

Some Pragmatic Phenomena in the Thai Mr O Corpus data: proposing ideas and the uses of laughter

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Overview

- The study presents the pragmatic phenomena of proposing ideas and the uses of laughter in Thai.
- The data can be explicated in the light of Thai politeness, norms of interaction and cultural values.
- The acts of proposing ideas and laughter are focused in this study.

Politeness in Thai

Some distinct characteristics

- Use of polite particles
- Use of NVC, e.g. *wai* (a prayer-like gesture performed with a slight bow)
- Use of paralinguistic features, e.g. soft tone of voice, drawl, stuttering, etc.

Some misconceptions about Thai politeness

- Thai ways of interaction are too indirect and non-sensical.
- Thai people are passive interactants.
- Thai people are inconfident.

Proposing Ideas

- Proposing idea is an act of offering or suggesting information or knowledge that will benefit oneself, others or the task at hand.
- In general, idea proposal is regarded as an act that shows the extent of interlocutors' collaboration in conversation. (Feldman, 1999; Hollinworth, 1994; Buchman, 1983)

Proposing ideas: contrasting views

- To many westerners, proposing ideas are an act that can be used by the speaker to just anyone.

Why? Focus on equality and individualism

- However, proposing ideas can be a tricky business among Thais, especially if the other party is more senior or has more power.

Why? Focus on social hierarchy and collectivism

Types of proposing ideas

1. Unsuccessful proposals
2. Proposals by permission
3. Proposals by confirmation

Unsuccessful proposals

Typical characteristics

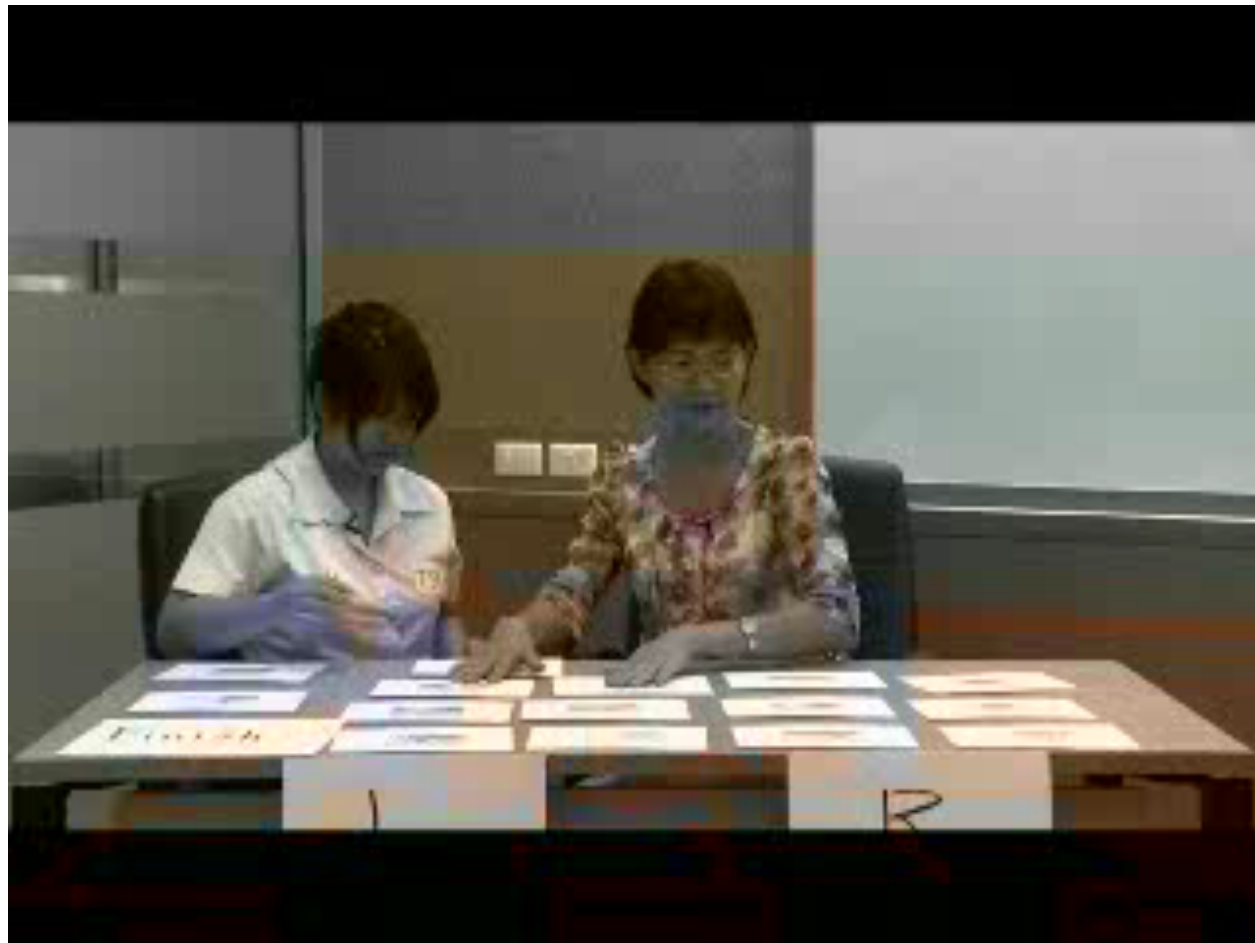
- Students try to propose their ideas, but stop pursuing the attempt because teachers do not give them a chance.
- Students' contributions are mostly in the form of minimal responses only.

