

# A Study on Sociopragmatic Failure in Business English Interpreting Under Negative Cultural Transfer Effects and Countermeasures

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**Abstract**—Considering the fact that numerous studies have been done in the field of negative transfer on the lexical level, on the syntactic level and on the textual level, and the impact of culture exerts on Business English interpreting studies, this thesis will take the negative cultural transfer as the research scope. The negative cultural transfer effects of mother tongue on Business English interpreting studies are mainly embodied in the result of pragmatic failures. As Chinese people's thinking pattern, cognitive mode, conventional habit, values are different from English people, Business English interpreting learners are inclined to end up with misinterpreting and incomplete interpreting when in practice. This thesis is an effort to explore the causes and embodiment of sociopragmatic failures from the perspective of negative cultural transfer in Chinese-English Interpreting, especially in Business English Interpreting, and to provide some countermeasures.

**Keywords**—*negative cultural transfer; interpreting; sociopragmatic failures; business English teaching*

## I. INTRODUCTION

With the development of globalization, the communication between China and other countries in terms of economics, politics and culture are greatly enhanced. Given so, the reason for the arising phenomenon of advocating and opening courses of Business English Interpreting in many colleges and universities in China becomes obvious, that is, the society urgently demands talents with strong interpreting competence. Interpreting is a highly-demanding job, the interpreter shall prepare quite well in advance as he or she has no one to turn to when undertaking a task, the interpreter shall have strong flexibility, as he or she cannot predict what the speaker is going to say the next minute. The features of business activities require the interpreter to be equipped not only with a good mastery of English skills, but also with a good mastery of business and cultural knowledge. The failure to apply the target language in interpreting or lack in social and culture background information of the targeted speaker would both result in the breakdown of communication. Though we are reluctant to admit, it's quite true that many interpreting learners fail to provide intact and exact

interpretation no matter in class or in social occasions without realizing it. The two languages are separately deeply rooted in the respective culture, thus differ greatly in characteristics. During the study of English, Chinese students cannot get rid of the influence from the negative cultural transfer of their mother tongue. The students are conditioned to apply Chinese thinking pattern, expression method in the interpreting process. Cross-cultural communication is thus brought into an unfavorable situation. Therefore, it becomes vitally important to make analysis on sociopragmatic failures caused by negative cultural transfer and to find coping strategies.

## II. THE THEORY OF NEGATIVE TRANSFER OF MOTHER TONGUE AND PRAGMATIC FAILURE

According to the contrastive analysis hypothesis put forward by an American linguist and educator Lado, he pointed out in his book that mother tongue would transfer to foreign language learning. Transfer falls into two kinds, the positive and negative transfer. When mother tongue promotes foreign language learning, the function is identified as positive transfer; if not, the phenomenon is categorized into the negative transfer. The core of contrast analysis hypothesis lies in the interference from mother tongue hindering foreign language learning (Lado, 1957) [1]. Therefore, we can look into the similarities and differences between two languages to predict the difficulties and mistakes we might come up with in English interpreting learning and find ways to deal with those setbacks. According to the inter-language theory put forward by Selinker (1972) [2], language transfer is a key element in influencing the constructing of inter-language. Later on, marked theory (Kellerman, 1979; Zobl, 1984) and cognitive theory were all applied to study the phenomenon of mother tongue transfer. Though theories vary in some aspects, they lead to the same point mentioning that negative cultural transfer will exert a negative impact on language learning.

The term "pragmatic failure" was first proposed by Jenny Thomas in her book *Cross-Culture Pragmatic Failure*. Thomas (1983) [3] describes pragmatic failure as "the inability to understand 'what is meant by what is said'" (p.91). Pragmatic failure, according to her, falls into two types:

pragmalinguistic failure and sociopragmatic failure. Pragmalinguistic failure arises when language is misused, resulting from misunderstandings of linguistic contexts. Sociopragmatic failure arises when language is improperly used, resulting from inadequate understanding of certain social context. According to Thomas J (1983), pragmalinguistic failure and sociopragmatic failure are the two manifestations of pragmatic failure phenomena in cross-cultural communication. Compared with the former, the consequences caused by the latter are more serious and more unacceptable. What's more, the latter affects more fundamentally on the effect of Business English Interpreting as sociopragmatic failure is caused by the differences in thinking patterns, cognitive modes, conventional habits, values and cultural factors. Moreover, students' failures to avoid the influences of these differences in interpreting are classified into results of negative cultural transfer. Therefore, to avoid pragmatic failure, and to improve pragmatic competence, learning how to cope with the impact of the negative cultural transfer becomes indispensable and inevitable.

