
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Analysis of Pragmatic Failure and Strategies in Cross-cultural Communication

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| ABSTRACT

With the advent of globalization and informatization, cross-cultural communication has become more and more common, followed by the emergence of pragmatic failure. The existence of pragmatic failure will lead to the occurrence of communication barriers and the appearance of communication conflicts. Therefore, the systematic study of it has become a very meaningful topic, which has strong practical value in modern linguistics. This paper analyzes the pragmatic failure in cross-cultural communication, discusses the types of pragma-linguistic failure and socio-pragmatic failure, and proposes measures to avoid pragmatic failure in cross-cultural communication in order to avoid them and achieve successful communication.

| KEYWORDS

Pragmatic failure, intercultural communication, pragmatics

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1. Introduction

With the continuous development of society and the accelerating process of globalization, the exchanges between countries in the world are becoming more and more frequent. The exchanges between countries will inevitably bring about exchanges between people of different cultural backgrounds. Especially in recent years, with the rapid development of China's reform and opening up, China has become more closely connected with the world, and a large number of Chinese people have gone out of the country and into the world, visiting and studying all over the world, and many Chinese enterprises have grown stronger and bigger, gradually integrating into the world economic system. Moreover, Chinese language teaching has been gradually extended to people all over the world with the continuous expansion of reform and opening up. As we can see, intercultural communication has penetrated into all aspects of social life in the world, and it has become a new, important and necessary discipline. However, in the world environment, people from different countries have different cultural backgrounds, different ideas, different worldviews, different values and different outlooks on life, and different living habits, cultural norms, and thinking patterns of people with different cultural backgrounds. Therefore, when two people with different cultural backgrounds communicate, pragmatic failure in cross-cultural communication will inevitably occur, which may lead to communication failures and even unnecessary misunderstandings.

One of the key problems in cross-cultural communication research is a pragmatic failure. Cross-cultural pragmatic research is of great significance to cross-cultural communication and foreign language learning. Therefore, it is necessary and important to conduct cross-cultural communication pragmatic failure research and analysis for people with different cultural backgrounds. The study of this pragmatic failure in cross-cultural communication can enable people from different cultural backgrounds to understand each other better and avoid the pragmatic failure caused by cultural differences to the greatest extent possible.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Cross-cultural Communication

“Cross-cultural communication” is also called “intercultural communication”, which refers to the communication between native speakers and non-native speakers, and also refers to any communication between people who differ in language and cultural

background (Samovar, 2000). Generally speaking, if you are dealing with foreigners (due to differences in language and cultural background), what should you be aware of, and how should you communicate appropriately.

Intercultural communication is the communication between people of different cultural backgrounds. Due to the influence of the region, there are bound to be differences between languages and cultures, and people from different regions and cultural backgrounds are bound to have different outlooks on life, worldviews, and values, as well as different moral standards and discourse rules, so intercultural communication is also affected by such differences.

2.2 Pragmatic Failure

The British linguist Thomas first introduced “pragmatic failure” in 1983 in the article *Cross-culture Pragmatic Failure*. She argues that pragmatic failure occurs whenever the meaning of discourse as perceived by the addressee differs from the meaning intended by the speaker. The danger of pragmatic failure is that it can cause misunderstanding between native speakers and foreign language learners, undermine communication between people, and strain harmonious interpersonal relationships.

2.2.1 Definition

The errors that occur in verbal communication because they do not achieve a complete communicative effect are collectively referred to as “pragmatic failure”. The reasons for the pragmatic failure are mainly attributed to the improper way of speaking, or not being in line with the habits of expression or speaking out of time. Specifically, the communicator in cross-cultural communication activities unconsciously violates the rules of language, social rules, or does not fit the time and space, does not look at the object, regardless of the identity, status, occasion, etc., against the target language-specific cultural values, so that communication can not achieve the desired effect or achieve the perfect communication effect, such errors are called pragmatic failure.

2.2.2 Classification

According to Thomas (1983), pragmatic failure can be divided into two categories: pragma-linguistic failure and socio-pragmatic failure. Pragma-linguistic failure is mainly caused by the differences between languages or their interactions, while socio-pragmatic failure is caused by the cultural differences or social and cultural habits underlying different languages. Pragma-linguistic failure is easier to overcome than socio-pragmatic failure because the former can be systematically learned to reduce them by mastering usage, while the latter involves all aspects of social culture.

