

SOCIO-PRAGMATIC AND PRAGMA-LINGUISTIC FAILURES IN CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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Abstract: Mastering high level skills in linguistic competence like grammar, syntax, and phonology does not mean having an equal pragmatic competence. Indeed, misunderstandings are so often the case in intercultural communications among interlocutors from different speech communities, in which drawing the intended implicature in the target language becomes a difficult task, especially if there is a lack of knowledge concerning cross-cultural differences like taboos, traditions, attitudes, etiquettes, and politeness. In another word, meaning cannot be conveyed through words or sentences in isolation without considering the socio-cultural context of any communication. Thus, it is important to learn how native speakers tend to act and behave in different situations to avoid breakdowns in communications, though it is almost impossible to prepare learners for all the possible scenarios that they may encounter in cross-cultural communications. This paper stresses the importance of pragmatic competence in foreign language teaching through discussing the nature of pragmatic failure which can be either linguistic as “pragma-linguistic failure” when inappropriate linguistic means are used, leading to failure to express the intended pragmatic objective—especially due to pragmatic transfer, or it can be social as “socio-pragmatic failure” when the speaker fails to choose what to say under certain social circumstances. The paper suggests at the end some interesting effective means to avoid these two types of pragmatic failure.

Keywords: Socio-pragmatic failure, pragma-linguistic failure, intercultural communication, pragmatic transfer, foreign language learning-teaching

ÉCHECS SOCIO-PRAGMATIQUES ET PRAGMA-LINGUISTIQUES DANS LES COMMUNICATIONS INTERCULTURELLES

Résumé : Maîtriser des compétences de haut niveau de compétence linguistique comme la grammaire, la syntaxe et la phonologie ne signifie pas avoir une compétence pragmatique égale. En effet, les incompréhensions sont si souvent le cas dans les communications interculturelles entre interlocuteurs de différentes communautés linguistiques, dans lesquelles dessiner l'implicature voulue dans la langue cible devient une tâche difficile, surtout s'il y a un manque de connaissances concernant les différences interculturelles comme les tabous, les traditions, les attitudes, les étiquettes et la politesse. En d'autres termes, le sens ne peut être transmis à travers des mots ou des phrases isolés sans tenir compte du contexte socioculturel de toute communication. Ainsi, il est important d'apprendre comment les locuteurs natifs ont tendance à agir et à se comporter dans différentes situations pour éviter les pannes de communication, bien qu'il soit presque impossible de préparer les apprenants à tous les scénarios possibles qu'ils peuvent rencontrer dans les communications interculturelles. Cet article souligne l'importance de la compétence pragmatique dans l'enseignement des langues étrangères en discutant de la nature de l'échec

pragmatique qui peut être soit linguistique, soit « échec pragma-linguistique » lorsque des moyens linguistiques inappropriés sont utilisés, conduisant à l'incapacité d'exprimer l'objectif pragmatique visé, en particulier en raison de au transfert pragmatique, ou il peut être social en tant qu '«échec socio-pragmatique» lorsque le locuteur ne parvient pas à choisir quoi dire dans certaines circonstances sociales. L'article propose à la fin quelques moyens efficaces pour éviter ces deux types d'échecs pragmatiques.

Mots-clés: Echec socio-pragmatique, échec pragma-linguistique, communication interculturelle, transfert pragmatique, apprentissage-enseignement des langues étrangères

Introduction

Nowadays the need for intercultural interactions arises more than any time to meet the growing demands of societies in a globalised world, especially with the fast economic growth in international business, global tourism industry, and the mobility of tertiary-level students (Thomas 1994) . Communication is an attempt to exchange meaning, involving complicated, dynamic and multilayered process through which verbal messages like words are consciously sent, as well as non-verbal messages including facial expressions, the tone of the voice and the physical setting that the speaker might be unaware of communicating (Adler 2003). Encoding and decoding meaning becomes more challenging in cross-cultural communications in which a person from a particular cultural background sends a message to another person from a different cultural background. It is so often that the received message is not identical with the sent message, despite reaching a sufficient mastery of language, leading to misunderstandings, biases, embarrassments, and even strifes and conflicts. The aim of the present paper is to investigate why developing grammatical competence is not sufficient alone to succeed in transcultural communications. In another word, the study seeks to answer why cross-cultural communication breakdowns, or more precisely pragmatic failures, occur despite language proficiency, and how they can be avoided. Since the process of encoding and decoding largely depends on socio-cultural interpretations of meaning, it is suggested that pragmatic failures are more likely to occur when ignoring the cultural aspect of the target language. The method used throughout the study is purely descriptive, supported by rich literature from pioneer semioticians, cognitive linguists, socio-linguists, anthropologist-linguists and researchers. It starts first by reviewing notable theories related to the strong existing bonds between language and culture, including Saussure's Theory of Language, Langacker's cognitive views on domains, based on Saussure's structuralist perspectives, Rosch's Prototype Theory, Fillmore's Frame Semantic Theory, and Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis. Then, it examines the nature of pragma-linguistic failures and socio-pragmatic failures, illustrating with some dialogues' analyses as examples. At the end, it suggests some pedagogical proposals to improve foreign language learning and enhance cross-cultural communications, calling teachers and institutional curriculum designers to reform language educational policies to stress the importance of pragmatic competence to foreign language learners.

