

On the Impact of Cultural Context on Pragmatic Failures in the Chinese-English Intercultural Communication: A Contrastive Analysis

Song Hong

*China Fundamental Education Research Center / School of Foreign Languages
Northeast Normal University, Changchun, China*

[Abstract] Pragmatic failures often arouse misunderstanding, controversy, and, even, conflicts in intercultural communication. The problems can be largely attributed to the absence of shared cultural context. A comparison between Chinese and English cultures is conducted from the perspectives of a conceptual system, value system, thought patterns, and face system. The thesis intends to explore how these social and culture factors influence the profound relationship of language and communication in order to seek for effective approaches to avoiding or, at least, lessening pragmatic failures in intercultural communication.

[Keywords] intercultural communication, pragmatic failures, cultural context, contrastive analysis

Introduction

The communication behavior involving different cultures, termed “intercultural communication (IC),” occurs whenever and wherever the message sender is a member of one culture and the receiver is another. In intercultural communication, people share less common knowledge of cultural background than that in intracultural communication. Consequently, conflicts and misunderstandings often occur in intercultural communication. Therefore, one’s ability to engage successfully in intercultural communication may be one of the most important skills that should be ever developed.

Related Studies on Pragmatic Failures in Intercultural Communication

Thomas (1983) suggests that a speaker’s linguistic competence involves “grammatical competence” and “pragmatic competence,” and describes the latter as “the ability to use language effectively in order to achieve a specific purpose and to understand language in context” (p.92). He (Thomas, 1983) proposes the term “pragmatic failure” instead of “error” to indicate that the problems that are not lexical or grammatical errors but the inability to understand what is meant by what is said which creates failure in communication.

Communication, as Sperber and Wilson (1986) claimed, “is successful not when hearers recognize the linguistic meaning of the utterance, but when they infer the speaker’s meaning from it” (p. 23). It is an ostensive-inferential process that demands shared knowledge and context among the communicators. However, the communicators with different cultural background may have different interpretations for the same context. They hold different views, attitudes, and value systems with different cultural presuppositions. They must construct and adjust their own internal cognition, which varies with individual experience. These internal constructions of meaning are not only a matter of comprehension, but also responses to cultural context. That is why pragmatic failures occur more frequently in intercultural communication than in intracultural communication.

Communication is governed by rules that are often tied to a particular cultural context. The concept of cultural context evolves from “context of situation,” first proposed by Malinowski in the 1920s. Then Samovar et al. (2010) define cultural context as the largest contextual component that is the cultural setting in which the communication is taking place and involving history, culture, customs, and folks capable of being understood by speakers in a speech community (p.18).

Pragmatic failure can be divided into pragmalinguistic failure and sociopragmatic failure. “Pragmalinguistic failure” refers to the inability in interpreting the linguistic meaning caused by mistaken beliefs about pragmatic force of an utterance, which is often revealed as violating the language rule of the target language, transferring L1 language norms, confusing the literal meaning with the pragmatic meaning, overusing complete structure, and so on. “Sociopragmatic failure” refers to the expressive inappropriateness resulting from the misunderstanding or the ignorance of social or cultural differences. They can often be detected as inappropriate speech acts, impolite or over-polite expressions, and violation of communicative principles in a given context or with a specific participant.

Thomas (1983) ascribed the causes of pragmatic failures to “pragmatic transfer,” which he defined as the activation of L1 knowledge in the establishment of an L2 speech plan by means of which the learner seeks to realize a communicative goal. The negative transfer happens not only in the aspect of the learners’ native linguistic knowledge, such as the native grammatical rules and lexical conception, but also in the aspects of cultural context. Dash (2004) highlighted that interlocutors in intercultural communication were required to be culturally sensitive and objective to avoid prejudice and stereotypical assumptions.

Researchers in various fields of linguistics, anthropology, and sociology have made great endeavors to examine pragmatic failures in many different interactive contexts. Much research concerning the impact of cultural context in intercultural communication has been conducted, but there is still a lack in thorough comprehension, especially systematic comparison between oriental and Western cultures. Therefore, the thesis shall make an attempt from the four perspectives of conceptual system, value system, face system, and thought patterns.

Conceptual system

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) point out that underlying our linguistic system is a conceptual system (CS), which is fundamentally metaphorical in nature. Learners of a second language (L2) are usually lack of the capacity to convey their meaning using culturally appropriate figurative language in the target language. The reason partially ascribes less shared knowledge of the cultural background. The dragon as an example; it is the symbol of power and greatness in Chinese culture, but it is a terrifying monster in English. The Chinese address themselves proudly as the descendants of a dragon, which sounds not so favorable in English. Some color items, also, have metaphorical conceptions. White, in English, can symbolize purity and has more positive semantic prosody. In contrast, white in Chinese implies sadness and mourning. The non-equivalent concepts of lexis often result in barriers in translation and communication. Such Chinese words as *ren, yi, li, zhi, xin* that dominate the ethical values in Chinese culture can hardly find equivalent English expressions. The connotations of some concepts vary with different cultural system and are much influenced by the factors such as history, religion, customs, conventions, and even, the external environment like geographical location, weather, and natural resources. For instance, *west wind* in English is usually considered the mildest and most favorable of the directional winds, but its concept in Chinese implies thrilling cold and harshness. The subtlety of conceptual differences is of significance to the understanding of language, since they penetrate subconsciously into one’s cognitive system and, thus, affect his phraseology.

