

# The Study on Cross-cultural Pragmatic Failure under the Perspective of Adaptation Theory

Liu Na

School of Foreign Languages, Jingchu University of Technology,  
Jingmen, Hubei 448000, China

**Abstract — With the rapid development of globalization and frequent contacts among different countries, intercultural communication is getting more and more important. However, people from different countries may use their own cultural values, beliefs and attitudes to understand others from different cultural backgrounds. As a result, pragmatic failures may occur frequently and bring many obstacles in intercultural communication. This thesis attempts to analyze the causes of pragmatic failure, and then proposes some measures to reduce or avoid the occurrence of cross-cultural pragmatic failure.**

**Keywords-** *communicative context; cross-cultural pragmatic failure; adaptation theory*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Interlanguage pragmatics was produced in 1980 which mainly explored the pragmatic phenomenon and characteristics in learning a second language. The center of research is the acquisition which occurs in learning the second language form and the different strategies. With the continuous development of society, Chinese and western people have more and more communication, because the people from different ethnic groups so they have different cultural background, habits, customs .Therefore, misunderstanding and conflict became inevitable. As a cross-cultural Pragmatics, Interlanguage Pragmatics often appears interlanguage pragmatic failures. This paper will analyze the interlanguage pragmatic failure from the perspective of Verschueren's adaptation theory and put forward some effective countermeasures to circumvent the interlanguage conflict.

## 2. Interlanguage Pragmatics and Interlanguage Pragmatic Failures

As an interdisciplinary, Interlanguage pragmatics is between pragmatics and second language acquisition. Its research areas include speech acts for expression, speech purpose fulfilled, positive and negative migration, pragmatic usage and language policy failures. In 1969, the famous linguist Selinker proposed "interlanguage refers to second language acquisition in the transition between the native language and the target language, and both the characteristics." Kasper & Blum also launched similar view in 1993; he believes interlanguage pragmatics is to study all kinds of speech acts in different cultural environments. In order to achieve the ultimate purpose, interlanguage pragmatics learns how to understand the words and actions from a theoretical framework in cross-cultural context. It will have a new national culture and customs when learning a second foreign language and the second language acquisition is bound to come into contact. As a major part of pragmatic, interlanguage pragmatics studies the second language acquisition in different cultural backgrounds which comes up the positive and negative migration.

Interlanguage is produced in a non-native language environment; the speaker must be in a totally different cultural background. Due to the different cultural background, habits, customs understanding and they cannot stand up thinking in each other's point of view, it is difficult to reach consensus in idea. Therefore, it will appear even inappropriate or identity theory which are all under the background of cross-cultural interlanguage pragmatic failures. The British linguist Jenny Thomas thinks that pragmatic failures has a serious influence in

communication exchange, he thought: in the process of communication, non-native speakers' grammatical mistakes make the listener feel uncomfortable and it will also impact the communication more or less, when the native speakers realized that the discourse grammar knowledge is weak and will forgive their grammar mistakes, but if a second language acquisition is especially skilled in target language, the listener will think these inappropriate behaviors are unfriendly and impolite. Therefore, the syntax error may just show the speaker hasn't really mastered the target language, but the pragmatic errors might reflect the speaker's personal accomplishment and even personality needs to be improved. Interlanguage pragmatic failure is a cross-cultural pragmatic rule of positive and negative migration, mainly because the two sides can not accurately grasp the discourse of social cultural background, can not select the correct topic and talking, do not choose different language forms in the face of different occasions.

