Applying Social Pragmatics to the Realities of Intercultural Interaction:
Insights and Limitations

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Outline

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1. Introduction: 2 applied questions
2. Factors affecting Rapport: developing an analytic framework
3. Achieving Effective Communication in International Projects: what analytic framework do we need?

Research Goals?

"Agreed, you need to know your linguistics before you can develop a mature & sophisticated applied linguistics; but should one not need to know applied linguistics before one can develop a mature & sophisticated linguistics? Should there not at least be a discussion of cases where applied linguistic questions make linguists refine or rethink just what it is they possess?"

Crystal 2003: 9-10

Applied Question 1

Research Goals?

1ˢᵗ Applied Question:

What factors influence people's perceptions of rapport in intercultural interaction?

N.B. Unlike many linguists, my starting point is 'questions about interaction' rather than 'questions about language per se'.

The Study

Project: A study of Chinese-British business meetings

1. Purpose: to study relational management in Chinese-British business interactions

2. Conducted between 1996 and 2000

3. Design: emergent rather than pre-specified

4. Theory: a new theoretical framework emerged from the study of the data

Data Collection

Three 10-day delegation visits were studied.

For each, three types of data were collected:

1. Video recordings of all official meetings
2. Field notes
3. Interview/playback comments

Implications

How did the findings fit in with existing pragmatic frameworks?

1. What are people 'rapport-sensitive' to?
2. How is rapport (mis-)managed in interaction?

Managing Rapport

Rapport

Definition of 'Rapport'

I use the term 'rapport' to refer to people's subjective perceptions of the (dis)harmony or smoothness-turbulence between participants, and the term 'rapport management' to refer to the ways in which this (dis)harmony is (mis)managed.

Rapport

Cf. Definition of 'Relational'

I use the term 'relational' to refer to the relationship between the participants in terms of the pragmatic variable distance-closeness, equality-inequality, and perception of role rights & obligations. I use the term 'relational work' to refer to the ways in which these pragmatic variables are managed or negotiated in interaction.

Data

Problematic Incidents in Visit 2:

1. Quality of the hotel
2. Seating arrangements
3. 'Content' of the UK welcome speech
4. Lack of opportunity to give a return speech
5. Programme of activities
6. Attempt to meet with China Sales Manager

