Sociopragmatic Decisions Regarding Complaints by Chinese Learners and NSs of American English

Russell Arent
University of Minnesota

Abstract

This exploratory study compares the relative frequency of the performance and avoidance of oral complaints by 22 Chinese learners and 12 native speakers (NSs) of American English (AE). The participants were enrolled in a major U.S. university and were asked to respond to three problematic situations that were set in the same university housing complex where all of the respondents lived. In response to naturalistic observations, an elicitation instrument was designed to elicit English complaints through audiotaped, closed role plays, combined with perceptions of situational seriousness and verbal report data. The instrument did not presuppose the performance of a face-threatening act (FTA) and allowed each participant to respond to the situations verbally or nonverbally, while controlling for the effects of social distance, power, and type of social contract. The data tentatively suggest that sociopragmatic decision-making for Chinese learners and NSs of AE appears to be associated with individual perceptions of situational seriousness and with culturally conditioned perceptions of the flexibility of explicit social contracts. The methodologies employed in previous research on L1 and L2 complaints are surveyed in a review of the literature, highlighting studies which involved Chinese NSs or learners.

Introduction

Speech acts (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969) have now undergone serious investigation by applied linguists for over two decades (comprehensive reviews of the literature are contained in: Coleu, 1996a; Kasper and Blum Kulka, 1993; Kasper and Dahl, 1991; and Wolfson, 1989). Since the groundbreaking work of Thomas (1983) and Bonikowska (1988), researchers in interlanguage pragmatics have been noting the need for more sociopragmatic data (Olshtain and Weinbach, 1993).
Sociopragmatic decisions involve deciding whether to perform a speech act or not, while pragmalogistic decisions involve the selection of linguistic forms to express the speech act intended (Thomas, 1983). The present study explores the complexities involved in sociopragmatic decision-making for Chinese learners and NSs of American English.

The speech act of complaining and face-threatening acts

There is a growing body of data on the speech act of complaining. The present section attempts to survey the research methodologies employed in fifteen recent studies of complaints: Bonikowska, 1988; Boxer, 1989, 1993; Cohen and Olshain, 1993; DeCapua, 1988; Du, 1995; Giddens, 1981; House and Kasper, 1981; Inoue, 1982; Nash, 1983; Olshain and Weinbach, 1987, 1993; Piotrowska, 1987; Schaefer, 1982; and Trosborg, 1987. Olshain and Weinbach's studies (1987, 1993) of Hebrew complaints offer perhaps the most comprehensive account of complaint realization patterns. Because their work is founded upon Brown and Levinson's (1987) research on politeness universals, a brief review of the latter is necessary, since there is great potential for either the speaker or interlocutor to 'lose face' if a complaint is performed in a context or manner that is socioculturally inappropriate.

Deriving from a study of politeness strategies employed in three unrelated languages (English, Tamil, and Tzeltal), Brown and Levinson (1987) maintain that culture has minimal impact on the hierarchy of politeness strategies and that differences in preferences among cultures can be accounted for by analyzing the relative values of three variables: 1) the difference in power (P) between the speaker (S) and the hearer (H); 2) the social distance (D) between S and H; and 3) the rank of the imposition (R). The decision by S to use a face-threatening act (FTA) against H depends on the sum total of the values of the three variables mentioned above. According to this model, all cross-cultural differences in politeness strategy preferences can be accounted for when it is understood that the relative weight of the FTA will vary from culture to culture, depending on the values assigned to each of the above variables (i.e., P, D, and R). Although the above claim has recently been questioned (on different grounds, Fraser, 1990; Gu, 1990; Kasper, 1990; Mao, 1994; Watts, 1992), the model continues to play a major role in
research in interlanguage pragmatics (Turner, 1996, for a comprehensive overview).

If the speaker has a right to complain, the first level of decision making involves considering the various costs and benefits associated with presenting a complaint that may constitute a face-threatening act (FTA) (Brown and Levinson, 1987:65). The person who has experienced an offensive event may choose to: opt out of verbal expression of the grievance (i.e., avoid); express the complaint on record (i.e., explicitly mention the addressee and/or the offense) or off record (i.e., hint); or express the complaint with or without redress (i.e., allow or not allow the hearer to rectify the situation).