Value system

Many of the difficulties communicators confront also stem from value systems. The way we view our world is a function of our culture, and it affects our perceptions. The contrast of value systems between Chinese and English can mainly be summarized in four aspects:

Guilt vs. shame: Ruth Benedic uses a combination of the concepts of “guilt” and “shame” to describe the Western and oriental attitude to life (Hu Wenzhong, 1989, p198). The guilt culture depends on internalized convictions of sin, which may be attributed to human’s earliest ancestors, Adam and Eve, who ate the forbidden fruit and were driven out of the Garden of Eden by God. So, Christianity holds that man

is born with sin, and man's life is the process of atoning for his crime. Chinese believe that every man belongs to the group where he exists. To maintain a harmonious relationship, man should follow the conventions of the group and devote himself to the society. If not, it would be shameful. So Chinese culture is a kind of shame culture.

Doing vs. Being: **Doing**, as Stewart asserts, is the dominant activity for Americans (Hu Wenzhong, 1989). American history is demonstrated by their continuous exploitation of the external world. In the process of conquering nature, it is natural for them to approve of being independent and self-made. On the contrary, the oriental worldview is to keep balance between man and the cosmos. So, it is vital to maintain the harmonious relationships.

Equality vs. Hierarchy: The essential types of human relationships can be divided into two categories: horizontal and vertical. A horizontal society is based on the principle of assumed equality or egalitarianism. Many Western countries have undergone a comparatively long period of democratic systems, so equality is highly valued. For example, "You are not playing fair" is a sharp criticism calling for changed behavior. Some countries like China and Japan, however, quite a long history of feudalism, belong to the kind of hierarchical and vertical society where people in certain groups have been used to receiving preferential treatment. In such a society, an individual's family background, kinship web, social status, and even age can carry great significance. Thereby, the Chinese are apt to enlarge and strengthen their kinship network by means of blood or sworn relationship. It is the reason that Chinese has a large vocabulary about kinship. It is also common to note that Chinese have a way of addressing by using a person's rank or occupation, such as Bureau Director Wang, Manager Huang, and Minister Zhang. It is the hierarchic sense that keeps a fundamental and pervasive impact on the Chinese culture.

Individualism vs. Collectivism: In Western countries such as England and USA, people tend to have a man-centered view. The concept of individualism is an expression of personality that favors free action and complete liberty. The large number of words with the prefix "self" is a demonstration. On the other hand, the Chinese are more sensitive to the connections they have as members of their social groups. Consequently, they are inclined to be more concerned about the impact of their actions on others of their groups. Harmony is the first consideration. So, great emphasis is put on saving others' face and maintaining the ethical relationship and social order.

Thought Patterns

Cultures do not communicate, people do. One's thought patterns are much affected by the social culture and psychological cognition, together with his personal experience. There appears to be a Western preference for deductive and analytic thought pattern but an Oriental preference for an inductive and synthetic pattern.

Deductive vs. Inductive: In the deductive pattern, a topic is introduced at the beginning of a discourse and then the minor or supporting arguments are presented afterwards. It is clear that the Americans favor the deductive pattern. This pattern is to get the topic directly towards what is most concerned. Details can then be worked out deductively as they are needed. Scollon (2000) illustrated the thought patterns with a story: When an American businessman was asked what he thought was the most important aspect of business communications, his answer was "all you need is the five *W*'s and one *H*: what, who, where, when, and how. Nothing else. If it's too long, you lose money" (p75).

However, inductive patterns place the minor points of the arguments first and then derive the main points as a conclusion from those arguments. The structure could be sketched out as: **Because A, and because B, and because C, therefore D**. The delayed introduction of a topic may arouse misunderstanding in intercultural communication.

Analytic vs. Synthetic: Americans favor analytic and logical thought patterns. They are apt to analyze the things in sense of their components. So, they place their most interested or crucial points at

the beginning of a conversation or a discourse and then probe into the components, while synthetic patterns emphasize the comprehensive mastery of the thing from all dimensions. In Oriental culture, the related factors in communication are synthesized into a unified whole so as to grasp the totality. It is also revealed in discourse structures with the rhetorical favor for parallelism and antithesis, which is often regarded in English discourse as prolix and verbose.

