

# **A Study of some Conversational Formulas - from a Cross Cultural Perspective**

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## **Introduction**

Speech act theory is probably the central focus of pragmatic analysis. It was developed by Austin(1962) and modified by Seale(1969). In speech act theory, the effect of utterances on the behaviour of the speaker and hearer is analysed. Austin concluded that by issuing an utterance, the speaker is performing three acts simultaneously: a locutionary act, an illocutionary act, and a perlocutionary act. The locutionary act refers to the actual communicative act, the utterance. The illocutionary act refers to the act that is performed when the utterance is being spoken, such as greeting, complimenting, promising, offering .The perlocutionary act refers to the particular effect that utterance has on the listener, whether offended, threatened, welcomed. Austin explained that the interpretation of locutionary act is concerned with "meaning" and the interpretation of illocutionary act is concerned with "force".

Different languages use different linguistic forms to achieve the various language functions. Native speakers of a language automatically recognise and understand the speech act strategies used in their language, because they have been learned from childhood; so when people share language and culture, communication is achieved without major setbacks. Communication failure may occur, however, between people from different cultural backgrounds when such knowledge is not shared. Although speech acts can generally be translated literally into other languages, the illocutionary force will not be the same.

Crystal (1987) highlights that European languages do not use the word "please" as often as English. If a L2 English speaker uses the word only as it would be used in his/her language, this may appear to be impolite to a L1 English speaker, and the over use of the word by a L1 English speaker when speaking another European language, for example, may appear insincere or sarcastic. That is why pragmatic failures often occur in cross cultural communication.

According to Thomas (1983:93), pragmatic failure, "the inability to understand what is meant by what is said", can occur as a result of one of two levels of misunderstanding. Misunderstanding at level 1 occurs when the hearer fails to understand which proposition the speaker intended. This is likely to occur when the utterance has a number of possible meanings and is ambiguous even when it is uttered in context. Misunderstanding at level 2 occurs when the hearer fails to understand the intended pragmatic force of the speaker's utterance. This second level of misunderstanding occurs when the speaker uses indirect speech acts.

She (Thomas, 1983:99) further develops the concept of pragmatic failure by dividing it into two main groups: pragmalinguistic and socio-pragmatic failure. Pragmalinguistic failure occurs when speech act strategies are inappropriately transferred from L1 to L2 and is caused by mistaken beliefs about the pragmatic force of the utterance. Socio-pragmatic failure stems from cross-culturally different perceptions of what constitutes linguistic behaviour. One of the reasons she gives for pragmalinguistic failure is pragmalinguistic transfer, which is 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 interpretations tend to convey a different pragmatic force in the target language.

Therefore, in this paper, I will have a comparative study of some conversational formulas between Chinese and English cultures from the perspective of adjacency pair. The concept adjacency pair was first developed by Sinclair et al (1975) and further investigated by Stubbs (1983:131) among others. The adjacency pair includes two-place structures such as greeting-greeting, question-answer. Such speech act sequence, whether it is greeting, thanking, complimenting, inviting, is highly formulaic with important cultural information embedded in it. The cultural differences reflected in the adjacency pairs such as greeting, thanks and response, offer and response, and compliment and response should not be neglected since these adjacency pairs are conversational routines, which, as Richards et al (1983:114) describes, help define speech situations and their appropriate use is a vital component of social competence in a language.

First of all, in this paper, five adjacency pairs in Chinese and English will be discussed respectively, namely greeting and greeting, compliment and response, offer and response, thank and response, advice and response, with special emphasis on differences rather than similarities between the both cultures. Then problems in cross Chinese and English cultural communication will be analysed in terms of pragmatic transfers. Since there are various kinds of linguistic means by which the speech acts in question

can be realised in both cultures, only those which represent the norms and are likely to cause negative pragmatic transfer will be investigated.

## Greeting and Greeting

In Chinese culture, the speech act greeting, may be realised by a variety of ways, among which four specific formulas occur more frequently among people based on where and when the interactants meet. They are "ni hao(How do you do ).", "jintian ni mang ma(Are you busy today)?, ni qu nar(Where are you going)?, chi le ma(Have you eaten yet)?" . Response to "ni hao." is always its repetition "ni hao.". However, responses to the other greetings are normally answers based on the real circumstance or position the addressee is in at the moment he/she is greeted.