### III. SOCIOPRAGMATIC FAILURE CAUSED BY NEGATIVE CULTURAL TRANSFER IN BUSINESS ENGLISH INTERPRETING

#### A. Thinking Pattern Impacts Under Mother Tongue

Confucianism has played a dominant role in people's mind cultivating since Han dynasty and has lasted for quite a long time, its emphasis on being moderate in every aspect of life has influenced people's expression method in a long run. Chinese people tend to express themselves in a roundabout way, which is to say, they like to circle around a topic instead of expressing their will directly. However, western people prefer to go straight to the topic. An applied example can illustrate how thinking patterns can compound the interpretation process.

In a business negotiation held between a Chinese and an American company, the American party asks for the possibility to be the exclusive distributor for the Chinese company in North America for the second year, while the Chinese company has low trust in the party's competence and wants to seek for more potential partners. Instead of rejecting the American party directly, the Chinese company representative responds to them: "I see", "Maybe", "We will talk later." to signal a negative reply. A literal interpretation of these responses devoid of any cultural awareness will be potentially misleading. While the American company tends to take a more direct reply, such as "no", "definitely not", "out of the question" as rejections. In this way, they could easily misconstrue a literal interpretation to be a positive reply (Samovar, 1998) [4].

#### B. Cognitive Mode Impacts Under Mother Tongue

The differences in cultures will lead to different understandings of things, even for the same thing. Due to different living environment and experiences, different cognitive modes are formed. For one single word, Eastern people and Western people would have different understandings and would have in mind different pictures.

Take "east wind" and "west wind" for example. Due to the geographical differences, the understandings of them vary greatly. In China, "east wind" represents something upright, positive, and nice. On the contrary, "west wind" represents something ruined, which can be found in many Chinese ancient poems. However, in western countries, "east wind" is interpreted as "Samuel Butler", which means harsh winds, and "west wind" represents something positive. Moreover, take China and Britain for example. Britain's temperate maritime climate and location have formed a gorgeous environment for fishing and maritime industries development. Thus, we can find many expressions related to fish, such as, "big fish" refers to rich people, "shy fish" refers to shy person, "fresh fish" refers to new prisoner, while in Chinese, we don't have such connection to fish, so the literal interpretation of these phrases will lead to jokes. What's worth mentioning is that, the difference in word-constructing principle of Chinese and English language will lead to trouble in matching words. For example, it's hard to locate equivalent English words for Chinese specialties, such as "Maobi", "shanghuo", "tuotuode", and "jianghu". Under such circumstances, some interpreters will randomly pick English words to explain, thus giving birth to numerous Chinglish expressions, such as, "social flower" for "jiaojihua", "big rain" for "Dayu", "red-eye" for "yanhong", "black beer" for "Hei Pijiu", etc.

Interpretation of proverbs offers another good example. In China, when we say a man is afraid of his wife, we would describe him as "Qiguanyan", if by literal interpretation of "Ta you Qiguanyan" into "He suffers from tracheitis", the western people would be confused, which would cause great misunderstanding. It should be interpreted into "He is a henpecked man." from their perspective. The differences in proverbs interpretation have shown clearly how different cognitive modes influence interpretation strategies. These are good examples to warn us that we should attach great importance to the cultural differences in choosing a proper strategy.

#### C. Value Impacts Under Mother Tongue

The value differences between Eastern and Western countries arise from differences in terms of geography, production method and living method. A training program offers a good example. In a training program held by a multinational enterprise to its employees, a Chinese interpreter literally interprets a training manager's introduction of an American Speaker to the audiences by saying "Now, let's welcome Mr. Smith to give us an excellent and enlightening speech." This introduction sounds to Chinese people pretty much enthusiastic and warming, while, it's not the same case with the American speaker. He seems to be enraged without showing any grateful smile. The truth is that, the American speaker thinks the Chinese training manager has no faith in his finishing the job successfully and is giving him encouragement. Obviously, the misunderstanding is caused by value differences.