Face system

The face system can be divided into positive face and negative face. Positive face is also called solidarity face, which refers to the approval of the other person. Negative face is avoidance of imposition. The face system is much influenced by values, worldviews, cultural conventions, and social norms, along with distance, power, and weight of imposition. Moreover, it varies with the context of situations. (Scollon, 2000). To a person from a highly individualistic culture, however, face relationship is very much a matter of private affairs. However, one's face in terms of collectivism is of vital relevance to the honor of the group to which a person belongs, whether a family, a company, or an organization.

It often occurs that in an international business negotiation, a Chinese merchant is apt to stress, first of all, the good relationship of both sides in the past, then look forward to the friendly cooperation in the future, as well as some light topics before the discussion of the most crucial and debatable details. It is out of the Chinese convention to maintain a harmonious relationship with others by weakening the disagreeable arguments, if unavoidable, to the least extent. However, the English participants prefer to put the greatest concern at the beginning, aiming at the settlements of the most concerned. They feel confused or even irritated with those "irrelevant" topics. What is more, in some dilemma, a Chinese usually concludes with "Let me think it over" or "We will make a study," which means, to a Westerner, a promise for further discussion, but actually it implies that the issue is hard to be accepted. This is an endeavor to save the other's face. Some English feel quite uncomfortable with the way Chinese make a farewell: "I must be leaving now" or "I have something important to do, so I must go," which sounds too abrupt and even insulting to them. They take it as a complaint or a hint that their conversation is meaningless. In intercultural communication, any expressions violating cultural conventions or threatening face may arouse conflicts.

Conclusion

The analyses made from the four perspectives of conceptual systems, value system, thought patterns and the face system reveal that Chinese and English are culturally and pragmatically different to a large extent. The differences often transfer into their language with negative effects. The Western culture values more individualism and initiative and prefers logic and straight patterns in verbal communication. Contrarily, in the Chinese culture, people are more collective-oriented, more inductive in thought patterns, more conscious of their social values and relationships with others, which influences their communicative behaviors as more emphasis on maintaining harmony and saving face. The influence even reflects in their language, characterized by circular discourses structures and circumlocutory phraseology. The differences can cause barriers, confusion, or misunderstanding, some of which may result in serious disputes or conflicts by different approaches to handling speech acts (direct vs. indirect), different appreciation of styles (formal vs. informal), different arrangement of discourse (inductive vs. deductive), different treatment of politeness or face, and different emphases on social and personal values (individual-oriented vs. collective-oriented) and so on. The differences conflict in the verbal communicative acts, bringing about the inability to convey or understand the original meaning. The analysis demonstrates that the pragmatic failures in intercultural communication, to a great extent, should be ascribed to the negative transfer of the communicators' cultural conventions. Therefore, cultural awareness and social-pragmatic competences should be strengthened and cultivated.

What is more, cultural context is a variable that is related to the individual who engages in the communicative activities. Any absolute classification of cultural patterns in terms of cultural stereotyping will be too rough and oversimplified. The general discussion of the cultural factors that affect communicative actions in this thesis doesn't mean that the patterns are always consistent with any participants in any context of situations. Age, sex, occupation, experiences, character, academic background of an individual, as well as the concrete situations, make the communication actions diverse and variable. These differences need further study.

Acknowledgement

The thesis is a partial research result of the following projects including National Social Science Foundation(14BYY003), Heilongjiang Provincial Social Science Research Program (13D016) and (12544040), Heilongjiang Provincial Education and Science Planning Subject (GBC1214029) and(14G018), Excellent English Teacher Training Project of Northeast Normal University(2014DSJX007).

References

- Dash, P. (2004). Cross-cultural pragmatic failure: A definitional analysis with implications for classroom teaching. *Asian EFL Journal*, 6(3), 1-17.
- Firth, J. R. (1957). *Papers in linguistics 1934-1951*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Hu, Wenzhong. (ed.) (1989). *Selected readings in intercultural communication*. Changsha: Hunan Educational Publishing Press.
- Hu, Zhuanglin. (1994). *Cohesion and coherence in discourse*. Shanghai: Shanghai foreign language teaching press.
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). The metaphorical structure of the human conceptual system. *Cognitive Science*, 4(2), 195-208.
- Lin, Dajin. (1996). *Intercultural communication: Theory and practice*. Fuzhou: Fujian People's Publishing House.
- Samovar, Larry A., & Porter, R. E. (ed.) (1994). *Intercultural communication: A reader*. Belmont Calif.: Wadsworth.
- Samovar, Larry A., & Porter, R. E., McDaniel, E.R. (2010). *Communication between cultures*. Boston: Wadsworth.
- Sperber, D., & Wilson, D. (1986). *Relevance: Communications and cognition*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Thomas, J. (1983). Cross-cultural pragmatic failure. *Applied Linguistics*, 4(2), 91- 112.
- Scollon, R., & Scollon, S.W. (2000). *Cross-cultural communication: A discourse approach*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.