

Analysis of Speech Act of Compliments in Persian, English, and French from a Sociocultural Perspective

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Received: 2 July 2018

Accepted: 8 September 2018

Extended abstract

1. Introduction

In the present postmodern world, so many of the biased remarks heard about one nationality or another can be traced to a failure to appreciate the different conventions of politeness and courtesy in different societies; therefore, it can be referred to as an instance of cross-cultural pragmatic failure (Mirza Suzani & Armiun, 2011). Furthermore, while a set of underlying social and linguistic conventions are assumed to exist universally in all cultures, contrastive pragmatic analysis needs two kinds of categories to contrast: one linguistic and the other sociological (Mirza Suzani, 2006). In the same vein, despite the idea that the formulaic nature of compliments- their syntactic and lexical predictability- makes them attractive materials, probing compliments in translation can be a troublesome aspect for language learners from different cultural backgrounds (Mirza Suzani & Armiun, 2011). Hence, the study of the speech act of compliments in both source and target languages can be important because paying appropriate compliments and identifying them in each culture is an aspect of communicative competence which may differ in a variety of ways from one culture to another. Moreover, compliments are more often than not culture-specific and reflect fundamental values of the society and the accurate interpretation of illocutionary force of compliments involves knowledge of subtle cultural norms of both source and target languages. Having considered the above points, the present research aims to investigate speech act of compliments in Persian, English and French from a sociocultural perspective. In this regard, it is attempted to probe cross-cultural problems of communication in the three languages to assist readers to make a better understanding of underlying universal social and linguistic conventions in Persian, English and French cultures and hence bridge the gap between socio-pragmatics and translation.

2. Methodology

To link socio-pragmatics and translation and as a matter of concern for both translators and other educators, the present study attempted to direct the readers' attention to cases in which the pragmatic force mapped by Persian native speakers onto a given utterance was systematically different from the force most frequently

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assigned to it by English and French native speakers of the target language. This study sought to delve into cases in which speech act strategies are inappropriately transferred from source language (SL) to target language (TL). For this purpose, in the current study, a variety of compliments on both greetings and social interactions in Persian, English, and French languages were used to check the perception of Persian, English and French native speakers. The appropriate implementation of compliments in different speech contexts and communities were probed and discussed as well. In this qualitative comparative research study, a corpus of 87 high frequency expressions of compliment performed in greetings (18) and social interactions (69) in the aforementioned languages were presented and content analyzed from a sociocultural perspective. Then, instances of cross-cultural (mis)match in each language were meticulously elucidated.

3. Discussion

The results of this study showed that in Persian the use of compliments is mostly less positive in comparison with those of English and French. Also, Persian speakers seem to be more reticent, indirect, ambiguous, lengthy and vague than English and French speakers. Besides, Persian speakers, unlike English and French speakers, tend to leave compliments somewhat hazy and they avoid assertive statements. Alternatively, compliments in French, as a socio-cultural norm, are not as philosophical and lengthy as they are in Persian, yet they are not as plain and straightforward as English ones either. English native speakers prefer direct responses more than Iranian and French speakers. One of the most indirect strategies employed by Iranians is “giving excuses, reasons, and explanations” for which English speakers show less preference. British speakers prefer another strategy which is “acceptance that functions as a refusal”. On the other hand, the French speakers tend to pick words which, compared to English language, belong to the formal language register. All these differences may bring about mismatch in the process of communication.

Additionally, languages differ in how they express politeness. In English, phrases like "I wonder if I could..." can be used to make a request politer; however, the French tend to pick words which, in English language, belong to the formal register. Also, as for compliments, what might be part of everyday French would sound majestic to English ears. The interjection “please” is one interesting example. Although it entered the English language in the 14th century via French and is used in polite requests and questions, the French equivalent is quite longer: “s’il vous plait” literally meaning “if it pleases you” which quickly reminds one of “if you please”, a phrase considered to be old-fashioned and formal in Modern English. There are many examples of words and formulaic phrases that the French speaking people use on a daily basis; these words and phrases that have well established themselves in Modern English are not usually of informal use. As a whole, a quick look at slang and formal expressions in English language would suffice to assert that the more formal a word or an expression, the more likely it is French.

As a whole, it can be said that while the differences between French and English compliments are mainly a matter of linguistic registers, Persian compliments are different from both in that they are carved deep in the Iranian culture in which courtesy is intertwined with indirectness and vagueness.

4. Conclusion

In analyzing the causes of cross-cultural misunderstandings arising from complimenting behavior, the distinction between pragmalinguistic failure and sociopragmatic failure can be a very useful one. *Pragmalinguistic failure* refers to a misunderstanding of the intended illocutionary or pragmatic force of an utterance, while *sociopragmatic failure* can be accounted for by inadequate knowledge of relevant cultural and social values and may occur when a speaker selects an inappropriate linguistic strategy to express a speech act in a particular context.

Analysis of the responses among the speakers of the languages in the present study showed that the tendency to leave the compliments somewhat vague in the English/French of Persian speakers seems to reflect Iranian socio-cultural norm. Besides, the choice of refusal strategies, in times, reflected the different characteristics of Persian speakers compared to the speakers of English and French. A reason for this characteristic can be that deeply-held culture values are not easily given up. Therefore, it has to be remembered that non-native speakers in the process of interpretation/translation are likely to engage in socio-cultural transfer in just those speech acts, like compliments, that involve delicate interpersonal negotiations. The present research could be extended in two broader areas. One such area concerns compliments given in settings different from the ones studied here; the other area concerns the study of response tokens. The present study mostly looked at compliments in formal conversations in a limited scope. Further studies could investigate compliments in settings in which participants are on less familiar terms with each other in order to see whether compliments in these settings are formed in a similar fashion and serve similar or different interactional functions. Such settings would for example be service encounters or encounters in public places such as sport events, campuses, cinemas, etc. Similarly, the design and function of complimenting behavior in talk in institutional settings, such as at the workplace or in educational settings, can be of interest.

This study implies that Iranian EFL language educators and translators' primary concern should be appropriately directed to cases in which the pragmatic force mapped by a Persian speaker onto a given utterance is systematically different from the force most frequently assigned to it by native speakers of the target language i.e. English or French, or when speech act strategies are inappropriately transferred from source language to target language. The best cases can be those drawn from the individuals' personal experiences as they are learning/translating foreign texts. Therefore, Iranian English instructors and translators have to acquire a high level of pragmatic competence both in the source and in the target language. Having such a

pragmatic competence can prove extremely valuable in the fields of translation studies and pragmalinguistics.

Keywords: Compliments, Cross-Cultural Problems, Mismatch, Sociocultural, Speech Act

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