Pragma-linguistic failure refers to people’s failure to choose and use the correct form of language expression according to the specific context in which they are communicating with others, which is contrary to the principles of linguistic usage and eventually leads to communication errors. Socio-pragmatic failure refers to the inappropriate choice of language forms in cross-cultural communication due to the lack of understanding of cultural differences in social rules, etiquette, and customs of both parties. It is related to the status, position, and topic of both parties.

3. Analysis of Pragmatic Failure in Cross-cultural Communication

As we know, language and culture are inseparable, and each culture has its own characteristics and rules. People from different cultures have different worldviews, views on life and values, as well as different moral standards and modes of thinking, etc. Therefore, these become the reasons for pragmatic failure in intercultural communication. If we simply understand a culture and do not pay attention to the influence of cultural rules when expressing our own meanings, pragmatic failure may occur, and intercultural communication will fail.

3.1 Pragma-linguistic Failure

3.1.1 Lexical Level

Among the various elements that make up a language, words are the most basic ones. The most important step in intercultural communication is to choose the right words for communication, and this is the key to successful communication.

In cross-cultural communication, take the common mistake of “Teacher + surname” as an example, which is obviously a direct application of native words to English. Teachers cannot be used directly as address terms in English. English and Chinese address terms are asymmetrical. In English, students often use the last name of Dr./Prof.+ or use the last name of Mr/Mrs/Miss+ to refer to teachers and administrators who do not have academic titles or professional titles. In fact, many vocabularies in English cannot be completely symmetrical with the corresponding Chinese. This is often the source of pragmatic errors in cross-cultural communication. Some English vocabulary is often broader in semantics than Chinese vocabulary, and the collocation is more flexible. For example, the verb “run” means “run, campaign, manage, manage, drive, participate in a race”, etc. Meanwhile,

some Chinese words have broader semantics than English words. For example, the verb “take” can be expressed by the words “take, bring, carry, fetch”, etc.

3.1.2 Grammatical Level

The grammatical rules of a country’s language come from a country’s way of thinking, depend on the long history of the country, and are an important part of its culture. The use of the target language in intercultural communication requires a new set of language systems for the interlocutor. Therefore, until the interlocutors master the grammatical rules of the target language, they will always be confused about the grammatical structure of the target language and will make certain grammatical errors in intercultural communication.

Affirmative or negative sentences are very common in any language. It may seem like a common and simple sentence, but how to answer it appropriately is a reflection of the different ways of thinking between different languages. Once a teacher organized a trip to the Summer Palace for foreign students. When the teacher heard that a student named John was not going, she wanted to make sure he was not really going, so she asked, “John, aren’t you going?” If the answer is “No, I don’t.”, it is obvious that the foreign student did not answer the question according to our Chinese custom. Because usually, according to our custom, the affirmative answer is “Yes, I don’t go.” and the negative answer is “No, I’ll go.” The Chinese custom is to answer with the opposite meaning of the word in the answer, while English gives the answer directly and makes the point.

Many pragmatic failures in cross-cultural communication are caused by a lack of understanding of grammar rules. When foreigners learn Chinese, it is very difficult to master the quantifiers in Chinese. The quantifiers are located between the number word and the noun, and what quantifiers are used are usually determined by the noun that follows. For example, “一匹马, 一条狗, 一只猫, 一双袜子,” etc., if the quantifiers in them are used wrongly, it will also cause a pragmatic failure. In cross-cultural communication, some pragmatic failures are caused by foreign countries’ misuse or omission of quantifiers. For example, “我给你一把刀” is sometimes said by foreigners as “我给你一刀”, which has a very obvious difference in meaning.

3.2 Socio-pragmatic Failure

3.2.1 Pragmatic Failure in Addressing

When people communicate, the first thing they inevitably do is address each other. Addressing indicates not only the beginning of communication but also the relationship between the two parties, so an appropriate term of address is a good start to communication. Each language has its own rules of address, and such rules can reflect people’s social status, age, relationship, etc.

China is a country with a strict hierarchical structure, and each person in the system has his or her own unique title, which reflects the traditional Chinese concept of “orderliness among the elders and the young”. For example, we call our father’s mother as “奶奶” or “祖母”, and our mother’s mother as “姥姥” or “外祖母”. But in Europe and America, they only say “grandmother”. Furthermore, we can know the size of the father in the family from the “叔叔” or “伯父”, while in Europe and America, they are collectively called “brothers”.