- 1 Teacher: Let's look at the pictures first. Let's look at them first. (6.03) Let's try this one.
- 2 Student: Yes. [This one.
- 3 Teacher: [Someone's walking.
- 4 Student: Yes.
- 5 Teacher: Then saw:: ((pick up the card)) (2.93)
- 6 Student: ((point to the same card)) This one.
- 7 Teacher: Mhm. This one. Seeing the cliff.
- 8 Student: Yes. [hahaha
- 9 Teacher: [Walking back to take a stick.
- 10 Student: Yes.

-later-

- 22 Student: Oh! Why could it cross two times? hahahaha ha:: ((the teacher continues arranging the cards without listening to the student)) (3.04) This one is okay. ((the student hands the card to the teacher but the card is put down)) Then this one. What's this one? :: (laugh while speaking)
- 23 Teacher: ha? I see. It should cry first. Crying [at the time...
- 24 Student: [Can it be:: crying at the time of failure at the first time.=
- 25 Teacher: =no (.) the first time it failed, it would (.) [It didn't know. see::? It already crossed.
- 26 Student: [So, it crossed

Illustration



Some explanation

Possible misunderstanding

- Outsiders may think that the student does not pay attention to the activity.

Justification

- The student tries to participate in the activity but the teacher does not see her attempt or takes her for granted. The teacher may also not expect that the student should contribute much or at all in her (the teacher's) presence.

Proposals by permission

Typical characteristics

- The student starts proposing her ideas only after the teacher has given her a permission.
- Permission can be shown in many ways, e.g. asking questions or making eye contact.

Example 2

- 101 Teacher: Or this one should be inserted here? It was back and then cried. Mhm:: But... there's no way out. It's likely that he couldn't find a new stick, right?
- 102 Student: Yes:: because this is the island..
- 103 Teacher: Mhm:: Yes. So:: take it out. (9.15) It could cross so it was happy. (14.41) Uhh:: What about this one? It smiled happily.
(6.09)
- 104 Student: I see:: Suppose...This one is the end? After it could cross, [it was (.) happy. Yes:: But when it knew it was stuck on =
- 105 Teacher: [It thought it would survive.
- 106 Student: =the island, it cried::
- 107 Teacher: Aha::
- 108 Student: Then take this one to somewhere else.

Illustration



Some explanation

Possible misunderstanding

- Outsiders may think that the student is inconfident because she does not show an initiative in proposing ideas.

Justification

- The student waits for an appropriate point in time before proposing her ideas because she wants to give respect to her teacher.

Proposals by confirmation

Typical characteristics

- Despite a proposal successfully made, the student is unsure of her moves, until she gets a confirmation from her teacher.
- Confirmation is to be requested for (by the student) rather than be readily offered (by the teacher).