"ni hao(How do you do)." is often used as a greeting among people who do not know each other or know one another but not very well, especially in the academic and governmental circles, for example,

*Situation:* a lecturer in mathematic department meets a lecturer in languages department on their way to work.

A. ni hao. (How do you do?)

B. ni hao. (How do you do?)

"jintian ni mang ma?" (Are you busy today?) is often used as a greeting between colleagues or acquaintances before, after or during the office hour, for example,

*Situation:* two people who know each other meet in the corridor of the office building when each goes to his own office.

A. Lao Zhang, jin tian ni mang ma? ( Old Zhang, are you busy today?)

B. hen mang/ bu tai mang. (Very busy/Not very busy.)

"ni qu nar?" (Where are you going?) is used as a greeting when two acquaintances meet on the street at any time of the day, for example,

*Situation:* two acquaintances meet on the street.

A. Liu lao shi, ni qu nar? (Teacher Liu, where are you going?)

B. wo qu xue xiao. ( I am going to school.)

"chi le ma? ( Have you eaten yet?) is normally used among acquaintances around meal time, for example,

*Situation:* two acquaintances meet in the building of their working place at noon.

- A. chi le ma, Lao Wang? (Have you eaten yet, Old Wang?)
- B. hai mei chi. ( Not yet.)

Although the speech act greeting is realised by four different linguistic and semantic means, there is one thing in common, that is the addresser shows his/her interest in and care for his/her addressee. Within the greeting there is gesture of friendliness, concern and interest. However, viewed from an English speaker's perspective, the above exchanges might not be considered appropriate because there are different formulas in English culture in terms of greeting. In English culture, greetings can be equally realised by means of different syntactical and semantic patterns, but "How do you do?", "Good morning/afternoon/evening.", "Hi/Hello," followed by "How are you?" or comment on weather such as "Beautiful weather, isn't it?" or "How are things going/How are you doing?" are more frequently used. The responses to the greetings are also formulaic. In responses to the greetings "How do you do?" and "Good morning/afternoon/evening.", mere repetitions are applied while in responses to "How are you" or "How are things going/How are you doing?", "fine" or "good" or "very well" are frequently used, followed by "thank you". When answering to the comment on weather as a greeting, the addressee normally responds positively, such as, "Yes, it (really) is." or "Yes, I like/love it."

"How do you do?" is generally used when interactants are first introduced to each other, for example,

*Situation:* A is introduced to B by C in a party.

- C. Luke, this is Peter. This is Luke.
- A. How do you do?
- B. How do you do?

"Good morning/afternoon/evening." is often used among people who do not know each other or know one another but not very well or in formal occasions, for example,

*Situation:* two academics meet in one morning in their hurry to their offices in their office building.

- A. Good morning, John.
- B. good morning, Mike.

"Hi/Hello," followed by "How are you?" or comment on the weather can be used both among strangers and acquaintances whereas "Hi/Hello," followed by "How are things going?/How are you doing?" are generally applied by closely related acquaintances or friends, for example,

*Situation:* two acquaintances meet in the corridor of the building of their working place.

- A. Hi, David, how are you?
- B. Fine, thank you.

*Situation:* two strangers meet on the street in a fine day.

- A. Hello, beautiful weather, isn't it?
- B. Yes, I love it.

*Situation:* two friends meet in a shop.

- A. Hi, Max. How are you doing?
- B. Hi, Sam. Pretty well.

The above examples show that despite some similarities, there are striking differences between Chinese and English greetings. Therefore, if the Chinese native speaker who learns English as a foreign language communicate with English speakers, he/she cannot avoid transferring their own sociolinguistic rules into the English language interaction, especially when he/she has had little or no instruction in English sociolinguistic behaviour. The following example can demonstrate the way in which transfer from Chinese sociolinguistic rules to English interaction takes place,

*Situation:* a Chinese native speaker(C) studying in an English Uni meets one of his English classmate (E) in one of the Uni buildings.

- C. Hi, Mike, have you had your meal?
- E. Not yet.