The second level of decision making is concerned with the selection of a specific strategy of complaint expression, based on a decision at the first level to express that complaint. There are five major strategies: 1) below the level of reproach (e.g., "Such things happen all the time."); 2) expression of annoyance or disapproval (e.g., "What terrible bureaucracy!"); 3) explicit complaint (e.g., "You're not fair."); "I've been waiting here for nearly an hour."); 4) accusation and warning (e.g., "Next time I will let you wait for hours."); and 5) immediate threat (e.g., "I'm not moving one inch unless you change my appointment.") (Olshtain and Weinbach, 1987: 200-201).

The speech act of complaining has been defined as consisting of numerous components. Schaefer (1982) proposes nine (pp. 14-15)1; Piotrowska (1987) accepts Schaefer's classification, but offers eight additional components2; DeCapua (1988, pp. 9-22) and Olshtain and Weinbach (1993, p. 111) each propose five components, although with different terminology3; and Trosborg (1987, p. 11) delineates four

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1 The components are: 1) opener; 2) orientation; 3) act statement; 4) justification of the speaker; 5) justification of the addressee; 6) remedy; 7) threat; 8) closing; and 9) valuation.

2 The components are: 1) societal justification; 2) request for explanation; 3) blame; 4) resignation; 5) conciliation; 6) persuasion; 7) indirect disagreement; and 8) request for agreement (Piotrowska, 1987).

3 DeCapua (1988) classified complaint responses as: 1) statement of problem; 2) request for repair; 3) demand for repair; 4) justification; and 5) criticisms (pp. 11-27).
categories'. What should be clear from the lack of consensus is that it is difficult to classify the speech act set for the speech act of complaining, and, as has been stated in the literature, such complexity "makes special demands on the speaker" (Cohen and Olshtain, 1993, p. 14).

Methods of data elicitation in previous studies of complaints

A variety of data elicitation methods have been employed in previous research on complaints. There is, of course, no such thing as a 'correct' method; each researcher must select the method (or combination of methods) that most closely matches the stated research objectives given various constraints, such as time and money. Each method has strengths and weaknesses and opportunities for comparisons with other studies will be limited if the corresponding methods are noticeably dissimilar.

Ten studies of complaints focused on oral responses (Boxer, 1989, 1993; Cohen and Olshtain, 1993; Giddens, 1981; House and Kasper, 1981; Inoue, 1982; Nash, 1983; Piotrowska, 1987; Schaefer, 1982; Trosborg, 1987), which heavily influenced the selection of the method. Boxer selected participant observation for two different studies in an attempt to gather more naturalistic data of complaint responses (1989, p. 30-32, 1993, p. 16-17). Although naturalistic data offers far more validity, it is very difficult and time-consuming to obtain, and variables which might influence the participants' behaviors are difficult (if not impossible) to control. Others relied on open role plays, where the interlocutor interacts with the speaker (Cohen and Olshtain, 1993; House and Kasper, 1981; Piotrowska, 1987; Trosborg, 1987), or closed role plays, where no actual acting occurs (Nash, 1983; Schaefer, 1982, p. 10). Piotrowska (1987) elicited oral responses to four, carefully-controlled situations by 32 Cantonese learners and 10 NSs of British English. In a study of oral complaints in both American English and Mandarin Chinese, Nash (1983) employed closed role plays (with some controls on P and D) for 11 American and 12 Chinese participants. The Americans complained in English and the Chinese in Mandarin, but comparisons between the two groups were limited because the Chinese

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The categories are: 1) no explicit reproach; 2) expression of disapproval; 3) accusation; and 4) blame; which are very similar to those offered by Olshtain and Weintraub (1993).
participants did not also perform the complaints in English. Although participant responses were most frequently audiotaped in the above studies, videotaping was also employed (Cohen and Olshtain, 1993; Trosborg, 1987: 30).