1. The interconnectedness between language and culture

To fully understand challenges in cross-cultural communications, it is necessary to cover first the deeply-rooted relation between language and culture as stressed by many experts in various fields. Anthropologists, for example, suggest that language, as a vital social behavior, is an important part of any country's culture, and it cannot be fully separated from it. Thus, any foreign language is not only a vocal behavior to respond to some stimuli as defined by physiologists, but it is also a significant key to the cultural heritage of that foreign country. Psychologists also emphasize the essential role of social system which can indirectly transmit attitudes, ethics and values through the process of learning the native language. Even interpretation of meanings is the result of the acquired knowledge and the total experiences gained within specific cultural environments where the interpreter has grown up. Therefore, it is suggested that the interpretation of the same meaning might be shared by individuals who belong to the same social group, as opposed to people who belong to different social systems. In another word, variations in interpretations depend largely on differences between social systems: the more diverse these systems are the more dissimilar interpretations of the same words and notions will be too, and vice versa. Saussure (1983), in *Course of General Linguistics*, stresses the point that language is a system of signs in which a connection is formed between sounds or images and concepts to make significant meanings. For instance, the sound, or more precisely "the signifier", of soap[soʊp]corresponds with a concept in the mind about an object used for washing or cleaning, which is referred to, in this case, as "the signified". More importantly, Saussure admits that the relation between the signifier and the signified is based on social conventions; thus, it is arbitrary, dynamic, and can change over time (Reda, 2016). This suggests also that the "signified" of a specific "signifier" is not all the time fixed as long as there are countless social conventions, especially when it comes to abstract things like "hope", "wisdom", "patience", which can, accordingly, be interpreted in varied ways as confirmed by Saussure: "If words stood for pre-existing concepts, they would all have exact equivalents in meaning from one language to the next; but this is not true" (Saussure 1974: 116).

The process of interpretation and encoding meanings is, indeed, very complicated as it is related to many uncontrollable variables. Some cognitive semantic approaches, based on Saussurian structuralist views, propose that there are some mental conceptual areas which include many networks of large-scale knowledge. Langacker (1986) suggests that these conceptual areas are hierarchically structured into low and high levels of concepts. He suggests also that meanings are formed only when these areas are evoked by signs, implying an implicit comparison with related concepts. For instance, the understanding of the hierarchal low concept NOSTRIL is relative to higher concepts like NOSE and FACE. This idea is, in fact, at the heart of Rosch's Prototype Theory, whose origins can be found in cognitive psychology, which suggests that concepts are gradually categorized according to their representation of central characteristics of the key concept (Rosch 1975), depending on resemblance to a perfect or ideal exemplar in the mind. For instance, eagles and robins are considered better prototypes of the concept "birds" than ostriches or penguins which cannot fly or perch in trees, simply because flying and perching in trees seem to be considered central characteristics of the concept "bird". Eleanor Rosch's prototype views revolutionized the classical and componential analysis studies suggested by Chomskian schools based on the principle of compositionality. She introduced new ideas to lexical semantics such as: generic, *real world versus ideal world*,

and *paragon* (Abbera 2006). Moreover, Eleanor Rosch concluded her extended studies of cross-cultural psychology and eastern psychology that human concepts' categorization of basic concrete objects tend to be similar even among members of different cultures, though it received some criticism. Recently, more attention has been given to study the impact of cultures on the way people think and perceive the world, with some specific emphasis on the influence of culture on categorization and semantic representation, stressing at the end the unavoidable cross-cultural differences in the processes of conceptualization and categorization (Unsworth et al., 2005).