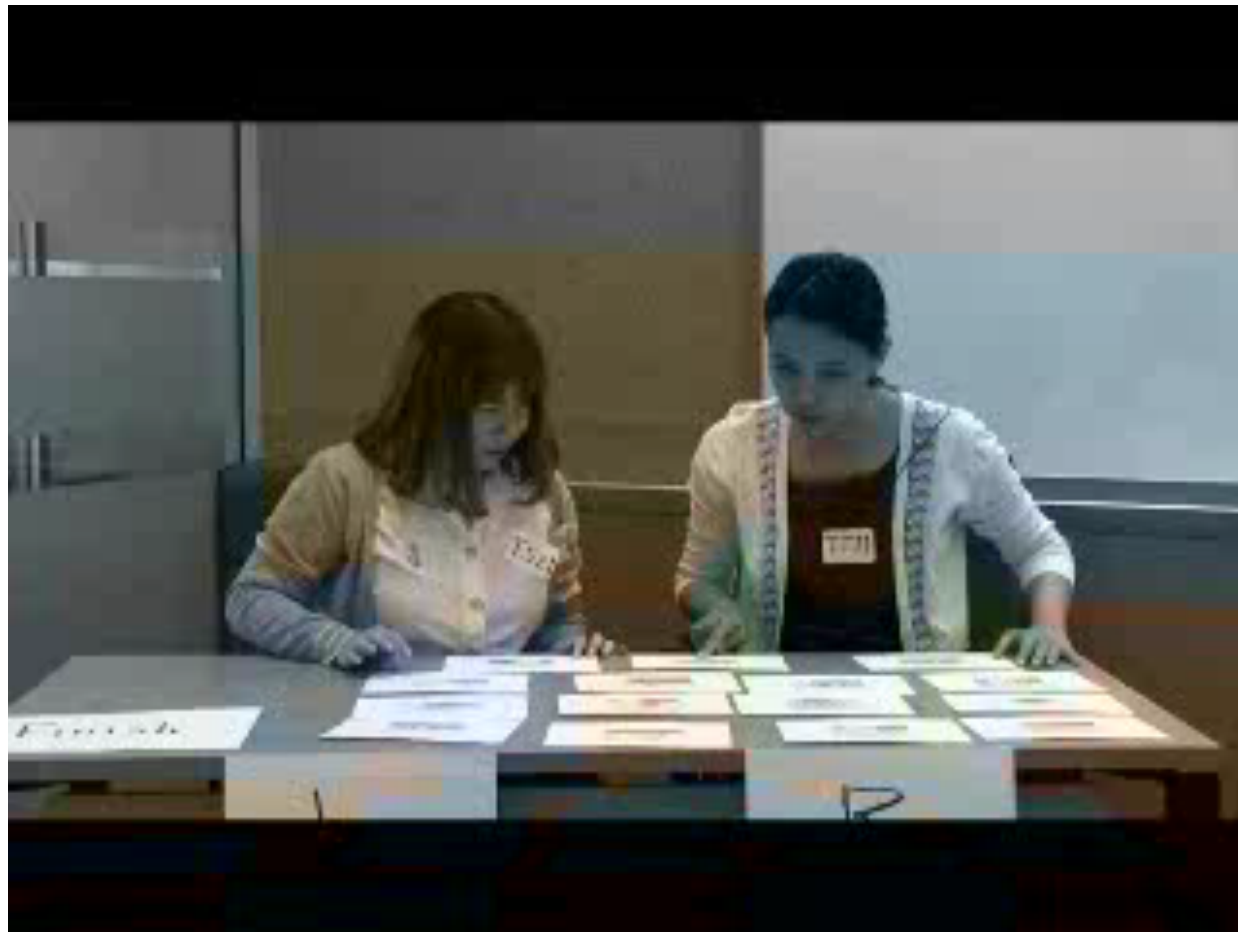
Example 3

- 1 Student: Let's try grouping the pictures
2 Teacher: (xxx) Like [this, right?]
3 Student: [in which the ground] was its scene. [I'll take ones] with=
4 Teacher: [This one.]
5 Student: =one [ground.]
6 Teacher: [Yeah.::]