All five of the studies that focused on written responses to complaint situations used a type of discourse completion task5 which consists of a prompt (usually describing a situation) and a space in which to write a response (Bonikowska, 1988; DeCapua, 1988; Du, 1995; Olshtain and Weinbach, 1987, 1993). DeCapua constructed five situations that were likely to elicit a complaint and instructed the subjects to respond to the situations "as though they were actually engaging in a conversation" (1988: 6). Olshtain and Weinbach also used a discourse completion task, although they used a greater number of situations: twenty (Olshtain and Weinbach, 1993: 110). Du (1995), in a study of FTAs in Mandarin Chinese (with 30 students from Beijing), focused on three different speech acts: complaining, giving bad news, and disagreeing; employing 19 different situations overall, yet only one (loud violin music from a neighbor) specifically dealing with complaints. The discourse completion task is relatively easy to administer and offers the advantage of eliciting the data in a short amount of time and allows for manipulation of contextual factors (Bonikowska, 1988: 170). A disadvantage, however, is that some research has hinted that semantic formulas employed in discourse completion tasks may differ noticeably from those employed in naturalistic contexts (Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig, 1992) and that discourse completion tasks may bias the respondent toward performing linguistically when opting out is a more likely option (Bonikowska, 1988; Rose and Ono, 1995: 205).

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5 Another variant of this data elicitation instrument is the Discourse Completion Test (or DCT; Blum-Kulka, 1982), which includes a rejoinder of some sort that must be incorporated into each participant's responses (Cohen, 1996a: 394). The author of this study is not aware of any studies of complaints that have utilized this method, although several other speech act studies have done so.

6 There are at least five other studies cited in this article that focus on various aspects of complaints in Hebrew. For reasons of simplicity, this researcher counted the article as one study, although it is clear that three of the studies referred to in the article also used a variant of the discourse completion task (Olshtain and Weinbach, 1993: 110-112).

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Cohen and Olshtain (1993) have concluded that one of the most effective ways to elicit data for the different types of speech acts is through a variety of approaches. They recommend combining methods, such as video-taping the respondents performing role plays and utilizing verbal report to gain a better insight into the reasons for selection of a given response. For those who desire more information, Kasper and Dahl (1991) offer a more general discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the various speech act data elicitation methods than that presented in this paper. Methodological validation is still in its infancy, yet work in this area is slowly moving forward (cf. Rose and Ono, 1995, for a thorough survey of the literature).

The above survey of the literature highlights the fact that there is currently little data available on English complaints involving Chinese learners. Piotrowska's (1987) study is one of the few previous attempts to research this area. The present study, although exploratory in nature, illuminates how Chinese learners process complaints in American English and is perhaps the first study of complaints that involves Chinese learners in an ESL (as opposed to EFL) context.

Opting out and sociopragmatic failure

Bonikowska (1988) found that few studies have truly allowed for the possibility that participants in a conversation may opt out of an unpleasant speech act such as a complaint. In natural contexts, even though a respondent may have a right to perform a speech act (Verbally), according to sociocultural norms of appropriateness, s/he may elect (for various reasons) to avoid such performance, due to possible unpleasant consequences. Bonikowska argues that research instruments need to be carefully designed so that the results are not biased by questionnaires and discourse completion tasks which assume performance of the speech act under study.

The judgements and processes involved in performing speech acts can be grouped into two broad categories: deciding whether to perform and how to perform (Bonikowska, 1988, : 170-171). Although pragmalinguistics (i.e., 'how to perform') has long been the focus of attention for language teachers and professionals, sociopragmatics (i.e., 'whether to perform') has not been adequately researched. Cohen
(1996a, 1996b) terms the latter category sociocultural ability, and also advocates that further research be conducted in this area, incorporating verbal report in the research methodology. Another term sociopragmatic failure, based on the work of Leech (1983) and Thomas (1983), describes the performance of a speech act when sociocultural norms preclude such performance. Some factors that may influence a speaker to exhibit sociopragmatic failure include: 1) a non-conformist personality; 2) a willingness to take risks (in the hope of receiving some benefit; i.e., "The squeaky wheel gets the grease."), and/or 3) (partial or complete) ignorance of sociocultural norms regarding appropriate speech act strategy selection in a given social context.