#### *D. Conventional Habits Impacts Under Mother Tongue*

The addresses for senior people in Chinese and English also vary greatly. The addresses are paid great attention to by Chinese people, especially, the addresses of the subordinate to the superior, the addresses of the minor to the senior, the addresses of the student to the teacher. Any misuse of the address would be deemed as impoliteness and disrespect. For an exchange of pleasantries, people would call the elder in the form of surname plus "gong", "Lao" plus surname. If a student is conditioned to express in this way, he or she would immediately interpret the introduction into "This is older Wang." when introducing an older person. However, western society attaches importance to individuality; they either call the other side by the name or add a surname before an appellation word, even to a leader or senior. It's welcoming to call them by "Mr., Sir, Madam, and Miss". The way people say goodbye offers another good example. Chinese are conditioned to express their sorry for being apart, would ask their friends or guests to "go slowly", "take care of yourself on the way home", "go well", while in English, we only need to say "Goodbye", "Bye-bye", "Good day". The failure to understand the differences between two languages in interpreting would cause misunderstanding and result in the breakdown of communication.

#### IV. COUNTERMEASURES ON COPING WITH PRAGMATIC FAILURES BY REDUCING NEGATIVE CULTURAL TRANSFER IMPACT

Undoubtedly, with the development of college English curriculum reform in the past decade, the research on Business English Interpreting teaching in colleges and universities has made certain progress, but there are still many problems. As discussed above, the improvement and accumulation of cultural awareness for target language culture are of vital importance. Here are ways to conduct cultural teaching from aspects of course design, teaching method, and teaching materials.

##### *A. Course Design*

In most colleges and universities in China, English majors are assigned one to two semesters' courses in learning Western culture and history, but most of them are in the form of extensive learning and intensive learning. Compared to colleges and universities in foreign countries, students are offered different comparative courses on cultural histories and ideological histories between target language country and own country, comparative cultural research opportunities, and etc. The intensive course, however, will be conducted from their third year in the form of seminar and presentation. This type of course design is much more useful for improving students' bilingual comparative thinking competence and encouraging their exploring studies, fostering their ideologies in multi-cultural communication, so as to establish their overall senses of culture, and to realize the aim of involving the cultural education within four-year's course design. Therefore, we should learn from foreign countries in course design and make some modifications.

##### *B. Teaching Materials*

Teaching material is the main channel from which the students obtain knowledge and cultural information. In most students' mind, the social life of the target language country is vague and far from reaching, so they still hold an out-of-date impression on the target language country. This is partly due to the old-fashioned teaching material, and partly due to the teachers' lack of access to the latest cultural information. Therefore, in choosing the teaching material, no matter it is those bought from overseas, or those published domestically, even those self-complied, the texts, conversations and practicing material involved should be classical and typical for the cultural information of the target language country. Proper teaching material can facilitate the teachers' teaching by combining cultural background and cultural connotation. It is encouraging to find in some teaching material the involvement of the target language culture, in the form of culture column and tips. It is advised to include the target language culture and history information in teaching material, in different forms. However, it is far from enough. It's of great significance to select the contents for teaching material in order to carry out the thoughts of developing culture awareness and language competence at the same time. We must stick to the principle of practicality, suitability, relativity and continuity in selecting the cultural contents in teaching material.

##### *C. Business English Interpreting Teachers*

###### *1) Implanting cultural awareness cultivation in teaching*

One the one hand, it is necessary to create a learning environment for target language by multi-level and comprehensive introduction to target language culture. Teachers can prepare some simple but interesting, life-related language material, encourage students to take part in the role-play, conversation, story-telling activities, stimulate them to speak English during the entire course, and remind them to choose proper speech act relating to identity and language situations. Students are expected to apprehend the connection between language and culture, and to establish cross-cultural communication consciousness. On the other hand, teachers should abandon the teacher-oriented teaching mode in teaching. To exploit the students' individuality and thinking competence by cultivating their analysis and expression abilities by adopting means of questions, discussion and debates. To encourage teamwork awareness by organizing group work. To stimulate learning interactivity and initiative by reorganizing their seating into circle, oval or U shape.