Data

"It shouldn't have been that he sat in the chair position and we were seated along the sides of the table. With equal status, they should sit along this side and we should sit along that side, shouldn't we? That would have been the right way. You see, they were chairing, and we were audience, which naturally means that you do what you are told to. [His colleagues chorus agreement] They were, right from the start, they were commanding, in control, contemptuous. In actual fact we should have been given equal status…" Chinese Delegation Leader
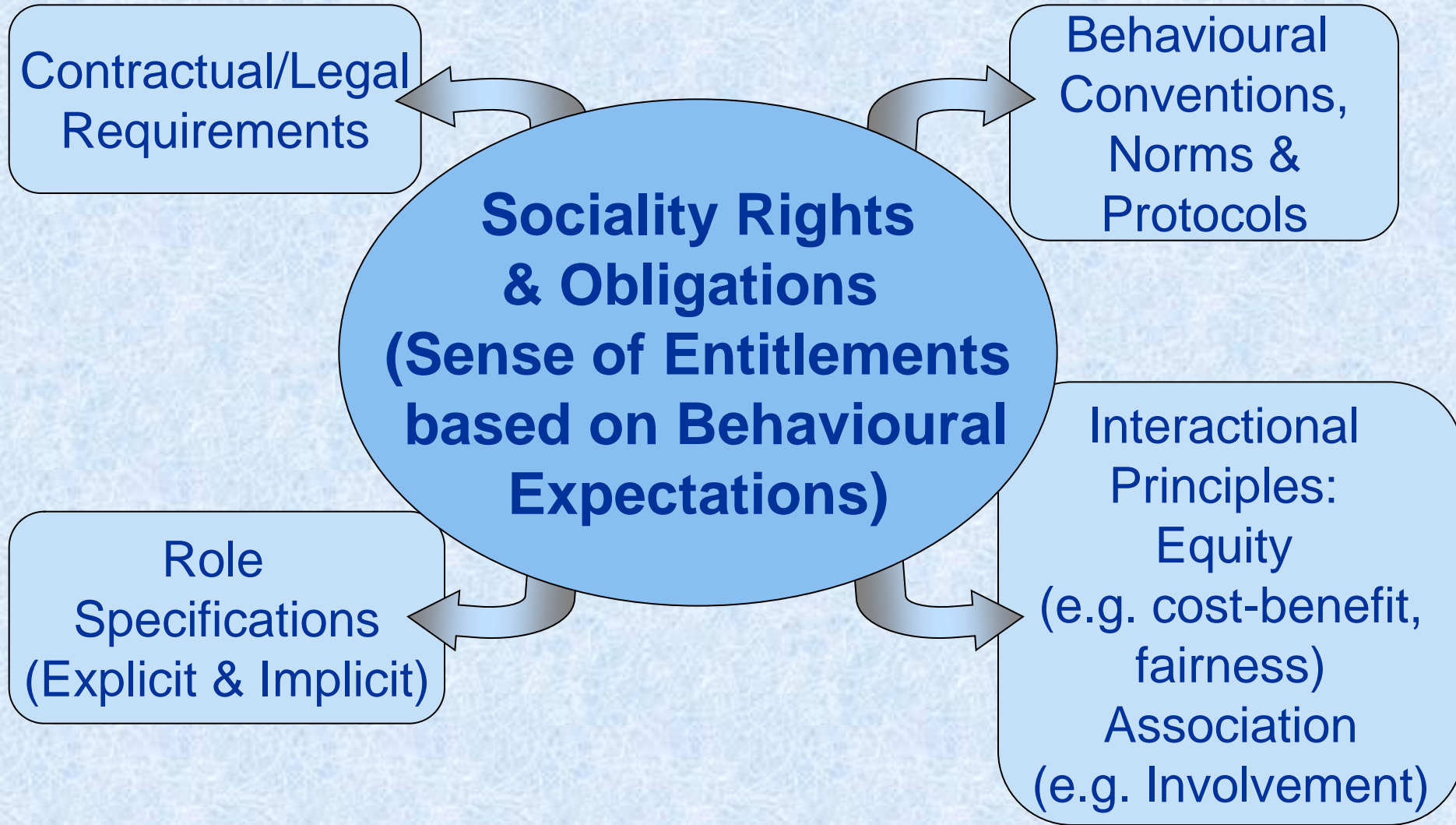
Data

