

## The Truth Behind British Politeness: Some Misinterpretations

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this paper is to analyse a chart published by the British newspaper *The Telegraph* about the most common misunderstandings foreigners face while making use of English as their second language. L2 speakers are said to take every word at face value and therefore making some pragmatic mistakes. Sometimes there can be another meaning behind the spoken words, like it is unsaid for a reason. The pragmatics theories of irony in Attardo (1999) shed light on these translating and intercultural awareness issues by explaining what is behind the misunderstanding which is the secret of the so famous British politeness. Some considerations will be made upon the chart so as to understand it, such as an analysis of irony and native speakers' perspectives on it. In addition to that, we will take into account the opinion of some native speakers of English to unveil some details and clarify how meaningful some sentences may be and if the researched chart is actually accurate.

**Keywords:** *Misunderstandings, Translation, Pragmatics.*

### 1. Introduction

The core of this study is to analyse the importance of pragmatics when it comes to learning a foreign language. The learner has to be aware of the language in use and the intention which underlies the spoken words, not written ones. In this paper we discuss some topics concerning the misunderstandings that non-native speakers of English go through when they are face-to-face with some clusters they do believe they understand because they are taking every word at face value. The sentences themselves are meaningful, nonetheless, tricky and devious according to the speaker's intention.

### 2. Starting from pragmatics

According to LoCastro (2003), pragmatics explains how human beings are capable of understanding meanings beyond the literal interpretation of signals. Linguistic forms are our most common signals, explains the author. They can be considered here one of the primary semiotic resource available to humans to communicate.

The human behaviour underlies a cognitive process called inference, which is, in other words, the ability of understanding and creating pragmatic meaning. LoCastro states that:

Researchers in pragmatics are particularly interested in meanings inferred in nonconventional uses of language. Communicating and comprehending pragmatic meaning are as natural as sneezing when there is dust in the air (LOCASTRO, 2003, p. 5).

Here are some examples of what this is:

a) *Could you pass me the salt shaker?*

According to LoCastro (2003), in the sentence above, the question itself is all about the ability of passing the salt. However, most native speaker of English will understand it as a conversational request, which is an expression recognized by the speaker who wants someone to pass him/her the salt.

According to Huang (2007), there is a huge gap between the meaning of a sentence and the message actually conveyed by the uttering of that sentence, there must be an interaction which depends on the context. In other words, the linguistically encoded meaning of a sentence radically undetermined the proposition the speaker expresses when he or she utters the sentence.

When it comes to meaning, the answer is not often that simple, most of the timesthelistener needs to understand what is unsaid in the spoken words.

### 3. Communication and Meaning

When it comes to communication, there are several ways to say things you want to without meaning it straight forward. This is just a sample on how difficult it may be for a foreigner or someone who does not share the same cultural context to understand English language when such examples come up. As mentioned before, this paper aims at analysing the most common misunderstandings by non-native speakers of English when they basically take every word at face value. This is very common when they do not have enough language cultural background to know the real meaning of the words they are exposed to in different contexts.

The British newspaper *The Telegraph* published -on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of September, 2013 - a chart regarding possible misunderstandings foreigners may make while communicating in English.

1- Chart published on *The Telegraph* – Translation Table

#	What British say	What it means	What learners get
1	I hear what you say	I disagree and do not want to discuss it further	He accepts my point of view
2	With the greatest respect	You are an idiot	He is listening to me
3	That's not bad	That's good	That's poor
4	That is a very brave proposal	You are insane	He thinks I have courage
5	Quite good	A bit disappointing	Quite good
6	I would suggest	Do it or be prepared to justify yourself	Think about the idea, but do what you like
7	Oh, incidentally/ by the way	The primary purpose of our discussion is	That is not very important
8	I was a bit disappointed that	I am annoyed that	It doesn't really matter
9	Very interesting	That is clearly nonsense	They are impressed
10	I'll bear it in mind	I've forgotten it already	They will probably do it
11	I'm sure it's my fault	It's your fault	Why do they think it was their

			fault?
12	You must come for dinner	It's not an invitation, I'm just being polite	I will get an invitation soon
13	I almost agree	I don't agree at all	He's not far from agreement
14	I only have a few minor comments	Please rewrite completely	He has found a few typos
15	Could we consider some other options	I don't like your idea	They have not yet decided

Source: *The Telegraph* (2013)

As it can be seen, the chart above is divided into 3 columns on purpose. Now we are going to provide some further explanation:

The expressions on the first column clearly reflect an attempt to soften the negative tone of the remarks by adopting a polite form, to avoid face threatening.

Obviously, the chart was produced to cause a humorous effect. When asked about sentences 1, 2, 6, 9, and 14, some native speakers<sup>1</sup> I got in contact with told me, unsurprisingly, that those sentences can be understood literally. When the second and third columns are read, it is possible to perceive that in some situations, the speaker is, in fact, being ironical. Below we present some alternatives suggested by the native speakers I interviewed.