Consistent with prior literature, Charles Fillmore's theory of Frame Semantics emphasizes that one can never fully understand a single word without having access to essential encyclopedic knowledge, or "frames", related to that word (Fillmore 1982). Understanding the concept "birthday", for example, cannot be completely separated from associated concepts like "party", "friends", "cakes", "songs", "gifts", etc. Even these concepts are related to other larger frames which make understanding concepts even more difficult to predict or determine, especially considering the fact that Fillmore, like Saussure, emphasizes the role of social dimensions and human experiences in forming conceptual areas. This may explain why concepts vary from one social group to another. To conclude, as long as concepts-making process is subjected to culturally non-controlled social conventions, language might always be shaped by culture. This conclusion about the interconnection between language and culture is further developed by Edward Sapir and his student Benjamin Lee Whorf in the Theory of Linguistic Relativity which appeared in the early twentieth century in American anthropology. It claims that every human being sees the world through his/her native language (Gilbert et al 2008; Levinson 2000; Lucy 1992; Whorf 1956). In other words, the spoken language, with its unconscious structure, can influence the way one thinks. Modern scholars divide this theory into two parts: linguistic relativity, and linguistic determinism. The first part maintains that languages which differ in structure and vocabulary convey different cultural meanings, while the second part, which is more extreme version of the theory, suggests that perception and comprehension of reality is determined by one's native language. This suggests also that people who speak the same language tend also to share the same culture. Thus, there is a correlation between language and culture as language shapes our thoughts. (Merrifield 1971; Sapir 1921). This also raises some questions about possible difficulties in cross-cultural communications or "pragmatic failures" as referred to, especially if one speaker is monolingual or too attached to his/her mother tongue language and s/he is unable to track the intending pragmatic force of his/her partner due to some cultural differences (Liebe-Harkort 1989).

2. Pragmatic failures among foreign language learners

The term "pragmatic failure" was firstly introduced by Jenny Thomas in an article entitled "*Cross-cultural Pragmatic failure*" in 1983, where she simply defined it as: "the inability to understand what is meant by what is said" (cited in Zhang 2021, 42). She also classified pragmatic failures into pragma-linguistic failures and socio-pragmatic failures (Zhang 2021). According to Thomas, the former occur when:

The pragmatic force mapped by a speaker onto a given utterance is systematically different from the force most frequently assigned to it by native speakers of the target language, or when speech act strategies are inappropriately transferred from L1 to L2 due to “differences in the linguistic encoding of pragmatic force.

Thomas 1983 as cited in Semino (2014:143)

The second, however, refer to: “the social conditions placed on language in use” (Thomas 1983 as cited in Semino 2014:143). Thus, it is assumed that pragma-linguistic failures are easier to tackle as they are only linguistic problems which can be simply overcome by correcting some grammatical errors. Most pragma-linguistic failures occur due to the negative pragmatic transfer from L1 to L2. Stated differently, pragma-linguistic failures take place when speakers rely on the norms of their first language and transfer them in intercultural communication in a second language where the norms are not the same (Kasper 1992). Negative pragmatic transfer may lead to pragma-linguistic failures, notably when issues of politeness, indirectness, and formality are involved and misjudged by interlocutors in cross-cultural interactions (White 1993). The use of indirect speech acts in English to make polite requests is a good example about how pragma-linguistic failures can occur, as illustrated by the following conversation between Sarah (A) ,British, and Kanji (B), Japanese.

(A) Can you pass me some sugar, please?

(B) Yes, I can. (finishing his meal).

Polite requests, which use indirect speech acts, are so often used in British culture to demonstrate kindness and politeness by making the demand less direct. This is usually misunderstood by non-native speakers, with limited cultural backgrounds of the target language, who ignore this social convention and interpret the above request as merely a question about the ability to pass some sugar. In addition to the use of indirect speech acts, language transfer may include also semantically or syntactically non-equivalent structures (Yusuf 2018), and lexical devices from the mother tongue language to the target language; thus, resulting in cultural breakdowns as in the following quoted dialogue (Richards & Sukwihat 1983, p. 116):

(A) Look what I have got for you! (a salary raise)

(B) Oh! I am sorry.

(A) Why sorry?

This dialogue is between a Japanese employee (B) and his American boss (A) who offers him a salary raise. The use of the word “sorry” which is employed in Japanese language to mean “thank you” is misinterpreted by (A) who, as an American, uses the word only to express an apology. Unlike pragma-linguistic failures which can be simply avoided by replacing some words or correcting some syntactic structures, Socio-pragmatic failures are more difficult to deal with because they stem from “cross-culturally different perceptions of what constitutes appropriate linguistic behaviour” (Thomas, 1983, p.99). It entails even changing people’s principles and beliefs (Jaworski 1994). The article of Thomas, in fact, shifted the interests of cross-cultural pragmatics to focus on challenges in transcultural communications, with a particular emphasis on socio-pragmatic failures and the impact of social backgrounds on the use of language. Riley (1989), for example, sees pragmatic failures as errors which “are the result of an interactant imposing the social rules of one culture on his communicative behavior in a situation where the social rules of another culture would be more appropriate” (p. 234). More precisely, socio-pragmatic failures occur as the social backgrounds of interlocutors affect the linguistic choice of

speakers in intercultural communications (Crystal 1989; Al-Hindawi & Mubarak, 2014). To better understand how breakdowns in transcultural communications occur due to socio-pragmatic, it is most useful to consider the following quoted dialogue between a Chinese student (A) and his American roommate (B):

A: You look pale. What's the matter?