Although the latter term sociopragmatic failure has been adopted in the present study, it must be pointed out that the words ability and failure both imply a perspective based on target language or cultural norms. Referring to such norms may unduly trivialize the perspectives of individual learners, who may perform a particular speech act for a variety of reasons; some of which may be more strongly linked to issues of ethnic identity, rather than linguistic proficiency. Regardless of the terminology employed, one particular sociopragmatic option has received little attention thus far: the performance of a face-threatening act (FTA) when sociocultural norms preclude such an act.

The research questions

The present study was designed around the following research questions:

1) To what extent do Chinese learners and NSs of American English differ in the relative frequency of:
   a) sociopragmatic failure, in a situation where the speaker does not have a right to perform the FTA, according to sociocultural norms of appropriateness?
   b) opting out, in a situation where the speaker does have a right to perform the FTA, according to sociocultural norms of appropriateness?

This list is not exhaustive. There may be many other valid reasons why someone would fail to conform to a social norm in a given social context.
2) To what extent does the perception of situational seriousness influence whether Chinese learners and NSs of American English perform an FTA in:
   a) a situation where the speaker does not have a right to perform the FTA, according to sociocultural norms of appropriateness?
   b) a situation where the speaker does have a right to perform the FTA, according to sociocultural norms of appropriateness?

Research design

Sample

A total of 34 adult residents of Global Village Cooperative (GVC) participated in the study. Efforts were made to balance the sexes in both groups, with 6 American males, 6 American females, 12 Chinese males, and 10 Chinese females. All of the participants had taken university-level courses and the majority in both groups were enrolled in graduate degree programs. All of the Americans were between 20 to 29 years old and came from diverse regions of the United States. Slightly more than half of the Chinese were between 20 to 29 years old; the rest of the Chinese were aged 30 to 39 years. Most of the Chinese (64%) had been in the United States for more than two years and were from diverse regions of the People's Republic of China (PRC), although one (male) was from Hong Kong and two (one male, one female) were from Taiwan. All of the Chinese respondents were of at least intermediate proficiency in English; while most of them were advanced and working professionally in various academic departments. All of the respondents owned and operated automobiles in the United States.

Instrumentation

To elicit oral responses to problematic situations, while at the same time remain sensitive to the possibility of opting out or sociopragmatic

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8 The name of the housing complex and other identifiers were changed to protect confidentiality.
failure, a questionnaire was constructed that describes three different problems which might plausibly occur at GVC and about which one might complain (see Appendix A for two excerpts). The questionnaire was translated into Mandarin Chinese to minimize the amount of misunderstanding with the Chinese participants, and was subsequently checked for accuracy by means of a back-translation, which confirmed that the original translation was well formed.

In each situation in the data elicitation instrument, differences in power (S < H: +P), social distance (+D) and type of social contract (explicit) were controlled. The variable of perception of seriousness (i.e., roughly equivalent to rank of the imposition, or R) was measured through respondent ratings on a three-point scale: "very serious", "somewhat serious" and "not serious" (See Appendix A).

The first situation describes a refrigerator that was not working properly and caused the food inside to spoil. This problem was chosen because the management of the housing complex is clearly responsible for ensuring that the refrigerator functions properly, since this point is mentioned in the lease and is mandated by local government. The second situation describes a car parked in the wrong parking space which was later towed. This situation was selected because the resident is clearly at fault due to parking procedures communicated through the rental agreement (i.e., lease), a resident policy manual, and a weekly newsletter. The third situation describes neighbors playing loud music at three o'clock in the morning on a weekday, with a test scheduled for early that morning. This situation was chosen because the neighbors are responsible for the noise, which is prohibited by municipal noise ordinances. Similar situations frequently arose in naturalistic observations of actual complaints by GVC residents to GVC administrative officials.