## 2- Corrected Chart Version

#	What British say	What it means	What learners get
1	I hear what you say <i>but</i>	<del>I may disagree in some aspects and do not want to discuss it further</del> <i>I want to say something else.</i>	He accepts my point of view
2	With the greatest respect	<del>You are an idiot</del> <i>I do respect you</i>	He is listening to me
6	I would suggest	<del>Do it or be prepared to justify yourself</del> <i>it is up to you, but I'd like you to do what I say.</i>	Think about the idea, but do what you like
9	Very interesting	<del>That is clearly nonsense</del> <i>It is interesting.</i>	They are impressed
14	I only have a few minor comments	<del>Please rewrite completely</del> <i>Just few minor comments.</i>	He has found a few typos

Source: *The Telegraph* (2013) & Audrey Bellis

In this new version of chart, we can see some corrections made by 2 native speakers of English from Manchester. The table is not radically understood the same way to all native speakers of English in England.

<sup>1</sup> Two native speakers of Manchester, both graduated at the University of Manchester, at the ages of 30 and 61.

As for the rest of the content from the first chart, they both seem to agree that the chart works just as it is shown as a matter of irony. Of course the chart above can be understood otherwise, but in this article we are going to focus on the ironical meanings.

#### 4. For a Definition of Irony

Although interpretations may vary, irony is within pragmatics. The language in use and the speaker's and interlocutor's intention play an essential role here.

According to Attardo (1999), irony can/may be:

- 1) An inappropriate utterance which is nonetheless relevant to the context.
- 2) Irony crucially involves a two-stage processing (the first is the obvious interpretation and its processing).
- 3) Irony may go undetected.
- 4) Understanding that the text is ironical doesn't mean getting the meaning of it.
- 5) The recognition of irony is distinct and separated from interpretation of its value.
- 6) The reconstruct of the intended meaning is inferential. No aspect of the meaning may be given in the text. Irony is purely pragmatic phenomenon.
- 7) The purpose of irony lies in its rhetorical and social effects. Irony has a purpose and a goal.

If we take into account what was said above, we can clearly see how ironical British speakers can be so as to be polite and not really say what they mean. Let's take as an example the sentence number 5 from the original published chart:

#	British say	Real meaning	What is understood
5	Quite good	A bit disappointing	Quite good

At first we could say that the original sentence would be a compliment, because we would understand *quite* as a synonym of *a lot but not complete*<sup>2</sup>, and *good* as something very satisfactory and interesting. We all have to agree that the real meaning of this sentence is not said in it, it is only inferred.

When asked, natives<sup>3</sup> seem to agree that the meaning is *poor* or *disapproving*, because this is the way they understand it, taking their knowledge of native speakers for granted. They say it is just a meaning implied in the sentence, as in a whole chunk. Whenever you listen to this chunk and it is qualifying something, you know it means only *poor* and it is never even near the meaning of *good* or *very good*.

<sup>2</sup> This definition was taken from the Cambridge Dictionary for Advanced Learner's of English (2012).

<sup>3</sup> Two native British speakers, one man at his 30 years old and a woman at her 61 years old, both graduated at college.

As mentioned before, Attardo (1999) establishes some topics explaining what irony can be and how you can identify it. In the example we have just examined, we can see that the sentence is:

- 1) Relevant to the context, if we think of a teacher-student situation where the teacher is just being polite and do not wish to cause any embarrassment saying how bad it may be.
- 2) It may go undetected if the student is not fluent enough to get this pragmatic meaning.
- 3) We cannot interpret it from what is said (literal meaning), otherwise we will be getting it the wrong way.
- 4) Irony is in between the language and its usage in society.

Then we can understand why natives of the language can grasp the meaning easily, once the purpose of irony is purely social and rhetoric. We may think about it as a stereotype, but British people in general are said to be polite, you can see the fame through the chart below.

When we have a look at sentence number 12:

#	British say	Real meaning	What is understood
12	You must come for dinner	It's not an invitation, I'm just being polite	I will get an invitation soon

We confirm what we have just said, like in some other languages (Portuguese, Spanish and French), the sentence above is just a way of being polite, and it doesn't really mean you are scheduling a dinner at your home, it means you are just being friendly by showing how welcoming you may be to others you have come across with.

## 5. Final Remarks

Learning a new foreign language is by far much more difficult than some structural rules and vocabulary memorization. Context, speaker intention and culture also take a great place in the learning process. Getting to know the language in use, seems to me, just the beginning of a long path as to achieve some fluency.

As observed in this study, irony is not simply got by foreigner students. It takes some time and you probably face some problems while trying to understand what is said. It is known that irony is not really part of formal studies in foreign language course books worldwide. The teacher himself is in charge of teaching some pragmatical usages which can be unsaid in the words we hear on a daily basis. It makes us wonder, is pragmatics learnt only in real life situations? There is no other way round?

Grammar books and course books should include some topics concerning pragmatics more often in order to make it visible in English classes around the world. Of course pragmatics is a lot

dependent on context and culture, however we see few attempts from authors to work with it, the construction of meaning.

There is still much to be done about pragmatics when it concerns teaching material. The chart observed and studied was just a sample of the embarrassments students have to face up on a daily basis in a foreign country, but it is, at the same time, something to encourage teachers and book writers to come up with different ways to teach pragmatics in the upcoming future with developed studies on pragmatics.

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