###### *2) Organizing extra-curriculum activities*

By taking part in various kinds of extra-curriculum activities, students are expected to learn more from outside of school. To start with, teachers can lead students to read some original books, novels, poems, essays written in English. If they find something interesting, the studying initiative is stimulated, which is far more encouraging. Moreover, reading original books would be very important in infusing western thinking pattern and increasing their sensitivity to English, it would subtly influence their original thinking mode. Then, seminars, debates, speech contests,

singing contests, poems reading contests can be held to encourage students' involvement. As students are vulnerable to the impact of negative cultural transfer, teachers should encourage them to increase exposure to proper expressions.

#### *D. The Suggestions for Business English Interpreting Students*

##### *1) Deepening into comparative research into Chinese-English cultural theories*

Cultural adaptation includes both social and psychological factors. Social factors include the similarities and differences between mother tongue and target language, that is to say, in the learning of target language, the learners are to be assimilated by target language or to reserve their mother tongue language is a question. Psychological factors refer to the students' acceptance to the culture and life style of the target language country (Fa xiaoying, 2011) [5]. In the study of interpretation, teachers should encourage students to clarify the similarities and differences between Chinese and English by means of comparative analysis and error analysis. To find out the core hinders students' mastery of English would facilitate teachers' scientific and accurate analysis of cultural pragmatic failures in interpreting, in order to promote positive transfer and to get rid of negative transfer.

##### *2) Collecting Business English interpreting error examples*

Students' probing into the study of error examples can remind themselves of the causes for the interpreting errors and help them avoid the errors positively in future's interpretation. Teachers shall help them in their study in the field of conditions, confining factors, interlink between factors, transfer amount related to the negative transfer. Studies on those manifestation examples caused by cultural misunderstanding in terms of thinking pattern, cognitive difference, and value difference would specifically be vital for improving interpreting competence. By analyzing and summarizing those error examples, students are expected to adopt more effective and efficient ways to cope with the negative cultural transfer.

##### *3) Exploring the meaning of English words*

To understand a language, it is inevitably to learn the words. While many words contain more than one meaning, if you are to save trouble in learning a single meaning of a word with the expectation to learn a language, it is out of the question. Leech (1974) [6] divides meanings into seven types: conceptual meaning, connotative meaning, social meaning, affective meaning, reflective meaning, collocative meaning and thematic meaning (p. 55). From the second meaning to the sixth meaning, they are all concerned with associative meaning, which is based on the subject's culture and emotion, so it is also called social-cultural meaning. Though it's hard and unnecessary to find out the seven meanings of a specific word in interpreting, it reminds us to differentiate meanings in different contexts and social situations. Some English words may be devoid of derogatory sense when in single use, but possibly contain a derogatory sense when used in a phrase or sentence. Some English words contain metaphor function when used in a fixed combination; any ignorance of

this can lead to misinterpreting. Some English words, such as words referring color, always contain extensive meanings. Therefore, students' deepening understanding of English words, focusing not only on one single meaning of words will be useful to avoid negative cultural transfer.

##### *4) Increasing sensitivity to culture*

Being a part of culture, language is also the carrier and basis of culture. To realize effective and efficient cross-cultural communication, a good mastery of language is far from enough, a good comprehension of target language culture would be significant. Different thinking modes, values are rooted in languages, and given so, language is the direct reflection of a nation's cultural characteristics and specialty. Equipped with the knowledge of the target language culture, students' sensitivity to foreign culture will be improved; pragmatic failures are expected to be reduced. In this way, effective business negotiation can be achieved.

## V. CONCLUSION

Negative transfer of mother tongue is an important inner factor in causing pragmatic failures in Business English Interpreting for Chinese students. In order to learn English well, to make good use of English skills, students have to obtain a good understanding of cultural background of English, to avoid the negative cultural transfer of Chinese. Therefore, in practical Business English Interpreting teaching, teachers should attach great importance to inputting of English culture, to making a comparative analysis on the cultural knowledge of countries. What's more, effective teaching strategies are required in reducing the sociopragmatic failure caused by the impact of the negative cultural transfer of mother tongue.

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