-later-

- 97 Student: I think if it's so, it should be like... Uhh... like... It picked up the stick
once=
98 Teacher: =Yes.
99 Student: Then well... it broke...
100 Teacher: Mhm.: so it fell.
101 Student: Then it walked to pick up another one.
102 Teacher: Mhm.
103 Student: Then it tried to cross. It [could cross.]
104 Teacher: [Then it jumped] Mhm.
105 Student: After that,:: it could be here. Do you think this is right?
106 Teacher: Aha.
107 Student: Mhm. (laugh while speaking)
108 Teacher: Mhm. (laugh while speaking)

Illustration



Some explanation

Possible misunderstanding

- The outsiders may think that the student is indecisive since she cannot make final decisions by herself.

Justification

- The student knows of her subordinate role. It is up to her teacher, not to herself, to decide on the direction or the outcome of the task at hand.

Uses of Laughter

- Laughter is an audible expression or appearance of excitement, an inward feeling of joy and happiness. (Provine, 1996)
- Universally, laughter is triggered when people find something humorous. (Smith, 2008)
- **But** in Thailand, people can laugh with many more reasons.
- The tricky case: laughing in ‘uncomfortable’ situations.
 - For most outsiders, people who laugh in such a situation is normally regarded as rude and impolite.
 - For Thais, it is understandable to laugh in such situations. **Why?**

3 Uses of Laughter in Thai

1. Cheerful-inducing laughter
2. Unpleasantness-avoidance laughter
3. Phatic laughter

Cheerfulness-inducing laughter

Typical characteristic

- Laughter which is used to show that one feels happy or is enjoying the situation.

Example 4

17 Student L: There was an emergency call to Gib. The call was from...Nickname. She called to say that have you checked your e-mail yet? The teacher said there'll be [no class this afternoon.]

18 Student R: [hahahahahahahahaha]

19 Student L: hmhmhmhmhmhm In that afternoon, there was no class. Everyone was happy.

Illustration



Unpleasantness-avoidance laughter

Typical characteristic

- Laughter which is used to conceal or mitigate the unfortunate aspects of the circumstance that someone (or even the speaker him/herself) is experiencing.

Example 5

26 Student: My story. Well, it's actually my friend's story.

27 Teacher: Mhm. [Why?]

28 Student: [Well,] it's like... Well, it's like... It :: (1.06) is not such a good story. Something like that, [teacher...]

29 Teacher: [hehehe]

30 Student: hahaha ha:: It's surprising because it's like... why bad things happen to our lives simultaneously.

31 Teacher: I see::

Illustration



Some explanation

Possible misunderstanding

- Outsiders may think that the interlocutors are 'not nice' or unsympathetic since they made fun of other's misfortune (or of themselves).

Justification

- The interlocutors do not mean to laugh at the victim of the misfortune. They actually laugh at the uncertain circumstances of life. Their intention is only to try to lessen the stress or unpleasantness of the 'situation'.

Phatic laughter

Typical characteristic

- Laughter which is used purely for phatic reasons.

Example 6

-silence (1.94)-

4 Student: ((the teacher look at the student)) [hmmhmmhh]

5 Teacher: ((the student look back at the teacher)) [herherherhhh]

If... If you come up (.) with something, you can tell me.

(laugh while speaking)

6 Student: Yes.

Illustration



Some explanation

Possible misunderstanding

- Outsiders may think that the interlocutors laugh without good reason.

Justification

- Thai people laugh because they want to eliminate an awkward moment caused by silence.

Uses of laughter: summary

- Thai people laugh in many situations.
 - Cheerful-inducing laughter → Universally applicable
 - Unpleasantness-avoidance laughter
 - Phatic laughter
- } Unique to Thai (and other Asian) culture(s)?

Laughter unique to Thais (and other Asians?)

- **Unpleasantness-avoidance laughter**

It is not impolite for Thai people to laugh in an uncomfortable situation.

Why? The concept of “mai-pen-rai”

- **Phatic laughter**

It is not non-sensical for Thai people to laugh when they are shy or have nothing to say.

Why? Thai sense of friendliness