B: I am feeling sick. A cold may be.

A: Go and see the doctor. Drink more water. Did you take any pills?

Chinese medicine works wonderful. Would you like to try? Put on more clothes. Have a good rest.

B: You're not my mother, are you?

Tang (2013:78)

This short conversation provides an example about breakdowns in cross-cultural communications due to socio-pragmatic failures resulting from differences between Chinese and American cultures. In Chinese culture, people are used to demonstrate care and some concerns to their loved ones, especially when it comes to diseases, through enquiring about the situation, offering help and suggesting some pieces of advice. This can be negatively interpreted in American culture as a suspicious behavior that may threaten one's privacy and independence. Therefore, it is essential to develop some pragmatic competences to avoid such breakdowns in cross-cultural communications.

3. The importance of pragmatic competence to overcome intercultural communication breakdowns

Pragmatic competence, as early introduced by Chomsky (1980), refers to "knowledge of conditions and manner of appropriate use, in conformity with various purposes" (p.224). Pragmatic competence, in the late twentieth century, was usually contrasted with the notion of "grammatical competence" which, according to Canale (1987), refers to the mastery of the use of lexical items, rules of syntax, morphology, semantics and phonology. In this comparison, pragmatic competence was seen as an essential model of communicative competence (Bagaric & Djigunović 2007). Chomsky emphasized that language users should possess some knowledge about how verbal language needs to correlate with some specific circumstances of use, because developing grammatical competence only is not sufficient to communicate as confirmed by Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998): "EFL learners may produce utterances that are perfectly grammatical, but they may violate social norms of the target language because they lack pragmatic competence to support grammatical competence" (cited in Barzani and Mohammadzadeh 2022). In the mid 1980s, more cognitively-oriented views were adopted by scholars and researchers in pragmatics, leading to the introduction of many models and accounts of communication, including the Theory of relevance—based on Gricean studies, with a specific focus on pragmatic competence (Domaneschi & Bambini, 2020). Pragmatic competence has been so often identified as a sociopragmatic competence before making a clear division between pragma-linguistic competence and socio-pragmatic competence (Thomas 1983; Leech 1983). The former stresses the possible linguistic options that can be performed by speakers, and the second refers to the ability to choose the most appropriate linguistic option to communicate, taking into consideration any specific setting or a pragmatic force (Ashoorpour & Azari 2014).

Since most pragmatic failures are caused by cultural differences between languages (Thomas 1983), it is useful to teach them to foreign language learners, along with the essential grammatical competence to successfully communicate with interlocutors with different socio-cultural backgrounds. Therefore, learners need first to be acquainted with key points in pragmatics such as the distinction between implicature and explicature, cooperative principles and maxims of conversation—with a particular emphasis on the Relevance Theory, presuppositions, the use of deixis and the different types of speech acts—locutionary acts, illocutionary acts, and perlocutionary acts as explained fully by Austin (1962). Second, they should be aware of issues related to indirectness, politeness, and taboos. As socio-cultural norms of the native language tend to influence speakers' performance when interacting in a foreign language, learners should also avoid negative pragmatic transfer from their native language because each language has its own specifications. In other words, mastering grammar rules only does not guarantee successful intercultural communications because language and culture are closely related. Learning the cultural aspects of the society should not be separated from learning the target language. Both are undoubtedly of paramount importance as a means to avoid breakdowns in intercultural communications. Teachers should also pay more attention to the need to teach pragmatic competence and integrate it in teaching curriculums, along with the different language aspects—especially that many researches agree that pragmatic competence can be taught (Barzani & Mohammadzadeh 2022; Holmes 1989; Davis 2007).

Conclusion

“How to learn a new foreign language?” remains always a problematic issue in linguistics that has been answered in different ways with the passage of time, thanks to the considerable development in many fields. Now, in the twenty-first century, and with the growing need for cross-cultural interactions in increasingly multicultural global society, it is no longer accepted that learning a foreign language is only through mastering grammar rules without any reference to culture that is represented by that language. There is, indeed, a deeply-rooted correlation between language and culture, as emphasized by influential theories, including Saussure's theory of signs, Fillmore's theory of Frame Semantics, and Rosch's Prototype Theory. Ignoring, or breaking, this simple rule may unavoidably cause socio-pragmatic and pragma-linguistic failures, leading to communication breakdowns as interlocutors misinterpret pragmatic forces. Thus, it is necessary that foreign language learners should be exposed to the foreign culture too.

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