In this context, E would expect that an invitation might follow and wait for C's next turn. But C left without any further comment. E would feel surprised and think that C is a bit strange because to him C didn't make clear the reason for asking the question.

The above examples show that the first move of the interaction, the speech act, and the discourse structure are closely connected and they form a culture specific formula. In Chinese culture, the first move of the interaction "chi le ma?" suggests that the speech act is greeting, which requires the involvement of only one exchange, that is initiation and response. However, in English culture in the similar situation, the appropriate initiation would be "Hello, Mike, ( how are you?)". The question "Have you had your meal?" in this context may well indicate the speech act "inviting" (rather than greeting), which involves at least two exchanges in English culture, for example,

- Initiation A. Hi, Mike, have you had your meal?  
Exchange 1  
Response B. Not yet.  
Initiation A. Will you come and have lunch with me?  
Exchange 2  
Response B. That will be great.

In the interaction between C and E, the transfer of the Chinese pragmatic rules into the English discourse give rise to the conflict between two speech acts "greeting" and "inviting". The speech act "greeting(Have you had your meal?)" leads to the absence of a further turn taking by C which is expected by E for the progressing of the speech act "inviting". As a result, the noncompletion of the speech act "inviting" makes E feel that C is a bit strange.

Similarly "Are you busy today?" is often used as a greeting in Chinese interaction which requires only one exchange as shown above, that is initiation and response, and no further turn is expected. However in English discourse it may indicate the speech act "requesting", which may have at least two exchanges. So in a cross Chinese and English culture communication in English context pragmatic failure may occur, for example,

- Situation:* a Chinese student meets his lecturer on the campus.  
C. Hello, Mr. White, are you busy today?  
E. Not really. Anything I can do for you?  
C. Oh ... nothing.

In this situation, C would feel very awkward because intuitively he/she didn't expect any further move from E and didn't know how to respond. However, E, who considered C's initiation "are you busy today?" as an indirect requesting rather than simply a greeting, would left wondering "If nothing why did you ask me?".

Thus we can conclude that in intercultural communication, we must make sure that the linguistic means we use to perform certain speech acts should not be translated literally from our own to another, because they may alter their original meaning and instead, perform a different speech act. In other words, linguistic switching of a speech act is not synonymous with conceptual and cultural switching, and cultural context needs to be taken into account in cross-cultural interactions.

## Compliment and Response

Compliment and response are characteristically formulaic both in Chinese and English cultures in terms of syntax and semantics. If we take the definition of a compliment to be that an utterance containing a positive evaluation by the speaker to the addressee, we find that the number of words that could be chosen to evaluate positively, or compliment, is almost infinite. However if we observe the daily interactions, we will find that there does exist a very restricted set of lexical items and grammatical patterns which have very high frequency in daily discourse. In Chinese culture, adjectives and adverbs such as "hen hao(very good/well), hen hao kan/hen pao liang(good-looking/beautiful), hen nu li/hen yong gong(very diligent/very hard),shui ping gao(level high)" are, though not exhaustive, often used in present day Chinese compliment. The utterance patterns are characterised by two high-frequently used formulas, for example,

NP + Adj. e.g. ni de fang jian hen piao liang(Your room beautiful.)

NP + VP(NP +Adv.) e.g. ni han zhi xie de hen hao(You the Chinese characters write very well.)

Similarly, in English culture, adjectives, "nice, good, beautiful, pretty, great" are used frequently according to Wolfson (1989). She claims that two-thirds of compliments use the above adjectives and 90% make use of just two verbs "like and love". At the syntactic level, she finds that 79% of all compliments are characterised by the following formulas,

NP + {is/looks} (really) + Adj. e.g. Your house is really beautiful.

I really { like/love} + NP e.g. I really like your shirt.

Pro is (really) (a) + Adj. + NP e.g. That is really a great paper.

On the surface level, there are not much difference between Chinese and English cultures in terms of compliment. However, if we look at the response to compliment, differences arise. In Chinese culture, the response to compliment is almost always negative to show modesty, for example,

*Situation:* a lecturer talks with his student.

A. ni xue xi hen nu li.(You study very hard.)

B. bu, cha de yuan le. ( No, far from enough.)

*Situation:* a customer speaks to a waiter after his lunch in a restaurant.

