

## A study on pragmatic failure in cross-cultural communication

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**Abstract:** Through analyzing and comparing the anecdotes of pragmatic failure in cross-cultural communication from the aspects of lexicon, syntax and discourse, some pragmatic strategies are suggested in intercultural communication. To improve learners' cultural awareness and communicative competence, a cultural-linguistic approach in foreign language teaching should be adopted.

**Key words:** cross-cultural communication; pragmatic failure; pragmatic competence; cultural awareness; communication strategy

### 1. Introduction

People may meet with various problems in intercultural communication. The knowledge of target language's culture is as important as its grammar or vocabulary. Perhaps more to the point, a lack of cross-cultural awareness can be a severe hindrance in the understanding of a message which is linguistically accurate or comprehensible. As a rule, people are much less tolerant of cultural "bumps" and cultural shocks than they are of grammatical mistakes and lexical insufficiency.

The word "culture" is too broad to be defined in one or two sentences. Here, the author uses it in its narrow sense which relates to language use, i.e., the way of life, the conventions of behavior, value systems, ways of viewing the world and institutions. Language is inseparable from culture. Thus, when learners learn a language, they learn about culture; and as they learn to use a new language, they learn to communicate with other individuals from a different culture.

### 2. The importance of cultural awareness in communicative competence

The study's focus of linguistics once was set on language itself. "Langue" was preferred to "parole" by de Saussure (1916). Either the study on American Structuralism or that on linguistic competence by Chomsky ignored the social situation and norm to some degree. The social-linguist shifted the study from separated abstract language form to the actual use in social context. The term "communicative competence" was put forward by Hymes in 1971. Communicative competence includes both linguistic competence and pragmatic competence. Pragmatic competence is further divided into linguistic competence and social-linguistic competence. The former is the ability to use language form and pragmatic function to understand the speaker, thus to express his own intention exactly; the latter is emphasized on the ability to use target language properly in target language's cultural background.

### 3. Anecdotes of pragmatic failure

A lack of either competence will lead to pragmatic error. English learners from different cultures may result

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in different pragmatic errors. In intercultural communication, the learner tends to transfer the forms and rules of his native language, including his native culture, into target language, which will bring trouble in communication, sometimes may even lead to breakdown. So, the more knowledge learners know about target language's culture, the easier it will be for them to reach effective communication. Cultural awareness plays an important role in language learning and teaching. In cross-cultural communication, there are a number of differences worthy people's attention.

### **3.1 Culture-loaded words**

Word sense includes linguistic sense and cultural sense. The cultural sense of a word is a word's subjective evaluation among people with same cultural background. If the evaluations from two different cultures are not the same, the effective communication will be interfered. So in vocabulary learning and teaching, people should always bear in mind words' cultural senses and pay special attention to those culture-loaded words, such as those concerned with animals, colors, flowers and taboos.

Take animals as example, the word "dog" has same denotation in English and Chinese, while their connotations are quite different. The word is usually used derogatively by Chinese people to describe somebody disgusting. But in the eyes of Westerners', "dog" means loyalty, faith, bravery and intelligence. No wonder Chinese can often hear the expressions, like "a lucky dog", "to be top dog", "work like a dog", "love me, love my dog", while there are even more Chinese words concerning dogs bear negative associations. It is just the opposite case with the concepts of "elephant", "magpie" and "bat". So the trademarks with these names on will be hardly accepted in western market.

### **3.2 Sentence level**

This type of communicative failure is caused not by different cultures, but mostly by the deficiency of learners' knowledge about target language's lexical and grammatical usage, which Thomas (1983) called pragmatic-linguistic failure. For instance, "Never mind" is often used by Chinese English learners as a response to thanks. But as a matter of fact, English native speakers say "Never mind" to others' apology and its entailment is consolation.

Once in a while, grammatically correct sentences, such as "Be quiet", "I can't agree with you" and "Close the window" are too abrupt and direct for native speakers. It could be more appreciated if English learners use some vague modifiers, such as "Would you please be quiet?", "Do you mind closing the window?", "I'm afraid I can't agree with you", it would sound more polite and proper.

### **3.3 Discourse level**

Pragmatic failure on discourse level is closely related to cultures and constitutions of communicator's native language. Chinese native speakers sometimes will unconsciously transfer their native cultural pattern into English-speaking world on the occasion of "greeting", "complimenting" or "accepting gifts". Now, the author will deal with some of the negative transformations.

#### **3.3.1 Starting a conversation**

One of the most important areas of communication is probably when people start verbal exchange. In cross-cultural communication, people are aware enough now that they would not like to use Chinese routine as "eating" and "whereabouts" to greet people from another culture. However, sometimes, people could not help touching "privacy", such as a person's age, salary and the price of an item, which are perfectly acceptable in Chinese culture.

In the context of Chinese culture, it appears unnecessary to greet when meeting the same person several times in the same day. Westerners generally use a brief greeting routine, verbal or non-verbal, are inclined to

judge some one who suddenly lurches into the topic more negatively than intention of the interlocutor warrants. The westerners decide this behavior—the omission of any greeting routine and the direct approach—as rather rude and a disregard of fixed status relationships.

### 3.3.2 Requesting

The strategy for a Chinese to request something or ask a favor is to hint and talk around the topic, in case he will be turned down and lose face. This may cause inappropriate interpretations by native English speakers, for example:

Example 1: A: Gosh, I'm out of money, I forgot to go to bank.

B: Sorry, I'd like to help you out, but I'm a little of cash myself.

A: Oh, I didn't mean I wanted you to lend me money.

Their reactions to this strategy seem to be negative, e.g., "it is devious", "I was getting irritated—she was so longwinded—just to ask for small favor", "I was so busy, he was talking up too much of my time".