In addition to addressing close family members, we can also address non-blood-related members of society to show our respect for each other. For example, “老兄、大哥、大姐、老伯” and so on. This kind of title is also used for some fixed honorifics, such as “雷锋叔叔、警察叔叔” and so on. However, in Europe and the United States, there is no custom or concept of this kind of title; they are more often used as “Mr., Miss, Mrs.” and other terms of address.

3.2.2 Pragmatic Failure in Compliment

Compliments, as a common social language, can not only shorten the distance between communicators but also maintain good social relations. Proper compliments are helpful in promoting cross-cultural communication activities. In European and American countries, the range of compliments is very wide, from personal ability and achievement to property and house owned, and even family members are included. Compliments from people in Europe and America are widespread, and complimenting a woman’s beauty is not only allowed for women but also for men. However, in China, due to the influence of traditional Chinese culture, compliments on women’s appearance are only limited to women. Generally speaking, if a man compliments a Chinese woman on her beauty, it is likely to cause tension and embarrassment between the woman and the man.

The mistake of compliments in cross-cultural communication is mainly caused by the different cultural habits between Europe and America, and China. People in Europe and America accept each other’s compliments and express their approval, which is an affirmation of each other’s viewpoint and an equal relationship between themselves and each other; in China, they first deny the compliment, which is a sign of their modesty and education.

3.2.3 Pragmatic Failure in Request

When Chinese people and people from Europe and America make requests, Chinese people are more influenced by traditional thinking or social status and have many cultural and social rules when making requests. People in Europe and the United States, on the other hand, believe that all people are equal and do not have as many social rules when making requests. For example, in China, a manager can directly ask a staff member to “give me a cup of coffee” or “give me that material”, and the staff member is willing to accept such a direct request without feeling uncomfortable. In Europe and the United States, however, such direct requests are considered to violate people’s personal rights or restrict their freedom.

Chinese people are used to using polite words when speaking Chinese; for example, when we take a cab, we politely say, “Please take me to the train station.” People in Europe and America, on the other hand, believe that it is their right to take a cab, and they can directly ask the cab driver to take them to the train station, which is the duty and responsibility of the cab driver rather than politely requesting.

3.2.4 Pragmatic Failure in Apology

An apology is a remedial measure in the process of communication, which can effectively restore the relationship between the two parties in the process of communication. How to apologize and accept apologies is a very important part of the communication and cross-cultural communication process.

Some apologetic words can be used in both China and Europe, and America, such as “I’m sorry for your trouble” and “I’m deeply sorry to you because of my relationship”. Of course, due to the cultural differences between China and Europe and the United States, there are also differences between the two apologies. In China, the word “sorry” is used in two different ways in Europe and America: “sorry” and “excuse me”. “excuse me” is an apology used to ask a stranger for information about interrupting someone’s speech, while “sorry” is used when you accidentally infringe on someone, for example, you need to ask where the museum is, and then you need to interrupt someone, so “excuse me” is used. For example, if you need to ask a museum where it is, you need to disturb someone, so you use “excuse me”; if you step on someone’s foot on the bus, you use “sorry”. In China, there is no such classification, “sorry” can be used in all situations.

3.2.5 Pragmatic Failure in Inviting

In China, when we are ready to invite someone, we give the invitee a definite time, but the invitee cannot give a definite time but answers us in an uncertain way, such as “I’ll be right there”, “You guys eat first, I’ll be there as soon as I can after work”. If a European or American person hears a refusal answer, he will definitely misunderstand and stop inviting. In China, even if one is willing to accept an invitation, it is customary to push back a few times and give a reply in ambiguous terms as a sign of politeness. A single refusal in China is an act of politeness for China and Europe and America and a definite refusal for people in Europe and America.

3.2.6 Pragmatic Failure in Refusing

Refusal is a common phenomenon in daily life. It is a speech act that threatens the face. People have different social and pragmatic rules because of a different cultures. Chinese people usually express refusal in a kind of euphemistic way, which is indirect and vague. They tend to follow the polite principle and don’t say “no”. A part of Chinese people may say, “Please don’t go to any trouble.”, “you are too polite”. The vague answers make the host feel confused. In western habitation, when the host asks, “Would you like a cup of coffee?” the guest should say, “yes, please”, “thanks, that would be nice.” or “No, thanks”. However, it seems to western people that these words are tactless. They hope that they can get a definite reply.