A. ni men zhe fu wu shui ping hen gao. (Here, you have high level service.)

B. bu tai gao. ( Not very high.)

*Situation:* two female lecturers talk to each other in their shared office.

A. ni de qun zhi hen hao kan. (Your skirt looks beautiful.)

B. bu tai hao, hen pian yi. ( Not very good. Very cheap.)

The above responses are typical in Chinese compliment-response exchanges. If the addressee does not reject but responds positively instead, he/she will be regarded as conceited or at least not polite and modest. As a result, further relationship will be impaired if not ruined. This kind of behaviour has much to do with the deep-rooted Chinese idea that humility is a virtue. According to Confucius, to be a man of his best he must practice five things, humility, magnanimity, sincerity, diligence, and graciousness with humility ranked first. He further explained (The Analects, 12), "if you are humble, you will not be laughed at. If you are magnanimous, you will attract many to your side. If you are sincere, you will be trusted. If you are gracious, you will get along well with your subordinates." In English culture, the addressee may often than not respond to compliments positively with "Thank you.", for example,

*Situation:* a lecturer talks with one of his student.

A. You've done a good job.

B. Thank you.

*Situation:* two female graduate students are looking at photos.

A. Your son is great.

B. Yes, I'm proud of him.

Although sometimes he/she may seek to minimise compliments, or reject them completely, the means by which this downgrading is accomplished is very different from those used by Chinese. Typically, he/she responds to compliments by giving unfavourable information about the object or by transferring the credit for the accomplishment or the object complimented to someone or something for which he/she has no responsibility, for example,

*Situation:* two female English people talk to each other.

A. I like your jumper.

B. It's so old, my sister bought it for me a long time ago.

*Situation:* two male English people talk to each other in a garden.

A. The garden looks so great. You must have spent a lot of time on it.

B. Not really, but my wife loves gardening.

Therefore, the above mentioned differences may result in serious communicative interference in cross Chinese and English culture communication. If they are not aware of the strong tendency to negotiate

their roles through opening speech sequences involving such behaviour as complimenting and responding, the great majority of Chinese learning English will not know how to interpret or respond to native English speaker compliments in a way that would lead to the formation of closer relationships. Even worse, they may offend their interlocutors and break their relationships.

There is a wide-spread joke in China running as the following,

"In the late 19th century, a Chinese government official went to receive an English diplomat with his wife and an interpreter. After the routine greetings, the English diplomat said to the Chinese official, 'Your wife looks very pretty.' as a compliment. The Chinese official responded in the typical Chinese way, 'na li, na li' meaning 'no, no.'. However not aware of the contextual meaning of it here, the interpreter translated it as 'where? where?' which is the denotative meaning. So astonished, the English diplomat said, 'Everywhere.' The Chinese official was very frustrated, for he interpreted it as an insult according to his own sociolinguistic rule."

The joke may not be true but it does show that a Chinese is very likely to transfer his/her own linguistic and sociolinguistic rules inappropriately in interaction with English speakers due to the fact that there are great differences between Chinese and English syntactically, semantically as well as pragmatically. Of course, such a joke would not happen any more, because the study of sociolinguistics has received much more attention in the areas of linguistic research and language teaching and quite a few systematic investigations into patterns of speech behaviour have been done, especially within English speaking communities. Based on certain findings, Chinese students are normally informed that the appropriate response to a compliment in English is to accept it with "Thank you" . But in practice, they still find it difficult to do that, for example,

*Situation:* at a function for scholarship students, after C(female Chinese) has been introduced to A(male English) by her friend B(male Chinese), A speaks to C.

- A. Do you know that he's the best student in the class?
- B. No, no, no, that's not true.
- A. It is true.
- C. Yeah. He studies all the time.

*Situation:* Two female graduate students are looking at photos. A is English; B is Chinese. The photos are of B's family.

- A. Your brother is handsome.
- B. Not very much.

Another problem is that a native speaker would very often take compliment as an opening to negotiate a relationship with another speaker. The Chinese is often misled into making response "Thank you" which have exactly the opposite of the desired effect -- response which create distance rather than solidarity between him/her and the English interlocutor, for example,

*Situation:* English female student speaks to her Chinese male classmate.

