

## Research on Strategies to Deal with the Impoliteness in Ostensible Speech Act

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### Abstract

Scholars from different disciplines have provided a great number of theories to examine the development of human relationships. The use of ostensible speech acts originally can be considered as trying to be polite, to save the hearer's or the speaker's face and maintain a harmony relationship between the communicators. Because of the complexity of the communication, communication failure occurs quite often. We should pay much more attention to the way to communicate.

### Keywords

Ostensible speech act, impoliteness, uncertainty, cultural sensitivity.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Ostensible speech act is what Goffman (1974) called a type of nonserious use of language, making them akin to sarcasm, irony, teasing, facetiousness, play acting and others. However, because of the complexity of the communication, it is inevitable to feel sad emotionally caused by the use of ostensible speech acts and this may result in impoliteness. In order to avoid this kind of impoliteness, we should stand in mind some of the strategies when using ostensible speech acts to communicate with others.

## 2. UNCERTAINTY AVOIDANCE

Uncertainty refers to our cognitive inability to explain our own or other's behaviors and feelings in interactions because of an ambiguous situation that evokes anxiety. Uncertainty avoidance refers to the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by unknown and uncertain situations and the extent to which they try to avoid these situations. The stronger the uncertainty avoidance, the greater the feeling of threat and the inclination toward avoidance in the face of uncertain, and novel situations. Weak uncertainty avoidance cultures encourage risk taking, whereas strong uncertainty avoidance cultures prefer clear procedures and guidelines in directing members' behavior in an organization. Historical or political change contexts and national wealth are proposed by Hofstede (1991) as two preliminary factors that affect the development of uncertainty avoidance work-related values. While members in weak uncertainty avoidance family situations prefer informal rules to guide their behavior, members in strong uncertainty avoidance family situations tend to prefer formal rules and formal structure. Rules and laws are established to counteract uncertainties in social interaction. In weak avoidance family situations, roles and behavioral expectations are actively negotiated. Children are given more latitude to explore their own morals and values. In strong uncertainty avoidance family situations, family roles are clearly established and family rules are expected to be followed closely.

In terms of Hofstede's theory, when comparing Chinese traditional culture and western cultures, China is with a high uncertainty avoidance degree, for the characteristic of the actions of the Chinese are competitive, nervous and normalized, which are confined by the unique social cultural environment, psychological environment and geographical environment. The relationship between the westerners tends to be balance, however between the Chinese, people tend to have a superior and inferior relationship, when dealing with the interpersonal communications, in order to express their respect, hospitality and to maintain the harmonious relationship, the Chinese usually will use ostensible speech acts; on contrast, the westerners will just care about their individuals, there is no need to be so that polite, for they are equal. They will not pay more attention to the unfamiliar risks and the uncertainty environment that exist when they communicate, because of the low context culture, they will just feel at ease about the maybe-face threatening acts and be themselves, which is quite different from the people from the high context cultures, they should pay more attention to the hints exist in communicating. Thus, when confronted about the situations that may threaten the speakers or the hearers' faces, people will choose different speech acts to deal with these uncertainties, whether to be honest to handle the questions that they encountered or to use ostensible speech acts to maintain the harmonious relationship to try to be polite. At the same time, as the author explained above, people with high uncertainty avoidance will be nervous when meeting these uncertainties, they just think that life should be a race, not a dance, and they will lay emphasis on these uncertainties and choose the corresponding strategies to communicate, and when the people trying to use ostensible speech acts to show their politeness, if the hearer just came from the culture with low uncertainty avoidance, they will think that there is no need to doing so, to reply or handle the questions honestly is much better, and impoliteness occurred in this sense. The other characteristic of uncertainty avoidance is about competitiveness. People with high uncertainty avoidance will think that the competitiveness is not a good thing, for the result is uncertain. So, they are hard to bear the different ideas, or the superior thought, they strongly require that the whole ideas are consistent, for different opinions will cause conflicts, high uncertainties may result in bad influences. While, the people with low uncertainty avoidance, they advocate criticism, posing up different opinions and even refuting the authoritative viewpoints, which is totally different from the people with high uncertainty avoidance in communicating. They will not feel losing face when doing so, and they will not try to use ostensible speech acts to save their faces and try to be polite. They will just be themselves and be brave to express their thoughts and ideas and just care less about the uncertainties.

At the same time, uncertainty avoidance goes close to the individualism and collectivism culture, when we have some understanding of the uncertainty avoidance, we can better understand why people with different uncertainty avoidance will choose different actions to respond when communicating, and this will definitely improve the intercultural communication capability.

### **3. STRENGTHEN THE COMPREHENSION OF DIFFERENT CULTURES**

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 interactional style.

However, these hints may not be quite understood by the westerners or the people from low context culture, who are less homogenous 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 inviter. 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: tinny 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. ENHANCE THE INTERCULTURAL SENSITIVITY AND THE INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS

Before enhancing the intercultural sensitivity, we had better have a profound understanding of our native culture, as only when we take the opinion of monitoring ourselves, respecting ourselves, empathy, and being open-minded, can we take a non-appraisal and impartial opinion. Our intercultural consciousness is in fact our intercultural competence based on cognitive aspect. It is connected with the capability to recognize similarities and differences among different cultures. In terms of the definite and vague understanding including cultural standard, value system, and personal philosophy, it is especially the case, which is even harder to distinguish. It's real that we all have intuitive sensitivity. While, instincts are usually taken for granted and lacks rationality. That's what for we need cognitive awareness, which capability can help us distinguish cultural differences as well as know, describe and be liberal-minded to the differences. Awareness here means the context in which communication happen and know more about our own cultural background (Song Li, 2004:245-246).

When we talked about impoliteness caused by ostensible speech act, we could not deny that the miscommunication could be confronted by the communicators. Even though the usage of ostensible speech act is for the politeness purpose, it does impoliteness mainly because of the unconsciousness of cultural differences, which causes pragmatic mistake and social disorder and the two factors in turn enhance miscommunication. So we are well obliged to believe that a better and more cultivated intercultural communication is necessary to help promote effective intercultural communication. Meanwhile, if we study further to analyze pragmatic mistake and social disorder, we can find methods of improving intercultural communication. As we all know that "culture is everything and everywhere", the study of ostensible speech act should not be without considering the cultural differences in intercultural communication.

#### 5. CONCLUSION

Ostensible speech act is a common phenomenon in our daily communication, and also a powerful communicative strategy embedded in our daily conversation. People sometimes use ostensible speech act as the communicative strategy to attain some personal goals. The present study has been carried out on the background of the achievements and deficiencies of the existing studies on ostensible speech act and impoliteness. The purpose of this study is to integrate impoliteness into ostensible speech act and attempts 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. This part will summarize the major findings in the present study briefly and then to discuss the implications and limitations of the study, and finally provide the suggestions for further studies.

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