"According to our home customs and protocol, speech is delivered on the basis of reciprocity. He has made his speech and <u>I am expected</u> to say something. … In fact I was reluctant to speak, and I had nothing to say. But <u>I had to</u>, to say a few words. Right for the occasion, right? But he had finished his speech, and he didn't give me the opportunity, and they each introduced themselves, wasn't this clearly implied that they do look down on us Chinese."
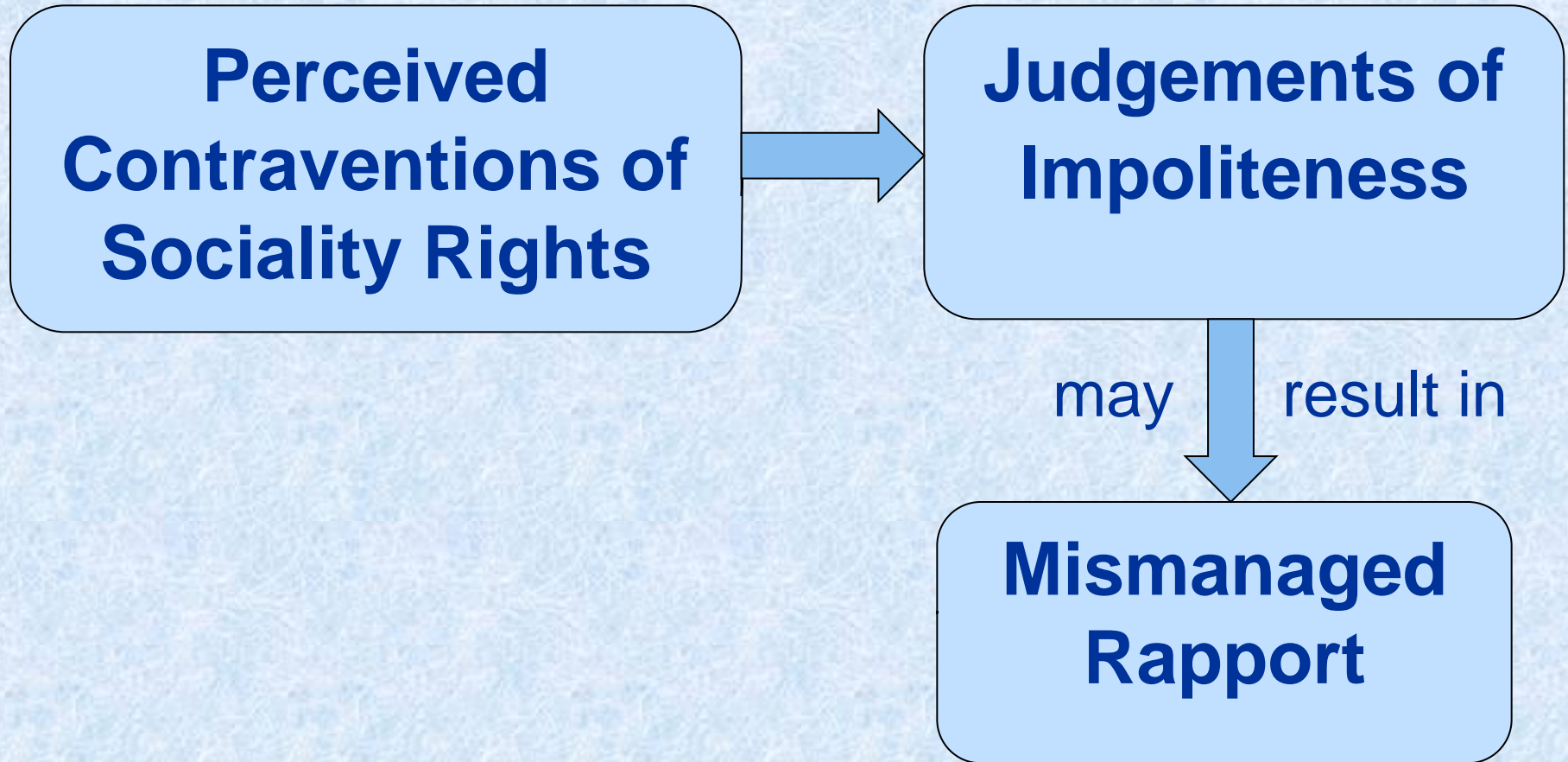
Chinese Delegation Leader

Implications

- People have expectations as to what will happen

- These expectations can become prescriptive in that people believe they <u>should</u> happen

- I label these "**sociality rights and obligations**"

- If people perceive that their sociality rights & obligations have not been fulfilled, they are likely to feel offended

- The bases of people's sociality rights and obligations are various.

