostensible speech act using is with the purpose of being indirect and polite, it can still cause impoliteness.

3. STRATEGIES TO DEAL WITH THE IMPOLITENESS IN OSTENSIBLE INVITATION

In order to avoid misunderstanding in interpersonal communication of different culture groups, to build good relationships, to promote understanding and improve cooperation in different nations, people need to understand some knowledge of the intercultural communication, in order to improve intercultural communication capability.

The language people use to communicate is confined to pragmatic maxims, for the people would like to achieve some purpose through communication, at the same time, these pragmatic maxims are from the culture, which have been penetrated into the speech act that has distinct cultural characteristics. At the same time, culture is the fundamental sign to distinguish people from all other livings. So, if we want to better understand the meaning hinted behind the speech act, we should know better about the culture differences.

For example, in Chinese culture, an invitee always makes an initial refusal to the offer or invitation even if he or she intends to accept it. Just like the examples above. Why the Chinese choose this way, i.e., by using some ostensible speech act and then to make the acceptance quickly? As indicated in a Chinese culture, it is better to accept something implicitly instead of accepting directly, and those who explicitly say out what they want or what they think without reservation are regarded as superficial scornfully. So, they deliberately communicate in an indirect and vague manner, leaving the intended meaning to be sensed by the interlocutor. Hall (1976) calls cultures with such features high-context cultures contrasting with low-context cultures. Just like what the author talked above that Chinese high-context culture was flourished and rooted in Confucianism. Confucius argued that people could know each other through interpersonal communication without many words because their verbal communication and characters were an integral whole. If the latter were known, the former would be known (Jia, 1997:229). Furthermore, Confucius believed that speech could generate misfortunes, and proposed that people should be careful with their words, by saying “cautious talk and wary talk.” These proposals were aimed at establishing and maintaining harmonious social relationships, the ultimate goal of human behavior (Jia, 1997:229). Because indirect communication can help to prevent the embarrassment of rejection by the other person or disagreement among partners, leaving the relationship and each other’s face intact, it naturally becomes the Chinese preference of international style.

However, these hints may not be quite understood by the westerners or the people from low context culture, who are less homogeneous and therefore tend to compartmentalize interpersonal contacts. Hall emphasized that “each time they interact with others they need detailed background information”, the verbal message contains most of the information and

very little is embedded in the context or the participants, and this explanation helps to understand lots of different manifestations of the Eastern and Western communication styles. People from high-context cultures, take the Chinese for example, ostensible refusals serve the politeness function in the communication. Generally speaking, the people who refused are intended to show the negative politeness to the invitee. So, ostensible refusals are always followed by a real explanation but some types of formulaic expressions like “Don't bother”, “It is just too much trouble for you”, or by a comment highlighting the cost of the inviter. Such an exchange often completes the initial turn of a Chinese invitational activity. The invitee's negative response indicates willingness to continue the politeness and the negotiation to the inviter. Meanwhile, from the above examples, we can know that when the cases happen among the people from different cultures, misunderstanding would take place most of the time. Even though the people have some knowledge about the matters needing attention from different cultures, this kind of knowledge is still limited compared with the natives. People fall into low-context culture category, the style of communications orients strongly towards content (as numbers, facts, precise and dates, explicit meanings), and they tend to be explicit and direct—that is to say, everything needs to be stated, quite possibly for they are unaware of their environment and their surroundings and have to rely on verbal communication as their main information channel, and they are uncomfortable with indirectness and sometimes miss nonverbal cues: tiny shifts in voice; slight, almost imperceptible changes in body posture or breathing, this failure to perceive or understand the nonverbal means and the correlates that they often miss an increase of tension in people, and as a result, fail to realize that something is wrong until a crisis develops.

4. SUMMARY

To sum up, there are different ways to make an invitation which seems sincere but actually ostensible. The speaker may offer this kind of ostensible invitation with the purpose of expressing his/her politeness, to maintain the hearer's negative face, or being “negative politeness”, for the face-honoring process includes two components, one or both parties feel that the other is making positive overtures of respect, and that their face is being validated and honored by the other. Concessions are perceived by the parties as equitable, and neither feels exploited by the other. When one party states their needs and wants in an honorable manner, taking into consideration the notion of mutual face-concern, however, in this sense, the hearer may think the other way because of the culture differences, their think patterns and some other background information, which may cause impoliteness to the hearer.

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