

# Study on Pragmatic Failures in Cross-Culture Communication

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**ABSTRACT.** Pragmatic failures occur when participants fail to effectively or correctly achieve the specific purpose, or when the hearer fail to realize the intention of the speaker's utterance in some certain context situation. Being an indispensable part of pragmatics, pragmatic failures shall be taken seriously to realize the properly use of language, which quite matters for L2 learners. This thesis tries to analyzes three types of typical pragmatic failures based on analysis of pragma-linguistic failure and socio-pragmatic failure and propose suggestions for L2 learners to deal with pragmatic failures, with eventually coming to the conclusion that competence to deal with pragmatic failures show its crucial role and necessity in cross-cultural communication, with an increasing large number of participants involves in bilingual and multilingual context situations.

**KEYWORDS:** Pragma-linguistic failure, Socio-pragmatic failure, Cross-cultural communication

## 1. Introduction

Leech (1983) defines pragmatics the study of how utterances have meanings in certain situations [2]. With more and more pragmatics studies coming forth, linguists have further understandings of pragmatics. And according to the third edition of Linguistics Course Book edited by Hu Zhuang ling (2005), pragmatics studies the contextual meaning of utterances which comes partly from the use of language in a context. At the start of the 20th century, what characterized pragmatics studies is its study of language in a sociocultural context, and Malinowski, Firth, Sapir are seen as the representatives. As a result, a new paradigm was thus established, making a diversity of research of pragmatics in various cultures.

With the advent of the era of globalization, language communities tend to be bilingual and multilingual. However, limited or even shackled by the pragmatic knowledge, language learners suffer failures in concrete contexts, which are known as pragmatic failures [1]. Take a conversation for example, when someone says to you "*You're silly*", and you respond "*What do you mean?*" If this response is studied in terms of the linguistic form itself, it's a simple question. However, you definitely know the meaning of *Silly* and the reference of *You*. You, however, want to know the intention of the speaker's uttering such a sentence, or you have known the intention, and put it that way as a denial of what you heard. Thomas (1983) asserted that pragmatic failure is the inability to understand what is meant by what is said [4]. It is asserted that pragmatic failure is the communicative failure of cross-cultural communication, which in most cases causes misunderstanding or even conflicts.

Example:

English: Is that Sunshine middle school?

Chinese: Of course.

In English, "of course" contains the implication that a speaker confirms it by subject evidence. In this case, of course is not a proper answer, which may cause misunderstanding. What's more, as the diversity of social backgrounds among countries is obvious, people living with the specific cultural traditions, thus usually make diverse mistakes concerning on the culture [5]. And this thesis tries to collect real pragmatic failures, and tries to find out features of pragmatic failures in farewell, gratitude and compliment made by non-native participants, and meanwhile analyze factors that interrelated via the methods of analyzing pragma-linguistic failure and socio-pragmatic failure. And this thesis will confirm the significance of awareness and competence to settle pragmatic failures in cross-cultural communication and try to help the non-native language users avoid misunderstandings and even conflicts.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Pragmatic failure is divided into two categories by Jenny Thomas (1983): pragma-linguistic failure and socio-pragmatic failure. He also focusses on study of grammatical competence and pragmatic competence, the latter of which quite matters in a concrete communication. Both the pragmatic competence and these two categories of pragmatic failure involve in this thesis, and an introduction of them will be given.

### 2.1 Pragmatic Competence

Pragmatic competence is a key concept of pragmatics, denoting the capacity of using linguistic knowledge for specific communication and interpretation of utterances in defined situations [6]. And Bachman (1989) conducts a more in-depth study about pragmatic competence, suggesting that pragmatic competence falls into two parts, Illocutionary competence and Sociolinguistic competence. More theoretical studies about pragmatic competence began in 1980s, and linguists in many countries have different statements of pragmatic competence, while a common emphasis of their assertions having been reached is that theoretical studies of pragmatic competence should focus on the capacity of properly dealing with and understanding language in diverse contexts. There're two seemingly contradictory results of some linguistic researches of the relationship between grammatical competence and pragmatic competence. On the one hand, Schmidt conduct researches that arranging some Japanese living in America for two years. And these Japanese, without enough acquisition of English grammar, have a quite good capacity of dealing with daily communications, that is, in spite of their poor grammatical competence, their pragmatic competence enhances amazingly rapidly [3]. On the other hand, many grammatical categories, such as the number, aspect, case, almost all of which influence expressions of speakers and the interpretations of hearers. Therefore, the grammatical competence, in a way, shackles the pragmatic competence.