- A. Your English is good.
- B. (hesitation) Thank you.

*Situation:* two students, one is English and the other is Chinese, waiting in a classroom for the other students and lecturer to arrive.

- A. Your English is fluent.
- B. No response.

*Situation:* English female student speaks to her Chinese female classmate.

- A. Your blouse is beautiful.
- B. Thank you.
- A Did you bring it from China?
- B. Yes.

In the above examples, the compliments about addressee's English proficiency illustrate what may be regarded as almost formulaic conversation opener used by native to nonnative speakers. In situations as such, a Chinese need learning to know how to respond in ways that help to support a continuation of talk, rather than a modest "thank you" or no response at all.

What is also important to note is that women are traditionally assumed in both cultures to be more concerned than men with personal topics such as physical appearance, clothing, food and diet. However native English-speakers, regardless of gender, tend to apply compliments to nonnative speakers on their belongings and appearances as leads into longer conversational sequences. This too is often misunderstood by Chinese speakers of English, who wishing to show modesty or believing "thank you" is the proper response to a compliment, will often resist unconsciously such attempts at conversational openings made by English people, either by closing the exchange by thanking or by not responding at all. If Chinese speakers of English are aware of the native English-speakers' compliments as intentions for further conversations, it can be of great benefit to them as a means of forming friendly relationships with their English interlocutors and thereby learning to interact with a variety of people and gaining the opportunity to practice using the target language.

## Offer and Response

Similar to response to compliment, the Chinese way of response to offering is also strikingly different from that of English. In English culture, to show courtesy, "Yes, please" is very often used as a positive response, "No, thanks" as a negative response to offering, for example,

*Situation:* B is visiting A. After A shows B into his room,

A. Sit down please. Would you like a cup of coffee?

B. Yes, please.

*Situation:* A is a waiter and B is a customer in a restaurant.

A. (A brings a menu to B) Would you like to have some drink first?

B. Not now, thank you.

In the similar situations, a Chinese will respond quite differently, for example,

*Situation:* B is visiting A. After A shows B into his room,

A. qing zuo. wo qu bao cha. ( please sit down. I am going to make tea.)

B. wo bu he. bie ma fan le. (I don't drink. Don't bother.)

*Situation:* A is a waiter and B is a customer in the restaurant,

A. (A brings a menu to B) nin xiang xian he dian shen mo?  
(What do you want to drink first?)

B. xian bu ma fan. ( Don't bother now.)

According to the Chinese sociolinguistic rule, in the first situation of the above examples, the guest said that he would not have any tea and advised the host not to bother to make it, he did not suggest that he really did not want it, but rather tried to show his politeness, and normally the host would still make some tea for the guest for he equally tried to show his politeness by doing so. In other words, the negative response "wo bu he" together with "bie ma fan le" functions as courtesy rather than a negative statement in family circles. However, in the second example, "xian bu ma fan(Don't bother now)" is a polite reject to the offer in which "nin" is an honorific for "ni(you)", indicating that the customer would not drink for the time being but would possibly drink later. Nevertheless the Chinese way of response, such as "bie ma fan le" or "bu ma fan" demonstrates that politeness and the negative syntax with the indication of preventing the offering are closely related, and form a routine, whereas the English way demonstrates a different formula, which connects politeness with modality markers such as

"thanks or please". The specific response structure "No, thanks or thank you(very much/a lot)", or Yes, please." shows such a formula.

If the Chinese sociolinguistic rules are transferred into the target language during cross Chinese and English cultural interactions, negative effect will appear, for example,

*Situation:* a Chinese(A) visits his English colleague(B)'s home,  
A. Would you like something to drink?  
B. No. Don't bother.

In this situation, the English host would believe that the guest rejected his offer on the one hand and feel that the guest's response was abrupt and impolite on the other hand, for the guest's response could no longer convey the illocutionary act "showing politeness". According to the English sociolinguistic rule, "Don't bother" is not associated with politeness but rudeness.

Similarly, the Chinese response to offering of gift is also different from that of English. In English culture, people generally respond to certain offer with great appreciation or admiration and the language used is very formulaic, for example,

*Situation:* It is B's birthday. A offers a souvenir to B.  
A. Happy birthday to you, Jane. Here is a souvenir for your birthday.  
B. Thank you very much. (unwrapped the parcel) What a lovely scarf!