### **3. The Communication Context Adaptation and Adaptation Theory**

Verschueren's book "Understanding Pragmatics" points out that the discourses choose the appropriate words in the process of communication, and this choice is the embodiment of the language compliance. Language has three big characteristics: variability, negotiability and adaptability. As the three characteristics of the basic attributes of human language, it enables speakers to use the appropriate language non-statically. Variability can make different ways and methods when choosing the words, and make sure these options are not immutable. Variability provides endless possibilities for users of using language. Negotiability can make the people's choice becomes flexible; it is not in accordance with the machine to use in the form of language. Adaptability refers to the speaker's words to achieve the ultimate goal in communication; this choice can satisfy the need of communication. It is not difficult to come to the conclusion that in order to attain the goal of

the session, variability and negotiability are the basis of adaptability, and adaptability is the core element. From the perspective of linguistics, the three features provide a theoretical framework for the study of interlanguage pragmatic failure.

According to the adaptation theory, with the different communicative purposes and language environment, the discourses choose the corresponding speaking style and structure. In order to get the best presentation, the contextual factors, such as the physical world, social world and mental world will be activated for different levels. The words what they used are the core element of the communicative context. Language users will be affected by contextual factors of different level in the choice of words and understanding.

### **4. Analysis of Interlanguage Pragmatic Failures from a Perspective of Communicative Context Adaptation,**

In order to achieve communication goals smoothly, it will make some non-static adaptation changes as the language context and the structure. However, because of the wrong judgment in the process of communication will lead to the communication stop or failure, which is the root causing of the interlanguage pragmatic failures. The specific performance in the following aspects:

#### **4.1. Ignoring the adaptation of language users**

In the process of language using, the communicative context is the core elements of speakers. Because of two sides speakers have different cognitive level and personal factors, such as culture, educational background, social status, career, etc., it will appear to comply with these factors and eventually lead to interlanguage pragmatic failure. In order to highlight the interlanguage pragmatic functions of language, the speaker should activate their psychological, social, and contextual elements in the physical world as far as possible. Such as:

A British gentleman Peter came to China for the first time; he hired a TAXI and asked sincerely:

Peter: Would you kind enough to take me to the

Beijing Hotel?

Driver: Eh...

Peter: Ok, It doesn't matter, I can call another one.

Peter had to call another car as the taxi driver's puzzled look. It is obvious that the driver's embarrassment just because Peter is too warm and polite which made the driver was supposed to take passengers to the destination was an unpaid service. Based on the British people is the first time to come to China, he did not consider their own identity and relationship between the rights and obligations. Because of they did not follow each other's identity and finally lead to the interlanguage pragmatic failures.

#### **4.2 Ignoring the adaption of physical world**

Verschueren think physics mainly refers to the instructions of time and space. It includes events and allegations of time to talk. In addition, the communicator's body posture, gestures, appearance, physical characteristics also belong to the physical world. In order to pass information more smoothly in cross-cultural communication, the speaker should comply with the communication in speech communication of the physical world; the listener should clarify session pragmatic relationship. Such as:

(2) Mr. Zhao is a visiting scholar in one of a university in Washington, his American friend Johnson gave him an invitation on Monday:

Mr. Johnson: Mr. Zhao, Will you be free next Friday, Would you like to come to my home to have dinner at 6:30.

Mr. Zhao: Thanks for your invitation, I will arrive on time.

Johnson prepared a big dinner for the arrival of the guests on Friday, but Mr. Zhao did not appear until 7 pm. Mr. Johnson could not help but to call Mr. Zhao to ask when he would arrive. Mr. Zhao was very surprised and said you told me next Friday but not this one, and unfortunately he was not in Washington. It's a pity that faulty communication makes a failure invitation. Two different cultures for next Friday have different understanding, Chinese people think it points to the next

Friday, and American culture, the so-called next Friday is coming this Friday. Due to ignore cultural adaptation in time, Mr. Zhao made an interlanguage pragmatic failures in United States.

#### **4.3 Ignoring the adaptation of psychological world**

The two sides should fully take into account each other's psychological world in cross-cultural communication, choosing the right words and expressions. In terms of Verschueren, personality, emotion, desire, intentions are part of the psychological world factors in communication. Ignoring the adaptation of psychological world can cause the interrupt or failure in communication, even result in an interlanguage pragmatic failure. Such as:

(3) A Chinese student Zhang came to the United States for a very short time. One day, he saw an old woman carrying some heavy shopping bags at the entrance of the supermarket; he ran to the woman and said very friendly:

Xiao Zhang: Granma, let me help you, you are too old to lift the heavy bag.

