

# Study on Pragmatic Failure in Intercultural Communication

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## ABSTRACT

With the development of globalization, intercultural communication is becoming more and more frequent. Studying intercultural communication from the pragmatic perspective became a new approach. From this perspective, this article discusses the pragmatic failure from the aspects of pragmalinguistic failure, sociopragmatic failure and non-verbal communication failure. The communication strategies are further put forward to avoid the pragmatic failure in intercultural communication, including the improvement of language ability, personal pragmatic competence and intercultural communication ability.

*Keywords: intercultural communication, pragmatic failure, communication strategies*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Intercultural communication refers to the communication between people of different cultural backgrounds. It is the encoding and decoding of messages sent or received by people from different cultural backgrounds. Due to the differences in custom, culture, social background and other aspects, the information in communication cannot be fully understood, which can lead to pragmatic failure and affect the progress of communication.

Pragmatic failure refers to the communication failure caused by the addressee's incorrectly decoding the addresser's real intention (Thomas, 1983). That is to say, although the sentences expressed by the addresser in verbal communication are correct in symbolic relations, he or she may unconsciously violate the interpersonal norms, social conventions, cultural values, etc., required by the target language, which will cause communication obstacles and lead to pragmatic failure.

Jenny Thomas divides pragmatic failure into two aspects: pragmalinguistic failure and sociopragmatic failure (Thomas, 1983). Pragmalinguistic failure refers to the fact that language learners do not understand the language conventions, or simply equate the literal meaning of their mother tongue with that of a foreign language. In other words, they misuse the expression of a foreign language, or rigidly copy the form of a foreign language according to the structure of their mother tongue. Sociopragmatic failure is caused by the lack of social and cultural ability of the addresser. It is the failure of the addresser to complete the illocutionary act required by the communicative scene.

This article discusses the pragmatic failure from the aspects of pragmalinguistic failure, sociopragmatic failure and non-verbal communication failure. The communication strategies are further put forward to avoid the pragmatic failure in intercultural communication, including the improvement of language ability, personal pragmatic performance and intercultural communication ability.

## II. PRAGMATIC FAILURE IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

### A. Pragmalinguistic failure

Pragmalinguistic failure refers to the misuses in interpersonal communication due to the incorrect choice of expressions and language forms according to the context, which is contrary to the general principles of language performance. It mainly includes lexical level and grammatical level.

1) *Lexical level:* Vocabulary is the most basic element of language, which is an important carrier of cultural information. Wang Zuoliang and Ding Wangdao (1987) discusses the meaning of words in this way: the meaning of words is complex. It is not only the meaning in dictionaries, but also the meaning of connotation, association and emotion. In the process of intercultural communication, the choice of vocabulary is the key to the success of intercultural communication (Wang Li & An Jin, 2014). If the vocabulary chosen in communication does not conform to the principle of cross-cultural communication and contain derogatory meaning, it is easy to cause misunderstanding, resulting in contradictions and conflicts between the two

addresser and addressee. There are four kinds of lexical failures, namely, the failure caused by connotative meaning, the failure caused by referential meaning, the failure caused by associative meaning, and the pragmatic failure caused by cultural differences. Among them, the failure caused by the connotative meaning, which is the connotative meaning of words exceeds the context, is the most common type of failure in pragmalinguistic failure. For example, “blue” in English means a kind of colour as well as melancholy. The failure caused by referential meaning refers to the failure caused by the conceptual reference of vocabulary in a specific context. In the process of cross-cultural communication, the misunderstanding of referential meaning is easy to contribute to the divergence between the two sides (Zhou Chunxiu, 2003). For example, Western students in China are used to addressing all women as “女士”, but as for Chinese, there are various honorific addresses for the elder women. The failure caused by associative meaning refers to the failure caused by the differences between cultural implication and imagination aroused by linguistic symbols in the process of people’s communication. For example, in Chinese language and culture, people like to use “jade” as a symbol of beauty while in English language and culture, it is the opposite, representing vulgar women. Westerners think that dog is a faithful friend of human beings, and they love dogs more than ever. They even regard people who don’t like dogs as unkind people. Therefore most of the sentences related to dogs in English have commendatory meanings, such as, “Love me, love my dog”; “Every dog has his day”, etc. However, in Chinese, dogs are more derogatory than commendatory, such as, “狗腿子”, “狼心狗肺”, etc. The pragmatic failure caused by cultural difference refers to the communication obstacle caused by cultural barrier. For example, in Chinese culture, the word “慢走” is used to say goodbye to a person while in western culture, “walk slowly” is considered to interfere with others and do not respect their privacy. In addition, the westerners regard the owl as a symbol of wisdom. In children’s books and comics, the images of the owl wearing a doctor’s cap is often painted. But Chinese think owls bring bad luck

2) *Grammatical level*: The grammar of any language is closely related to its way of thinking, which is accumulated in the long history and cultural tradition (Song Yuelan, 2001). In intercultural communication, one side in communication is required to master and use the new language thinking mode, which is easy to cause grammatical level errors, mainly including three aspects: the inability to clearly distinguish affirmative sentences from negative sentences, the difficulty in

mastering syntax and word formation, and the ambiguity of semantics.