"Thank you (very much/a lot)" together with a positive comment on the gift offered, is appropriate and polite response in English, but different linguistic means is applied to achieve the same effect in Chinese, for example,

*Situation:* It is B's birthday. A offers a souvenir to B.  
A. Lao Wang, wei qing zhu ni sheng ri, gei ni ge xiao li wu.  
(Old Wang, to celebrate your birthday, give you a little souvenir.)  
B. ni tai ke qi le. (You are being too ceremonious, and then put the gift away).

In this example, it seems that B performs an speech act "mild blaming(You are being too ceremonious)" on the surface, but the illocutionary meaning is "You don't have to( or don't bother) since we are friends", thus a negative response to the offer as a courtesy. In fact, a direct "bu(No)" or "zhen/tai ma fan ni le(Really/Too bother you)" can also be applied in the situation. In addition, a Chinese is generally reluctant to open the souvenir and comment

on it. This kind of behaviour is accepted as appropriate and polite in Chinese interactions, but it is totally unacceptable in English.

In summary, the sociolinguistic rules observed by Chinese are quite different from those of English. If they are transferred into cross Chinese and English communications, deviations will arise. As a result, the interactants will fail to convey their good-will intention and polite manner.

## Thank and Response

In English, "Thanks" or "Thank you (very much/a lot)" is perhaps the most frequently used expression in daily interactions. People express their gratitude to whoever does a favour for them. For example, a father will say "Thank you" to his son who passes table-salt to him at table, and a wife will say "Thank you" to her husband who makes a cup of coffee to her. In Chinese culture, the speech act "thanking" is not often used in family circles, and rarely used by members of ascending generation to those of descending generation. For example, parents never say "Thank you" to their sons and daughters no matter what favour they do for their parents, for parents take it for granted that their offsprings should do favour for them and offsprings consider it their duties or filial piety(xiao) to do whatever favour they can to them. On other occasions, there is no much difference between Chinese and English with respect to thank-giving, but there are some differences in terms of response to thanking. In English, "Not at all", "Don't mention it", "That's nothing", "You are welcome", "With/My pleasure" and "No worries" are used as responses to thank-giving based on whether it is formal or informal, with the first two perhaps more formal but the last least formal, for example,

*Situation:* In a restaurant, a customer thanks a waiter for his service.

- A. Thank you very much for your service.
- B. Don't mention it.

*Situation:* In a shared house, A thanks his housemate who has made a cup of coffee for him.

- A. Thank you.
- B. No worries

*Situation:* an elderly lady thanks a young man who carries her shopping bags to the car.

- A. Thank you a lot.
- B. With pleasure.

In Chinese, there are similar expressions, for example, "yuan yi xiao li/lao(With/My pleasure", "mei shen me(Not at all.)", "bu zhi yi ti(Don't mention it.)" which are used in many occasions in Chinese contexts (so no further discussion in this aspect), but in the public service settings two other expressions are often used, which are different from those of English, namely "zhe shi wo ying gai zuo de(This is what I should do.) and "zhe shi wo ying jin de yi wu(This is my duty.), for example,

*Situation:* In a restaurant, a customer thanks a waiter for his service.

- A. xie xie ni de fu wu. (Thank you for your service.)
- B. zhe shi wo ying gai zuo de. (This is what I should do.)

The above examples demonstrate that the responses are associated with a sense of duty, which is regarded by the Chinese as a moral obligation. Since the responses indicate that one need not to be thanked for what one should do, they are polite and modest. This kind of social convention is very often transferred into cross Chinese and English interactions, which results in negative consequence, for example,

*Situation:* An English tourist thanks his Chinese tour guide for his service.

- A. Thank you very much for the wonderful trip.
- B. That's my duty.

*Situation:* An English customer thanks his Chinese waiter in a restaurant.

- A. Thank you for your excellent service.
- B. That's what I should do.

In these situations, even though the Chinese believed that they showed their appropriate courtesy and respect for their customers, the English people would feel very upset and offended, since according to their cultural rules, both the guide and waiter were rude. Their interpretations would be that the Chinese were obliged to serve them rather than do it willingly.