In addition to the three basic situations outlined above, an upgrader was added to each situation so that participants would be forced once again to make a decision about whether to perform a complaint or not. An upgrader is an action or response (verbal or non-verbal) that increases the relative value of the rank of the imposition (i.e., the severity of the situation). See Appendix A (number (1d)) for a description of the upgrader employed for Situation 2.
In each of the above situations, the speaker must decide whether to complain or not. For Situations 1 and 3, the choices are to complain or opt out; while for Situation 2, the choice is to exhibit sociopragmatic failure (by complaining, since the speaker has no right to do so according to social norms) or not complain. The upgraders are central to the focus of the present study, since it was felt prior to data collection (subsequently confirmed with data analysis) that intergroup (sociopragmatic) differences in complaint performance would be most salient after the upgraders were applied, since the strongest motivations behind an individual's FTA performance (or lack of it) typically rise to the fore when the stakes are raised.

Data collection procedures

The researcher conducted the closed role plays in April and May of 1994 at Global Village Cooperative (GVC), a university housing complex for full-time students. A typical interview lasted 20 to 40 minutes, depending on how detailed each respondent's answers were and how much extra information was provided.

Participants were selected at random from a published directory, which contained information on residents' countries of origin. In order to obtain as representative of a sample as possible, the proportion of respondents within each group, Chinese and American, was balanced to reflect that of GVC as a whole, since Chinese residents there outnumbered Americans by nearly a two-to-one ratio. Because the research methodology involved many time-consuming activities (e.g., oral interviews, verbal report, transcriptions), the sample was kept to a reasonable size (N = 34).

During each interview, questions were asked one by one in the exact order that they appear on the questionnaire and participants did not know at any given point in time what subsequent questions would be asked. Interviewees were instructed to be themselves as much as possible when responding to each situation. The goal was to create a relaxed atmosphere for each interviewee so that s/he might feel at ease and not be unduly anxious about the presence of the tape recorder. Upon answering all of the set questions for each of the three situations,
respondents were asked to recall, through verbal report, why they answered the way they did.

The first situation (about the refrigerator) was treated as a warm-up exercise since it was important that each participant feel comfortable with the types of questions that were being asked and the pace of the interview itself. Responses to this situation, therefore, were not included in the final statistical analyses.

Data analysis procedures

72 response sets were transcribed and analyzed for the NSs, and 132 for the Chinese learners. Simple frequency counts were completed for the categories of: 1) perception of seriousness of situation; 2) type of response for the original situation; and 3) type of response for the upgrade. The One-Tailed Fisher’s Exact Test was performed via SPSS to determine whether any significant relationships existed amongst the variables under study.

Results

Question 1a (frequency of sociopragmatic failure): Significant relationships were found to exist between linguistic and cultural background and whether or not an FTA was performed. For Situation 2 (the towed car), 45% (9/20) of the Chinese respondents were still complaining after the upgrade was applied. The same percentage of Americans complaining at that point was only 9% (1/11). The effect of language and cultural background on type of response is statistically significant (p < .05). Table 1 below summarizes the above findings.
Table 1. Participants Still Complaining after Application of Upgrade in Situation 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Not Complaining after Upgrade Applied</th>
<th>Still Complaining after Upgrade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Americans (N=11)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese (N=20)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05.

Question 1b (frequency of opting out): No significant relationships were found between linguistic and cultural background and whether or not an FTA was performed in Situation 3 (the loud music) after the upgrader was applied. There was a slight, but nonsignificant trend for the Chinese to opt out more frequently. 45% (5/11) of the Americans and 59% (13/22) of the Chinese chose to opt out of expressing a complaint. Table 2 below illustrates these results.