### *B. Sociopragmatic failure*

1) *Greetings*: In intercultural communication, greetings have the dual functions of communication and arousing dialogue. However, due to the differences of cultural background, the two sides of communication from different language environments often make mistakes in language use. For example, in Chinese language and culture, greeting usually uses “吃了没?”, “去哪儿呀?”. Although it is a question sentence pattern, it is just greeting without no actual meanings. In western culture, “hello” in English, “bonjour” in French, “guten tag” in German and “hola” in Spanish are all simple greetings. The greetings, “吃了没?”, “去哪儿呀?”, are considered to have joined too much personal feelings and have the meaning of proposing a date to others.

2) *Farewells*: Farewell is a kind of polite language used at the end of communication. Although there are farewells in different languages and cultures, the expressions are different (Yu Hong, 2013). For example, when Chinese say goodbye, they usually use words like “路上小心”, “注意安全” and “一路顺风” to express their concerns. The Italians are usually to say “ciao” while the French are often to “salute”. Westerners use words of gratitude to show that you have a good time with each other.

3) *Invitation*: In Chinese language and culture, when accepting the invitation of the others, people will generally euphemistically say “太麻烦了”, “下一次吧” and other vague statements. They will accept only after the others’ repeated invitation. But in the western culture, when people make an invitation, they usually only say it once, and the invited person needs to make a clear respond. The invitation of Chinese has a certain stylized form, which not only requires the inviting side to show sincerity, but also the invitees to show embarrassed attitude while the westerners prefer to discuss.

4) *Compliment*: In intercultural communication, the failure rate of compliment is next to that of invitation. In different cultural background, praising each other and accepting praise show different ways of expression (Fan Zhenhui, 1999). In China, the function of compliment tends to show respect and admiration, and the way to answer is very modest, generally saying “哪里哪里”, “没有没有”. In western, praise is generally used to maintain equal communication status between the two sides. When people are praised, they generally accepted directly and answered “thank you”.

5) *Appellation*: Appellation generally indicates the relationship and social status of the two sides of communication. Only by using address correctly can people ensure the effective communication. Appellation can be divided into kinship discourse and social discourse. In China, kinship discourse can be used not only for immediate relatives, but also for addressing non relatives, such as “叔叔”, “大妈” and “大爷”. But in the western, people who are familiar with each other can call their first names directly. Strangers are usually called “Mr. / Ms. / Miss”, etc.

6) *Refusal*: Refusal generally includes direct refusal and indirect refusal. In Chinese culture, indirect refusal is usually expressed in an implicit way to show respect for each other. In the western, people advocate individuality therefore they prefer to use direct refusal and express their attitude clearly.

### C. *Non-verbal communication failure*

Human communication is the combination of verbal communication and non-verbal communication. In intercultural communication, people pay more attention to the correctness and acceptability of language communication, but ignore the cultural differences and the influences of non-verbal communication. According to the analysis of the anthropologist Birdwhistell (1970), language only accounts for 35% of the whole communication process at most and the rest of the information is completed by non-verbal communication. Nonverbal behavior is also an important tool to exchange information and express feelings and attitudes, which can help both sides to deepen their understanding of the contents in conversation and enhance the effect of speech.

1) *Body language failure*: Body language includes facial expression, eye contact, communication distance, body contact and posture. Among them, the context of intercultural communication determines the facial expressions of both sides. And the same facial expression has different effects in different languages and cultures. For example, in many countries, it is polite to smile at strangers, but Russians think it is suspicious. Also, the degree of eye contact has an important impact on intercultural communication (Gao Yimei, 2016). Communication distance includes public distance (more than 360 cm), social distance (120-360 cm), personal distance (45-120 cm), and intimate distance (less than 45 cm). Chinese people are willing to share each other's space, but westerners pay more attention to personal privacy and are fond to keep a certain distance when communicating. Physical contact is a means of intimacy. Body posture as a body language has different understanding in different

countries. For example, “OK” means yes in the United States, zero in France, and money in Japan.

2) *Auxiliary language failure*: Auxiliary language includes tone and tone quality. If topic switching and silence time are not well controlled, it is easy to lead to pragmatic failure (Zhang Huanxin & Zhang Yiting, 2017). In Chinese culture, silence is not always a negative meaning, but also represents silent praise or reservation of one's own point of view. In the west, silence is regarded as a kind of negative and impolite behavior.

3) *Failure in environment and condition*: Due to the error of space and time information in intercultural communication, it leads to language failure. In Chinese culture, people don't pay attention to the personal space of both sides and like to communicate in close distance. Westerners pay attention to privacy, personal space and consciousness.