Woman: Thanks, I am not so old, I can do it by myself.

Zhang never thought that his kindness made the granny's unhappiness. Since the childhood, the Chinese people have accepted the education which is to respect elders and help older people as much as possible in your life, but in western countries, people are afraid of being regarded as the elderly, because "old" in the western culture with older "useless", the meaning of "elderly", and they are more willing to be called "grandpa" or "grandma". In this session, Xiao Zhang did not notice the elderly American lady's psychological feelings and thus caused the interlanguage pragmatic failure.

#### **4.4 Ignoring the adaption of social world**

Social world includes social situation, social environment and the speech act. The communicators should obey the normative principles and guidelines. In order to achieve the goal of social communication, both sides should choose the words which conform to the social and cultural norms. In cross-cultural

communication, language acquisition is not familiar with social cultural background of spoken language. It is likely to lead to the failure in language using if the speakers just obey the own country people's way of speech. For example:

(4) Brown and Judy employ in a same multinational company, one day Brown met Judy at the gate of the company:

Brown: Judy, you look so nice today.

Judy: Really, I stayed up late yesterday.

Brown felt quite frustrated as his sincerely praise did not get the thanks but the denying of his taste. In fact, the culture of China and the United States has created two countries people's different values. When Chinese people receive praise from others, no matter how happy she is, she always shows a modest attitude, because this is one of the virtues in China. However, when Westerners receiving praise from others will accept it and thanks for you. Because Judy had not noticed the social world, but choose the social norms which contrary to the target language, so finally it caused the interlanguage pragmatic failures

## 5. Conclusion

Because different country has different culture, the choice of language must comply with the social environment in cross-cultural communication. A dynamic communication context adaptation process is to make relatively appropriate words and obey the communication environment adaptation. At the same time, in order to achieve the purpose of the communication, the speakers who are from different cultures should adapt each other's cultural background; otherwise, it may cause interlanguage pragmatic failures. The author thinks that in cross-cultural communication, the two sides of the target language should adapt to the communication context. In order to really improve the cross-cultural communication pragmatic competence, the speakers should pay attention to the cultivation of interlanguage pragmatics in daily communication,

emphasize on language form and the communication context and the appropriateness of pragmatic strategy, so as to maximize avoid cross-cultural communication pragmatic failures.

## Acknowledgement

[Fund Project] This is the 2014 annual scientific research project "Pragmatic strategy research on interlanguage pragmatics" achievement of Jingchu University of Technology. (Project number: SK201403)

## Reference

- [1] He Ziran. Pragmatics and English Learning [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai foreign language education press, 1997.
- [2] James. C .Errors in Language Learning and Use: Exploring Error Analysis M]. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2001.
- [3] Jia Yuxin. Cross-cultural Communication [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai foreign language education press, 1997.
- [4] He Gang. Pragmatics of cross-cultural perspective [J]. Foreign language study, 1999 (4).
- [5] Huo CuiLiu. Cross-cultural communication pragmatic failures and the adaptation theory [J]. Journal of Hubei Radio and TV University, 2009 (11)
- [6] THOMAS J. Cross-cultural pragmatic failure [J] .Applied Linguistics,1983( 4)
- [7] Lott D. Analyzing and Counteracting Interferences Errors [ J].ELT JournalVolume3: July, 1983: 134-137, 286.
- [8] Thomas J. Cross — cultural Pragmatic Failure [J]. Applied Linguistics, 1983: 91 — 112.
- [9] Zhang Xinhong. The Pragmatics of Chinese Refusals: An Adaptation — Based Approach.2000.49 — 59