Sociality R/Os

Contractual/Legal Requirements

Behavioural Conventions, Norms & Protocols

Sociality Rights & Obligations (Sense of Entitlements based on Behavioural Expectations)

Role Specifications (Explicit & Implicit)

Interactional Principles: Equity (e.g. cost-benefit, fairness) Association (e.g. Involvement)

Sociality R/Os

Perceived Contraventions of Sociality Rights → **Judgements of Impoliteness**

may | result in

Mismanaged Rapport

Different Conventions

Welcome Meeting Conventions

British Company

1. Members each introduce themselves
2. Speeches can be handled informally

Chinese Delegation

1. Leader should introduce the team
2. Both parties should give formal speeches

Attitudes:
- Flexible re Introductions
- Flexible re Speeches

Attitudes:
- Flexible re Introductions
- Not flexible re Speeches

Different SIPs

Meeting 'Friends'

British Manager

1. Needs of self and family take priority after a long business trip

SIP:
- Emphasis on Equity
- Emphasis on personal cost-benefits

Chinese Delegation

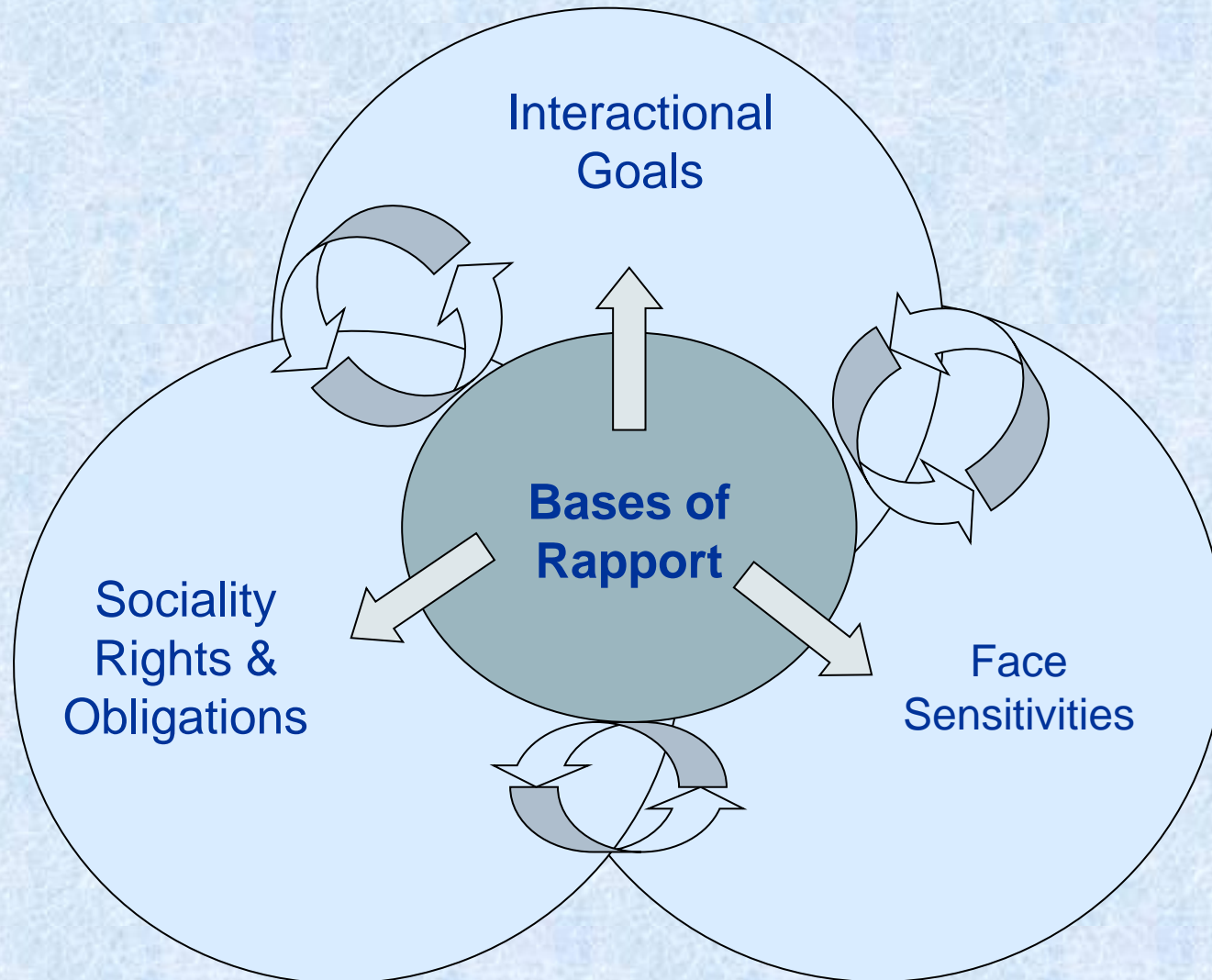1. Meeting social contacts take priority even after a long trip