### 2.2 Pragma-Linguistic Failure

Pragma-linguistic failure originate from language itself, and it occurs when the foreign language learners encode the pragmatic meaning into the target language which obey language habits of the native speakers of the target language. Two main types can be described as that speakers transfer the language habits of mother tongue into target language or they misuse the langue patterns of target language. And two main causes can thus be captured. First, speakers are shackled by the target language; second, speakers are interfered by their mother tongue.

Example 1:

(A Chinese English learner is asked by his English friend)

E: *How about some Chinese dishes for lunch?*

C: *OK, it depends on you.*

“It depends on you.” implicates the negative attitudes or sentiments. In fact, as is often the case that Chinese who respond as “It depends on you” do not want to deliver negative attitude towards the suggestion. They actually aim to express their modesty and support. But the misuse of the set phrase occurs when the Chinese have a shallow understanding of its pragmatic meaning.

Example 2:

(A Chinese student is praised by his English teacher)

Teacher: *Excellent work!*

Student: *But I think my performance is still bad.*

“Thank you” is a brief and proper response, which shows pleasure and gratitude. Although “I think my performance is still bad” is grammatically correct, which finally causes pragmatic failure in this context situation. Since the modesty, as one of Chinese traditional virtues, generates many expressions of modesty to reply compliments, which different from that of most western countries. In the context situation of the example two, the Chinese student's expression of modesty puzzled his English friend, and it can be regarded as the unnecessary supplement, which, to some extent, contradict those praise words. Pragma-linguistic failures of example 2 occur due to the interference of mother tongue, that is, the participant applies directly his own traditional expression to reply mechanically.

### 2.3 Socio-Pragmatic Failure

Socio-pragmatic failure occurs when speakers acquire little about society and culture, or even ignore the social and cultural background. Differences of communicators' social status, choice of communicative topic, interpersonal distance

and values. It is difficult to correct them simply through teaching and learning different pragmatic meanings of linguistic forms, since it's underlying and stubborn. Foreign language acquisition requires not only knowledge about phonetics, syntax and semantics, but also awareness and knowledge of cross-cultural communication. In the cross-cultural communication, an opening topic is crucial. Many Chinese English learners don't know how to open the topic properly in concrete communication. And factors that involves concludes status, culture and experience. While people actually have limited time to take these factors into account, or even they don't know these factors at all before they open an abrupt communication.

Example 1:

(A Chinese student talk with his foreign English teacher for the first time)

Student: *I expect you are in your twenties, so how old are you.*

Teacher: *About that, anyway, I hope I'm in twenties.*

Example 2:

(A Chinese in America falls over himself in snow, and a passerby asked him)

Passerby: *"How's your leg"*

Chinese: *"I'm fine, I'm fine."*

Age is a sensitive topic in western culture, and most Westerners don't want to tell their age when at the first meet. So, it's not wise in example one for the student to ask age directly unless it is expected to be mentioned. Besides, topics concerning privacy, religion and politics shouldn't be asked at the first meet. Such a response in example two puzzles the passerby, and the passerby thus don't know how to give the Chinese a hand. Actually, if the Chinese is in awkward or terrible situation, he can just utter his own words. You can just answer the question according to the facts of your own condition.

### 3. Three Types of Typical Pragmatic Failures in Cross-Culture Communication

#### 3.1 Pragmatic Failures in Farewell

Farewell occurs when speakers are ready to cease the talk and leave. There are some different expressions of farewell in English and Chinese, taking the expressions of saying good-bye for example.

Example:

Guest: *I believe that you are tired and I have to go.*

Host: *Well, actually, I'm OK.*

If a party is coming to end, guests who always obey the Chinese communication traditions, usually state firstly some excuses about the host before they leave to show the politeness. But the westerners often feel surprised for their guests' abrupt leave in this way. While for most people of English-speaking countries, the western guests give reasons concerning with themselves when they leave, such as "Well, I really enjoy the party and food here, but I must to leave soon, since I have to get up early for my tasks." As for the expressions of hosts, there's also differences. A Chinese host may say "Take care and walk slowly when you go back. ", They even believe that they may annoyed the Chinese host, because in western culture, "Goodbye", "See you" are proper to be as the expression of farewell.