Table 2. Participants Still Complaining after Application of Upgrade in Situation 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Not Complaining after Upgrade (Opting out)</th>
<th>Still Complaining after Upgrade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Americans (N=11)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese (N=22)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question 2a (perception of seriousness vs. sociopragmatic failure): The effect of linguistic and cultural background on perception of seriousness of Situation 2 and FTA performance was significant (p < .01). None of the Chinese (0/7) who viewed Situation 2 as 'not serious' or 'somewhat serious' were complaining at the time that the upgrader...
was applied, while 69% (9/13) of those who regarded the situation as 'very serious' were still complaining at this point. None of the Americans (0/7) who viewed the situation as 'not serious' or 'somewhat serious' were complaining at the same point; identical to the findings for the Chinese. Only 25% of the Americans (1/4) who viewed the situation as 'very serious' were still complaining after application of the upgrade. Table 3 below summarizes these findings.

Table 3. Participants Still Complaining after Application of Upgrade in Situation 2:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perception of Seriousness</th>
<th>Not Complaining after Upgrade</th>
<th>Still Complaining after Upgrade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Americans (N=11)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'not serious' or 'somewhat serious'</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'very serious'</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese (N=20)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'not serious' or 'somewhat serious'</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'very serious'</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

p < .01.

Question 2b (perception of seriousness vs. opting out): The effect of linguistic and cultural background on perception of seriousness of Situation 3 and FTA performance was significant (p < .05). Only 29% (2/7) of the Americans who viewed this situation as 'not serious' or 'somewhat serious' were complaining after the upgrade, while 100% (4/4) of those who perceived the situation as 'very serious' were complaining at the same point. For the Chinese, however, 36% (4/11) of those who viewed the situation as 'not serious' or 'somewhat serious' were complaining after the upgrade, while only 45% (5/11) of those who viewed the situation as 'very serious' were complaining at the same point. Table 4 below illustrates the above results.
Table 4. Participants Still Complaining after Application of Upgrade in Situation 3:

According to Perception of Seriousness*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perception of Seriousness</th>
<th>Not Complaining after Upgrade</th>
<th>Still Complaining after Upgrade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Americans (N=11)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'not serious' or 'somewhat serious'</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'very serious'</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese (N=22)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'not serious' or 'somewhat serious'</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'very serious'</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05.

Discussion

For a small-scale, exploratory study such as the present one, the generalizability of findings is severely constrained by several limitations: 1) what a person thinks s/he will do in a given situation may not coincide with what s/he actually does in a naturalistic context where there are real life consequences; 2) only three situations were included (and two analyzed) in this study, meaning that participant responses could merely be artifacts of the situations; 3) the sample size for both groups was small; and 4) although the situations were carefully designed in regard to differences in power (P), social distance (D), perception of seriousness, and type of social contract, other variables, such as affect and social network, were not controlled.

Despite these limitations, the data generated by this study appear to indicate a strong relationship between linguistic and cultural background and sociopragmatic failure (i.e., performing an FTA when it is not socioculturally appropriate), but less of an obvious relationship between linguistic and cultural background and opting out (i.e., not performing an FTA when it is socioculturally appropriate). Cultural (and individual) differences in ratings of the perception of situational seriousness also seemed to have a significant effect in determining participant responses.

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More Chinese (13/20) than American (4/11) participants viewed Situation 2 (the towed car) as a 'very serious' situation. There was a tendency on the part of the Chinese to continue complaining after the upgrader was added. Nine Chinese, but only one American, were still complaining after this point. Verbal report data indicated that many of the Americans felt that there was not much point in trying to persuade GVC Management to reduce the fine, since it was clearly the resident's fault that the car was towed. They pointed out that the parking and towing policy existed in written form in three different places: the lease, the resident policy book, and the weekly newsletter. Verbal report data also revealed that the Chinese viewed this situation as an opportunity to bargain, however, in an attempt to reduce or waive the $100 fine. Several Chinese respondents said that they are used to bargaining with authoritative figures since this process is fairly common in the People's Republic of China (PRC). 95% of the Chinese respondents revealed (for question 2; see Appendix A) that they knew that their action of parking a car in the wrong place was against the rules and that they were responsible, but this knowledge alone did not prevent them from expressing a complaint and (in some cases) negotiating a reduced fine.