SIP:
- Emphasis on Association
- Emphasis on interpersonal relations

Sociality R/Os

Bases of R/O Expectations

1. **Contractual/legal agreements & requirements**
2. **Activity type conventions** (e.g. Participation, turn-taking, handling of agendas)
3. **Role-related specifications** (explicit and implicit)
4. **General interactional principles**
   - Equity: cost-benefit, fairness/reciprocity, autonomy-control
   - Association: involvement, empathy, respectfulness

Rapport

Face

Definition of Face Sensitivities

I define face sensitivities as self-attributes that are contextually important to a person in a given interaction; they include the positively-evaluated attributes that the person wants others to acknowledge (explicitly or implicitly), and negatively-evaluated attributes that the person wants other participants NOT to ascribe to him/her.

Face

Defining Face Threat/Loss/Gain

Face threat/loss/gain will be perceived when there is a mismatch between an attribute claimed, and an attribute perceived as being ascribed by others.

Face threat/loss/gain typically leads to feelings of embarrassment/pride.

Example re Face

Interpreter:

- Discussing money is face-threatening

British Company

1. Talking about expenses is no problem

Attitude:

1. Be clear what you want

Chinese Interpreter
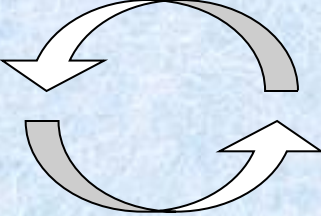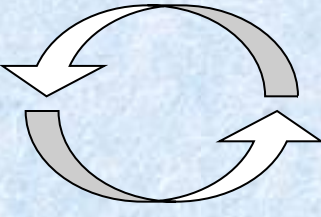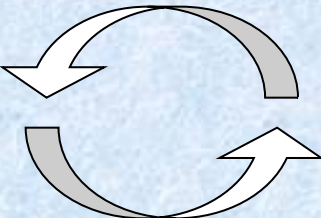
1. Talking about expenses is face-threatening

Attitude:

1. Avoid it, if possible

Goals

Types of Interactional Goals

- Transactional (task-focused)
- Interactional (interpersonally-focused)

Example re Goals

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Development of course materials as end in itself		Development of course materials as means of conducting applied research
Development of a full course/module		Development of innovative samples
Design that is suited to Chinese learners' current study preferences		Design that helps implement China's educational reform

Rapport

Perceptions of Offense

1. Different people may have different perspectives

2. Need to unpack the bases of offensiveness judgements

Rapport management perspective:

1. Allows for variable subjective judgements

2. Aims to unpack the bases of offensiveness judgements

Domains

"Domains of Rapport Management"

1. Illocutionary domain
2. Discourse domain
3. Participation domain
4. Stylistic domain
5. Non-verbal domain

Applied Question 2

Research Goals?