## III. ANALYSIS ON THE CAUSES OF PRAGMATIC FAILURE

### A. *Differences in values*

Values are the inevitable instructions of people in any society or culture, which is the rule of people's behavior, the way of thinking, the criterion of cognition, the philosophy of doing things, the mode of deductive reasoning, the criterion of evaluation, the standard of morality, etc. Every nation has totally opposite value orientation to things or behaviors. For example, the unity of human and nature is the value of traditional Chinese culture while the west is the view of the separation of human and nature. Chinese culture attaches great importance to collectivism while western culture advocates individualism. In China, people pay attention to unity, cooperation and mutual trust and the collective interest is greater than the individual interest. Individual behavior should be based on morality, focus on group interests and harmony while westerners emphasize the presentation of individual potential and advocate individual freedom.

### B. *Differences in cultural traditions and social customs*

It shows that different nations participate in verbal communication with different cultural traditions and social customs. For example, Chinese people like to ask each other about their marital status, age, children and income. Westerners, on the other hand, pay attention to privacy and will not ask these questions. Chinese like 6, 8 and 9, but do not like 4. And many westerners do not like 13.

Custom is a common social and cultural phenomenon in all cultures, which affects all aspects of social life. It is obvious that a kind of culture is different from another culture and has its own cultural

connotation. For example, “dragon” is a kind of auspicious animal in Chinese traditional culture, and it is also the totem of the nation. The Chinese call themselves “descendants of dragon”. The “dragon” in the west is a kind of evil monster, which often brings disaster to human beings. In western literature, “dragon” symbolizes the power of ferocity and evil. In different cultures, there are different polite expressions in greetings, appellations, honorifics, modesty, invitation, hospitality, etc. If the expressions of one culture are used in another culture, sometimes it will cause misunderstanding.

#### *C. The difference of time and space*

Different expressions and preferences of time and space in Chinese and English reflect different cultural backgrounds and thinking patterns. As for time, Chinese culture focuses on the past, such as the worship of ancestors, respect for teachers, pay attention to experience and age. In the west, people like to hope for the future. And the importance of time in China and the west are different. Westerners think that time is money and wealth. They like to arrange time in advance and correctly. Therefore, visits without appointment are not welcome. In the aspect of space, the relationship of space position also reflects the difference of thinking pattern between China and the west. For example, westerners like to talk face-to-face while Chinese like to talk with people sitting beside themselves or diagonally opposite so that they feel natural and comfortable.

#### *D. Differences in regional environment*

Geography and climate also affect culture. Chinese culture belongs to farming culture while western culture belongs to commercial culture. Chinese people who belong to farming culture regard land as their life and they are not willing to leave their hometown. Therefore, they have been living in the same area for generations with complex relations. Western civilization originated from Greek culture with poor land, combined with westerners’ character, determines that westerners are good at migration and get along well with their neighbors. But they have no permanent friends and nepotism is far less complicated than that of Chinese.

### **IV. COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES TO AVOID PRAGMATICS FAILURE**

To learn English is not only learn the language itself, but also pay attention to the cultural background closely related to the language. Based on the analysis of the forms and causes of pragmatic failure of Chinese English learners in the process of intercultural communication, this part puts forward the communication strategies to avoid pragmatics failure and improve intercultural communication competence.

#### *A. Improving language ability*

Language has three characteristics: variability, negotiability and adaptability. These three characteristics make language users tend to be flexible in the language usage, so as to improve the effectiveness of language. In the process of intercultural communication, whether oral communication or written communication it is, other’s emotions and feelings should be firstly considered, so as to reach the communication purposes (Chen Shuting, 2014). Cultural adaptation is not only an important way to improve language ability, but also an important condition to avoid pragmatic failure in intercultural communication. As cultural adaptation is a long-term and dynamic process, it is necessary to use adaptation strategy to ensure the success of intercultural communication.

#### *B. Improving personal pragmatic competence*

To cultivate and enhance personal pragmatic competence is an important measure to avoid language failure in intercultural communication. The key to improve personal pragmatic competence is to learn communication principles and strategies by analyzing the intentions in different situations. For example, by listening to foreign language news such as CNN and BBC, the differences between China and West can be realized. This can improve the ability of intercultural communication, so as to avoid language failure.

#### *C. Improving intercultural communication ability*

It is very important to understand the historical and cultural traditions as well as customs of other countries. On the one hand, communicators should cultivate cultural competence, treat cultural differences with an inclusive attitude. On the other hand, communicators should cultivate intercultural consciousness in emotional level and be good at cultural reflection. In addition, communicators should have a deep understanding their own culture, emotional attitude, and communication style. In cross-cultural communication, communicators should respect each other’s personal privacy, respect each other’s values in terms of customs and habits, and adapt to cultural traditions.

### **V. CONCLUSION**

Intercultural communication is a very complex social activity, involving various factors of social life and culture. An intercultural communicator should not only learn the knowledge of linguistics, culture, sociology, psychology, but also has the awareness of cultural differences. At the same time, a communicator should improve the sensitivity of cultural differences, and put himself in the other’s conditions. Propriety is the highest principle of communication, that is, a successful intercultural communicator should consider

each other's national conditions, customs, speech acts and unique cultural background and try his best to overcome the existing prejudice, respect others, and do as the Romans do, so as to avoid the social pragmatic failure in intercultural communication and complete communication successfully.

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