Perhaps most Americans know that in U.S. society it is socioculturally inappropriate to pursue a complaint or bargaining strategy when it is clear that the speaker has violated an explicit social contract. Americans have a general idea that in situations like this rules are meant to be objective and applied to all parties without exceptions, unless there is a very good reason for an exception. The situation in the PRC could be different, however, according to Chang and Holt (1991), who outline the importance of kuan hsi.

Kuan-hsi implies a special connection between people, a connection which brings along with it interactants' special rights and obligations, resulting from including the interactants as in-group members. Chinese interpersonal relationships are not conducted simply according to a set of well-prescribed rules. Instead, the Chinese world of interpersonal relations is complicated by clear distinctions based on the closeness of a given relationship, and consequently, all requests for preferential treatment that arise out of one's special connections. (ibid. 256, 258)
Rules, like the parking regulations in Situation 2, might be relaxed or waived altogether in the PRC when they come into direct conflict with interpersonal relationships (cf. Yang, 1994, : 55). This contrast may explain why a significant number of Chinese exhibited sociopragmatic failure in Situation 2 when most Americans did not. Fraser (1990) states that "upon entering into a given conversation, each party brings an understanding of some initial set of rights and obligations that will determine, at least for the preliminary stages, what the participants can expect from the other(s)." (p. 232)

The following unedited quotes, representing typical Chinese responses to Situation 2, illustrate that having an awareness of written regulations (such as parking rules) does not alone imply that the regulations will be viewed as non-negotiable, as the vast majority of Americans would assert: most of the Chinese participants in this study appeared to have a different understanding of the rights and obligations operating within the context of Situation 2.

#1 (Male) I didn't see any warning [inaudible] and I don't think this is necessary to tow the car parked in the visitor's parking. Especially the car belongs to the GVC resident. They should call us instead of just tow the car.

#2 (Male) 100 dollars. It's very...it's a lot to me and is any possibility like to get... I know it's some mistake, but it's some reasonable mistake. So is it possible to deduct...give me some discount on this ransom to get my car back?

#4 (Male) O.K., yeah, every resident should look at that, uh, the GVC. Resident's Manual to see if any regulation about, uh, the parking problem, but regulation is regulation. Besides the law, is there any gracious period for the illegal wreck?

#6 (Male) I feel upset about this situation, because I was not informed by the GVC in some more understandable form like this is the regulation. Just writing in the manual is not enough. I think they should tell you about it.

#13 (Female) It's really my fault. I didn't pay too close attention to what's on my car, but since so many times it's just those garbage things, I mean advertisements. So I made this mistake. Is there any possibility I can reduce the amount?

#14 (Male) I don't have enough time to read all of the information that I have. This very information society has too much information.
Even if I have read about this the GVC Resident Handbook, it's impossible for me to remember all of this stuff.

#19 (Female) Hello, I have some problem. I need your help now, 'cause I park my... second car in the visiting parking place. Uh, last night I forgot and I didn't notice that today the car was gone. Just the tow. I have to pay the fine. That's too expensive for me, because we are students. We cannot afford. Can you do something for me? Next time we won't do it!

Notice how in the above examples most of the Chinese respondents reveal an awareness of parking regulations, but for various reasons decide to pursue complaining and (sometimes) negotiating anyway. Many other Chinese participants specifically mentioned their status as GVC residents, apparently assuming that an appeal to in-group membership might lead to some sort of reduction or waiving of the towing charge.

It has already been noted that only one American elected to complain after application of the upgrader for Situation 2. The following response (American male #9) was typical of the Americans: 'I would be responsible, I think, because...I know the law, that part of the contract. I know what my rights are. I've exceeded my rights, and so that's my responsibility to pay the hundred dollars.' Americans participants consistently maintained that (barring a bonafide emergency) anyone who violated a written contract (in this case, the lease) would have to suffer the consequences.