#### 3.2 Pragmatic Failures in Gratitude

Expressing gratitude is universal both in Chinese and English-speaking countries. Because of the diverse social status, cultural background and regions, there are different expressions. In Western families, showing thanks to family members can be seen as a tradition. In Chinese families, people seldom show their gratitude, which definitely causes the pragmatic failures. In Chinese culture, showing thanks is relatively a formal expression, while in English-speaking countries, it can be sometimes a simple expression of politeness. It's common for citizens in English-speaking countries to show thanks to even delivery man. There is an example to show the difference between China and the west.

Example:

(A Chinese student shows his gratitude to his foreign English teacher for her assisting him settling problems of his English works)

Student: *I'm sorry to occupy your time.*

Teacher: *I'm not busy, I think.*

Expressions, such as "I'm sorry to occupy your time." are common types for Chinese to express gratitude. Most Chinese use to show they're thanks to others with something like guilty. And as are often the cases that the guilty take replaces of gratitude. But this replacement can hardly be captured by people who is outside the cultural background.

### 3.3 Pragmatic Failures in Compliment

Appropriate compliment in cross-cultural communication always creates comfortable atmosphere, while the improper compliment often interrupts communications.

Example:

(A Chinese student and his foreign teacher)

Student: *I really like your class, and I think you are a very strict teacher.*

Teacher: *Thank you, a strict teacher, well, I hope I'm not.*

The student has planned to show the teacher his respect. Unexpectedly, his teacher fails to recognize the respect, and even feel ill at ease for the student's view of "Strict". The pragmatic failure originates from the different affective meaning of the same word in different countries. If a Chinese teacher is thought to be strict, the teacher may feel happy. Since being strict in a way is a standard of a qualified teacher. While, in many English-speaking countries, the interpretation of strictness is different from that of Chinese, and this word usually implicates stereotype or bad temper. So "I think you are a strict teacher" in china can be seen as the student's compliment to his teacher. Generally, a foreign English teacher usually hopes to be thought being easygoing. So being strict won't be a proper compliment for a foreign English teacher. Actually, people don't have to praise others profoundly when are not quite familiar with each other. Topics, such as hair style, dress are suitable for a daily compliment.

## 4. Factors That Cause Pragmatic Failures in Cross-Culture Communication.

### 4.1 Linguistic Rules of Mother Tongue

Differences of linguistic rules embody the diversity of the actual uses of languages in bilingual or multilingual situation. Interference of linguistic rules of mother tongue thus become one of the major sources of pragmatic failure [10].

Some basic linguistic rules of mother tongue were acquired at most people's young age, and thus become the inherent part of them. Therefore, these inherent factors are definitely the interference of cross-cultural communication. And these rules and knowledge have things to do with their acts of encoding the meaning into their utterance, which is crucial for speakers to show their values. And conflicts about values may thus originate from the linguistic rules of mother tongue. When a Chinese utter such a response that "*It's my duty to do so.*" to reply the gratitude, the hearer may think that he is unwilling to continue the assistance, and he finally gives him a hand because of the compulsive force of duty. Many L2 learners are affected by those linguistic rules of their mother tongue. However, the people in English-speaking countries have different linguistic rules, which causes the pragmatic failures in cross-cultural communication.

### 4.2 Context Awareness

Language has the textual function that, generally speaking, a coherent and brief communication involves a single language or requires the context awareness [9]. Therefore, a cross-cultural communication has a stronger context awareness. It is reasoning that context awareness causes pragmatic failures in cross-cultural communication.

L2 learners don't have the opportunities to expose themselves to target language countries, which requires more efforts to cultivate the cross-cultural context awareness. As are often the cases that Chinese students have been used to learn language forms that isolate from the context situation, which definitely causes using language mechanically.