2nd Applied Question:

What communication problems occur in international collaborative projects

How can they be managed effectively?

eChina-UK

1. Set of Sino-British collaborative projects on e-learning in education, 2002-2008

2. Involved British and Chinese universities

3. 4 initial projects, with each project having core team of about 16 to 35

Team members were diverse in

1. Professional specialism
2. Subject area expertise
3. Nationality
4. Geographical location
5. Linguistic expertise
6. Expertise in e-learning
7. Beliefs about e-learning design

eChina-UK

eChina-UK teams needed to:

1. Develop joint proposals (to be approved by Joint Steering Committee)
2. Design, technically develop and deliver pilot e-learning materials

Communication Issues

1. **Who should negotiate and agree the joint proposals?**

Communication Issues

2. **What modes of communication should be used?**

Chinese 01: *In some circumstances, when a face-to-face meeting is impossible, video-conferencing is also good. But there is one problem with video-conferencing. That is, when many sides are taking part in the video conference, it is not easy to communicate things in depth. … It doesn't work very well for multilateral talk, because some things need to be discussed by two partners. In video conferencing, there is less room for emotional interchange, it is more like talk only for the sake of talk. I don't think it is very effective.*

3. **What communication networks should be established?**

Chinese Researcher: *In your opinion, was the communication effective?*

Chinese 20: *No, it wasn't. Though both Chinese and British sides had their own project managers, they couldn't do all the communications on their own. We should have embedded different communication mechanisms in the project at different levels.*

Communication Issues

3. What communication networks should be established?

Chinese 02: *Sending mass emails is a good way. But when we send such emails, it will infringe Chinese principles. If I send such an email to a person in a higher position, s/he will feel offended. Nowadays we send various materials by email, but Chinese are special, superiors will feel particularly insulted. … Sending emails to superiors is not a good way, because it shows no regard for status differences between people. Some superiors dislike equality, so the best way to communicate with them is to submit a report, either in written or oral form.*

Communication Issues

4. **What Communication Protocols should be established?**

Chinese 06: The UK colleagues are more likely to raise issues directly. Their logic is that issues should be raised first, then they'll try their best to find solutions. Even if they couldn't solve the problems immediately, at least they would know what the problems are. It's their culture, I think. But one part of the Chinese culture is that we are too shy to open our mouths to talk about some things. It's difficult for us to put some things on the table. … Sometimes the UK project manager sent some suggestions to us. When we got the suggestion, we usually got nervous and wondered 'must we do it immediately?' or 'are they commanding us to do this?' … But working together with them for a while I gradually realised that I could voice my opinions and take time to think. It wasn't a big problem.

4. What Communication Protocols should be established?

Chinese 14: When we were in the UK, we found that the British side had a very clear cut meeting arrangement, like how often an update meeting should be held. And the plan was strictly carried out. … I think this working pattern was quite effective and efficient. In contrast, a regular meeting system was impossible here in China because each member had so many things to do and so little time for regular meetings.

Communication Issues

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5. How should 'Forbidden Topics' be handled?

6. What Language should we use?

Chinese 21: The working language was English. Due to the language problems, when we couldn't express ourselves clearly, it seemed that we were disadvantaged. But as a matter of fact, the British were thinking hard to get what we wanted to say.

Chinese 16: I think we should show consideration for each other in terms of language. China is now developing very fast; they should know some Chinese to communicate with us. … We have learned a lot of English, it's their turn to learn some basic Chinese, as it is two-way communication. I find it weird that they don't know even a word of Chinese.

7. **'Do you mean what I mean?'**

British 09: *When I first joined, I spent weeks if not months on a simple practical confusion as to what is a unit, module, what was the other one?*

British 06: *Activity.*

British 09: *There was no standard definition, so I was like blocked at the first hurdle, and so I wasn't quite sure how much material I'd got to write, because we were given this notion of how many hours the student would spend, I wouldn't know in which box those hours fitted. ... I thought I don't understand this, I can't do this.*

Theoretical Reflections

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1. What conceptual framework can help the analysis of all these various communication issues?

2. What should be our unit of analysis? 'Communicative Activity' e.g. meeting is not 'big' enough.

3. Do we need a broader framework E.g. Activity Theory?

Thank You!

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