As has previously been stated, there were no significant differences overall in the number of Americans and Chinese who opted out of complaining in Situation 3 (loud music; cf. Table 2), but significant differences were found when the perceptions of seriousness were factored in (cf. Table 4). Prior to the upgrader, both groups showed a concern for good relations with their neighbors and a large number of each decided to talk to the guilty neighbors face to face. After the upgrader, however, there was a noticeable trend for the Americans (55%) to talk to the police, while the Chinese generally did not (only 27% elected for this option). The last finding can perhaps be better understood through a closer look at nonverbal communication. The nature of nonverbal complaints manifested interesting variations. One Chinese female said she would knock on the wall in this situation and would avoid a face-to-face confrontation because she was concerned
about a possibly violent response from the guilty neighbors. Two other Chinese respondents, a male and a female, said that they would keep knocking on the door of the guilty neighbors even after it was clear that they did not intend to comply. The strategy of knocking on walls is also corroborated by Du (1995, : 179) who has directly observed this type of non-verbal behavior in response to noise violations in Beijing. Verbal report data indicated that several participants, Americans and Chinese, would consider turning their own stereo system up in a full-scale 'sound war', if the neighbors continued to be inconsiderate. These data provide further evidence to Bonikowska's claim that non-verbal responses are legitimate options available to speakers in a speech act situation (of the FTA variety) and are worthy of focus in future studies.

Conclusion

The data obtained through this exploratory study suggest that the sociopragmatic decision-making process is perhaps much more complex than it would at first appear. Future studies on sociopragmatics, or interlanguage pragmatics in general, would do well to further investigate the motivations underlying speech act or FTA performance in a given situation. The findings of the present study, which indicate that American and Chinese participants differed significantly in the frequencies of complaint performance, can perhaps be explained through differing levels of the perception of seriousness of each situation and through different understandings of the flexibility of explicit social contracts.

Notes

An earlier version of this paper was present at the Second Language Research Forum (SLRF '95) at Cornell University in Ithaca, NY, on September 30, 1995. Elaine Tarone and Andrew Cohen offered valuable guidance throughout the term of this project, while Hsiao-lan Roberts and Heping Xu provided further counsel on cultural issues. Min-Chan Chang and Yao Zhu assisted with the translation process. Gratitude is also expressed toward the two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments during the review process. The views expressed in this paper do not necessarily reflect those of the above-named individuals.
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Selected excerpts from elicitation instrument

Situation 2

You have two cars. You park one car in the space reserved for your apartment, and the other car in the space marked 'Visitor's Parking'. Yesterday, a yellow warning tag was placed on a window of the car in the 'Visitor's Parking' spot, but you threw it away without looking at it because you thought that it was an advertisement. Early this morning the car in the 'Visitor's Parking' spot was towed and you learned that it will cost $100 to get it back.

Instructions: Please answer these questions in as much detail as you can.

1) a) How serious is the problem about the car?
   not serious somewhat serious very serious
   b) Is this situation (about the car) serious enough to talk to someone about?
      Why, or why not?
   c) Who do you talk to? What do you say? What do they say?
 d) You informed GVC Management about the problem, but they told you that you should have looked at the GVC Resident Handbook because the policy is explained there. What is your reaction to this situation?
   e) Who do you talk to? What do you say? What do they say?
2) Who is required to pay the $100 towing charge? Why?
Situation 3

Your neighbors next door just moved in two weeks ago, and you have not met them yet. You heard from a friend that the man in that apartment is the son of the President of the University. It is now 3:00 AM on a Tuesday morning and you just woke up from sleep because the same neighbors next door are playing loud music. You have a very important test this morning and need to get as much sleep as possible before your alarm starts ringing at 7:00 AM.

Instructions: Please answer these questions in as much detail as you can.

1) a) How serious is the problem about the loud music?
   not serious somewhat serious very serious
b) Is this problem serious enough to talk to someone about? Why, or why not?
c) Who do you talk to? What do you say? What do they say?
d) You talked to your neighbors, who were playing the loud music, and told them to please turn it down. They refused (said no). What is your reaction to this situation?
e) Who do you talk to? What do you say? What do they say?

2) Are your neighbors required to turn down the music? Why, or why not?