4. Strategies to Avoid Pragmatic Failure in Cross-cultural Communication

Intercultural communication pragmatic failures have their universality, complexity, and uncertainty, both in terms of their appearance and their causes. Therefore, it is necessary to study how to avoid pragmatic failure from various aspects. Many scholars are now engaged in this complex and systematic work, and they have put forward many valuable ideas.

4.1 Develop Language Adaptation Skills

In the contemporary development of pragmatics, Verschueren’s (2000) Linguistic Adaptation Theory is a new paradigm of pragmatic interpretation, a product of the interdisciplinary development of pragmatics and the inevitable result of a methodological re-examination. It is a generative view, built on the basis of a critique of the existing problems of traditional pragmatics, with adaptation at its core. According to him, pragmatics is the science of language use and selection. The process of communication is a whole process of language selection.

Language has the following three characteristics: 1. Variability of language, i.e., there are many possibilities for the user to choose the appropriate language 2. Negotiability of language, i.e., there is a high degree of flexibility in the process of choosing a language, rather than mechanical selection 3. The adaptability of language, where the user of a language is able to select the appropriate one from many linguistic items for effective linguistic communication. The core of adaptation theory is the dynamic nature of adaptation. That is, in the process of selection, context and linguistic structures interact to form dynamic semantic expressions. Whether it is an oral expression or written writing, the user of language should take the feelings of the other party into account so that the purpose of smooth communication can be truly achieved.

In intercultural communication, cultural adaptation is a dynamic process, and adaptation is everywhere in the process of intercultural communication. Cultural adaptation is a strategy to avoid linguistic errors in intercultural communication, and we should use the adaptation mechanism rationally to ensure the success of intercultural communication.

4.2 Develop Personal Language Skills

Pragmatic competence refers to the ability of language users to use language effectively in a given communication context, and the following approaches can be used to develop individual pragmatic competence.

Developing pragmatic awareness is important for improving pragmatic competence and foreign language learners' communicative competence in the process of language use. Foreign language learners should use authentic and effective learning materials, use real contexts, and learn relevant, pragmatic knowledge. The purpose of developing pragmatic awareness is achieved by analyzing the intentions of various conversations and telling learners to use different conversational principles and strategies to complete them.

If learners do not understand the culture of Western countries, it is likely that they will inadvertently complete conversations from the perspective of their native language and inevitably make a pragmatic failure. We need more convenient, real, clear, and vivid communication environments; for example, we can go deeper into the living environment of western people and communicate with them. The purpose is to allow learners to identify and summarize various speech acts and to learn relevant language strategies to avoid pragmatic failure. In short, it is necessary to improve language skills and reduce pragmatic failure through various forms.

5. Conclusion

Intercultural communication is a complex process. With the rapid development of the globalization of the world economy and the Internet breaking down national boundaries, intercultural communication has become a part of our daily life. If communicators do not have enough knowledge about the cultural features of foreign countries, different pragmatic failures will occur, which will certainly affect the quality of intercultural communication. The study of pragmatic failure in intercultural communication is not only a linguistic approach to generalization but also a way to avoid direct, vulgar, embarrassing, and unpleasant speech in the process of intercultural communication, which can lead to interruption of communication. In order to facilitate successful communication in intercultural communication, native Chinese speakers of English need to acquire not only the necessary linguistic knowledge but also non-linguistic contextual and background knowledge, i.e., information about pragma-linguistic and socio-pragmatic. Therefore, in addition to learning English language knowledge, native Chinese speakers of English need to understand pragmatic differences and develop pragmatic competence in order to communicate more appropriately and effectively across cultures.

From the perspective of intercultural communication, pragma-linguistic failure and socio-pragmatic failure are analyzed in detail in this study, such as pragmatic failures in the following aspects: forms of addressing, compliment, request, apology, inviting, and refusing. Then the causes of pragmatic failure are provided, together with some solutions to avoid pragmatic failure. Nowadays, there are already many scholars conducting research on intercultural pragmatic failure. Due to the limitation of my knowledge and experience, the research in this article has not been done sufficiently, and I hope that future studies will further empirical research on pragmatic failure in intercultural communication.

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