### 3.3.3 Agreeing to a request or proposal

Western systems usually require that someone who is requested to do something should verbalize his/her agreement, to some extent at least, e.g.,

Example 2: Don't worry, I'll do it straight away!

It won't be a moment.

It may take about ten minutes. Would you care to wait?

In some of Asian cultures, people do not consider it is necessary to inform or verbalize the time it will take to carry out the task. This non-verbalizing has no connection with low competence in language. The reason is the speakers feel that words are necessary, as long as the task is satisfactorily completed.

### 3.3.4 Accepting invitation or presents

In the area of accepting offers or invitations, various strategies operate. Americans accept with thanks, indicating pleasure at the invitation verbally and by facial expressions, mildly showing anticipated pleasures. In cross-culture communication, Chinese incline to transfer their cultural strategies to the parallel situation. That is, Chinese set their acceptance into an elaborate framework, pretending at first to refuse (see Example 3):

Example 3: You should not have done it.

It is too much work.

It is too expensive.

And they gradually accept. Chinese do not sound over eager as it may appear rather greedy. This often puts the native English speaker in a somewhat embarrassing position, "It makes you wonder whether they want to come at all", stated by one American.

When accepting presents, it is not Chinese custom to open presents in front but more appropriate to smile slightly and put the presents aside unopened. Thanks may be expressed on a later occasion. The westerner may apply their social norms to decide the behavior, e.g., "that person has no breeding" or "that person doesn't like me or doesn't care to receive a present from me".

### 3.3.5 Negative responding to requests, offers or invitations

Even more sensitive than acceptance situations are those in which offers or invitations need to be refused for one reason or another. Here, the refusal may threaten the "requester's" face if the behavior is misdone. For Chinese, it is considered rude to give a straightforward "no" to invitations and offers. People would talk around the subject and avoid a direct refusal. In cross-cultural communication, this may cause considerable confusion and be decoded into "insincere", "devious" and "inconsiderate" (see Example 4):

Example 4: Yes. (Meaning: Yes, I've received your invitations.)

Thank you. (Meaning: Thank you for inviting.)

Silence and smile. (Meaning: Thank you for your inviting.)

All the 3 sentences in Example 4 would be inappropriately interpreted by the Westerners as an acceptance of the invitation. In this case, people are often offended by the apparent rudeness and bluntness of the English speaker's direct refusal of well-meant offers and invitations. Chinese feel they seek to avoid any type of relationship with them by doing so.

Systematic comparison of the culture in operation will do much to eliminate the pragmatic errors in cross-cultural communication. Even though the analysis and comparison of 2 complex cultures in the paper are not so inclusive, the examples discussed may be helpful and available to arouse the cultural awareness.

#### **4. Communicative strategy**

It is an essential capability for the speakers to adopt communicative strategies to deal with the difficulties and problems in communication. Communicative strategies as auxiliary measures have drawn more and more attention, especially of as L2 learners who often find themselves in situations of lacking vocabulary to express their ideas or when confronted with another totally new culture. The communicative strategy is closely interrelated with linguistics, sociology and psychology, which supply the appropriate rules and norms in intercultural communication. However, there is no universal definition about communicative strategies in academic field (Corder, 1984; Faerch & Kasper, 1983; Ellis, 1985), whereas scholars unanimously agree on two features—problem-orientation and consciousness. It is obvious that, by analyzing the pragmatic failure, people can predict what the trouble spots will be and what's more important is to find the possible strategies to improve the effectiveness of people's communication.

To achieve effective communication, the adequate requirements are vital—proficiency of language, mutual understanding and basis of shared cultural norms and conventions. However, in most of the communication, the presupposition is not so adequate that the interlocutors are needed to take compensating techniques to reestablish the interpersonal relationship. The strategies people can apply in their cross-cultural communication are suggested as avoidance, tolerance, suspension and accommodation (XU, 2000).

The strategies people resort to in their cross-cultural communication can also be categorized into active strategy and passive strategy. Active strategy is the remedy actively adopted to solve communicative difficulties, including cooperative strategy, stalling strategy and paralinguistic strategy. Using various sources verbal or nonverbal to get speakers' meaning across can enhance communication effectiveness, whereas appeal for help is a basic social interaction strategy. This strategy involves asking someone, especially a native speaker in an interactive encounter, for clarification, verification or correction. To satisfy mutual needs, communicators must be cooperative and friendly. All the active strategies enable interaction to continue, not to break down because of communicators limitation in linguistic and social knowledge.

Reduction strategies like suspension, simplification and avoidance are summarized into passive strategies (XU, 1996). They are used temporarily to suspend the puzzles or to tolerate the incomprehensibilities in cross-cultural communication. As cross-cultural communication is of ambiguous characteristics, misunderstandings and confusion may arise. One should be willing to tolerate the communication counterparts' ideas and propositions that run counter to his culture systems or norms.

Proper use of strategies may not only make the communication go smoothly, but also create the conditions for successful communicative success.

## 5. Enlightenment to teaching

Knowledge without justification is not real knowledge, and pragmatic knowledge is no exception (Zegarac & Pennington, 2000, p. 180). To act or behave appropriately in another culture is a more demanding task. Principally, there are at least 3 objectives for teachers to teach culture in their language class: (1) To get the students familiar with cultural differences; (2) To help the students transcend their own cultures and see things as the members of the target culture; and (3) To emphasize the inseparability of understanding language and understanding culture through various classroom practices.

All these lead to a belief that a good understanding of structural things in some cases has much to do with a conscious understanding of the cultural background of the target language from language learners. In other words, a successful master of a given language has much to do with an understanding of that culture, because language and culture are correlated with each other at different levels of linguistic structure.

It is important to have a good environment for English study, so teachers and students should work together to build a common environment. When Chinese learn English under the specific context, they can understand it better.

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