## **Advice and Response**

In Chinese culture suggestions and advice are gestures of friendliness, concern, admiration or interest. As a result, advice-like statements and questions are frequently employed in interactions between friends and acquaintances as a solidarity strategies to show benevolence, develop conversational rapport, and/or establish group belonging, for example,

*Situation:* two lecturers meet in a teachers' lounge, A addresses to B.

- A. Lao Wang, ni jin tian mang ma? (Lao Wang, are you busy

today?)

B. hen mang, wo jin tian you liu jie ke. (Very busy, I have had six hours of lecture.)

A. na tai du le, ni ying zhu yi shen ti. (That is too much. You should pay attention to your health.)

B. mei guan xi. wo yi jing xi guan le. (It doesn't matter, I've got used to it.)

*Situation:* A and B are friends. B is leaving after he has just had a dinner with A's family.

A. duo xie ni de kuan dai. ( Thank you very much for your dinner.)

B. mei shen me. wai bian hen hei, duo ja xiao xin. ( Not at all. It's so dark outside that you must be

very careful.)

A. bie dan xin. zhai jian. (Don't worry, good bye.)

Advice as shown in the above examples which are highly formulaic permeates in Chinese daily conversations. On the contrary, English people would not perform the above speech acts in the similar situations. According to Altman(1990), English people rarely consider advice between acquaintances appropriate, but rather as an intrinsically face threatening act. Compared with Chinese culture, giving advice is a more complex speech act that should be performed with caution when the speaker is reasonably certain that the addresser is presupposed to have the right or the authority to give advice in English culture. In fact, Jefferson and Lee (1981) found that even in contexts of troubles-telling in English, the giving of advice is a precursor of dispute and is rejected in most such interactions. In English-speaking societies based on a tradition which places special emphasis on the rights and the autonomy of every individual, which abhors interference in other people's affairs,... which respects everyone's privacy, which approves of compromises and disapproves of dogmatism of any kind (Wierzbicka, 1991,30), the giving of advice generally has a negative socio-cultural and interactional value, and can be perceived as intrusive and overbearing, for example,

*Situation:* a Chinese student (A) meets his English lecturer (B) who is taking a walk on the campus. B twisted her ankle the day before.

A. Hello, Jane.

B. Hello, Luke.

A. What's wrong with your leg?

B. I twisted my ankle last evening.

A. You'd better go to the hospital.

B. Oh,... not that serious.

A. but at least you have to stay in bed.

*Situation:* a Chinese student (A) and an English lecturer (B) come out of B's flat to go to a cinema.

A. It's very cold outside. You'd better put on more clothes.

B. Well...

In the above examples, the L1 Chinese speakers who tried to show their kindness and care for the addressees would fail their good-will purpose because they transferred their own pragmatic rules to cross cultural communication. It would be hard for the English native speakers to accept the good-will. Instead they would feel very frustrated or at least uncomfortable for they would believe that they could make their own decisions and need no naggings as such. The giving advice which is an appropriate conversational strategy in Chinese speaking society would create imposition on the hearers when it is transferred to English communication.

## **Conclusion**

Clearly, there are great differences between Chinese and English conversational formulas in terms of the rules and patterns which constrain such speech behaviours. It has been the intention of this paper to provide some insight into the complexity of these differences by focusing specifically on only some conversational formulas in terms of adjacency pairs. The cross cultural spoken discourse analyses show that language is closely related to culture and thought. The use of mother tongue means the involvement of culture specific pragmatic rules, which are interwoven into the linguistic and non-linguistic realisation of speech act. In cross cultural communication, the differences in pragmatic rules, which are reflected in the differences in the linguistic and non-linguistic realisation of speech act, may become problematic areas in learning a foreign language. Therefore, it is of importance to make these differences known to both learners and teachers in learning and teaching a foreign language.

The discussion in this paper which provides insights into cultural differences between Chinese and English conversational formulas could prove valuable to English learners in China. Having been aware of the differences, English learners will be able to avoid much of miscommunication and frustration which so often result in dysfunctional interactions. Having gained such insights into the way speakers of the target language behave, English learners will be able to interpret what is meant by what is said to them, and will gain control over the way in which they present themselves to the target language speakers.

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