Example: *Excuse me, would you mind taking me to the train station?*

(A Chinese in America is hurry to take a taxi)

It seems that it's grammatically correct and expresses rightly the intention of going to train station. Actually, "*Train*

*station, please!*” is more suitable for this context situation. They seldom take coherence into account when they conduct a cross-cultural communication, so they even cannot realize the pragmatic failures, which is really terrible condition in communication.

#### **4.3 Thinking Patterns**

Some specific rules and logic of thinking patterns thus forms and often influenced by the unique cultural background [8]. Taking Chinese culture for example, which is to some degree more collective. And the diversity of thinking patterns is the main factor that many Chinese English learners suffer pragmatic failures in cross-cultural communication.

According to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, language may determine the thinking pattern of speakers. Language thinking is a kind of psychological phenomenon that people think with the aid of language. There are two meanings of language thinking, one is to think through language, such as “Chinese-type thinking” and “English-type thinking”. Second is language thinking is like the operation of the language symbol system. When the human brain is still independent of the running state, “think” in the process of language formed the unique operating characteristics, namely language thinking features.

### **5. Two Suggestions for L2 Participants to Deal with Pragmatic Failure**

#### **5.1 Cultivating the Cross-Culture Awareness**

Language is an indispensable carrier of culture. Culture finds a better representation through language use. (Linguistics Course Book 2005) For the close relationship between language and culture, encouraging reading and discussion thus can definitely promote the accumulation of English cultural knowledge. In this way, L2 speakers' reading quantity is expanded and meanwhile, they also improve their ability to communicate with the target language culture. Carrying out extra-curricular activities in English and pay attention to the extension of intercultural consciousness. School extra-curricular activities provide a wide world according to their own interests. To understand western customs, English language development is not only a process to help students master basic language skills, but also a process to guide them to understand the target language culture, improve cultural literacy and cultivate cross-cultural communication competence.

#### **5.2 Improving the Pragmatic Competence**

The improvement of pragmatic competence has a close link with the promotion of cultural abilities. Many old people in our life are illiterate, but language expression and comprehension are normal. And a three- or four-year-old child can understand the language of adult and can also clearly express their wishes. This is because they in context with a long time to receive other people's language. They constantly try to imitate in the brain over time, which will have the language ability and the ability to use language correctly according to specific occasions [7]. Thus, the formation of pragmatic competence and context are inseparable and relevant knowledge is not independent. Language learning is connected with specific situations, which requires learners to distinguish and master specific situations. The grasp of knowledge, therefore, must be connected with practice and apply what they have learned to practice.

Timely feedback on learning results through timely recognition and reward can help students to maintain their enthusiasm for learning. And students are more likely to be encouraged and praised by teachers in the case of more concrete interaction, which promotes the motivation and the confidence to use language.

### **6. Conclusion**

In this study, it has introduced the development of pragmatic study and the background information of pragmatic failure in cross-cultural communication, such as what is pragmatic competence, what pragmatic failure, and the categories and possible causes of pragmatic failure in concrete situation. The study has also discussed several main types of pragmatic failures made by Chinese English learners. Pragma-linguistic failure and socio-pragmatic failure with some living examples in the daily life. Then, the study has carefully analyzed some important factors contributing to the pragmatic failure in cross-cultural communication, such as the different thinking patterns, different values, interference of mother tongue, and weak awareness of concrete contexts. Finally, the study provides some effective methods to develop pragmatic competence and tactics to avoid pragmatic failure in cross-cultural communication.

The major significance of this thesis is to provide the general knowledge of pragmatic failure in cross-cultural

communication to people who need them or want to know them. The study of pragmatic failure in cross-cultural communication, not only can help the Chinese learn English well, but also can help promote the effective communication between Chinese and western people. Pragmatic failure also can be studied in other aspects fully and deeply. This thesis still has its limitations.

Metaphorically, language is a mirror of society, through which people can understand social activities better. Functionally, society offers language a proper context of use where people can have more vivid and truthful perception about aspects of language. During the whole 20th century, many studies of linguistics are monistic, that is, linguists treat language an independent science having nothing to do with social factors. Separating the study of language from its social context of usage. The creation of a dualistic view of linguistic research comes into being in the 1960s, which are opposite to the Chomskyan linguistics, the dominant theory before. And the study of pragmatics thus becomes dynamic, when taking the social factors into account.

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