Analysis of Pragmatic Failure from the Perspective of Adaptation

TANG Jingwei[a],*

[a]School of Foreign Language Studies, Shandong Jiaotong University, China.
* Corresponding author

Abstract

Pragmatic failure is an important research topic in cross-cultural communication. This article adopts Adaptation Theory and explains the root of pragmatic failure; that is pragmatic failure in verbal communication process occurs due to the fact that language users fail to make communicative language dynamically adapt to various factors of the communicative context.

Key words: Pragmatic failure; Adaptation theory; Context; Linguistic choice

INTRODUCTION

Bachman (1990) argues that the communicative competence is composed of grammatical competence, discourse competence and pragmatic competence. Therefore, ESL learners have to attach importance to the cultivation of pragmatic competence in order to improve communicative competence; Mastering a variety of pragmatic rules is a premise for the ESL learners to conduct decent, effective and successful communication and avoid failure of communication activities caused by the pragmatic failure.

In the current ESL teaching, teachers are concerned too much about teaching language knowledge and language structures while neglecting to cultivate ESL learners to use language properly. Consequently, after having mastered abundant knowledge and structures of the language, students may still encounter many difficulties and conflicts in communication. They tend to say some tactless words, although these words are of correct forms and right structures. Such an inappropriate way of using language would definitely result in the failure of communication activities, which is called Pragmatic Failure. Jenny Thomas thinks that as long as what is perceived by the listeners is different form what the speakers intend to convey, pragmatic failure occurs.

1. DEFINITION AND CLASSIFICATION OF PRAGMATIC FAILURE

1.1 Definition of Pragmatic Failure

Pragmatic failure was firstly coined by Jenny Thomas in her article *Cross-cultural Pragmatic Failure* in 1983. She defined and classified pragmatic failure in the essay and set a theoretical foundation for the analysis of pragmatic failure in cross-cultural communication. Afterwards, pragmatic failure has been a focus of cross-cultural pragmatics.

Jenny Thomas argues that pragmatic failure refers to "the inability to understand what is meant by what is said" (1983, p.22). Exactly speaking, Thomas only tries to analyze what pragmatic failure is like and doesn't give a specific concept to define what pragmatic failure is.

Many other scholars base their research on Thomas' analysis of pragmatic failure and supplement the definition of pragmatic failure. Ziran HE(2009, p.26) argues that "*pragmatic failure does not refer to the general wording and phrasing errors that appear in language use, but rather refers to the failure to reach the expected result*

because of speaking improperly, expressing ideas in unidiomatic way."

Qian (1997, p.195) believes:

> *When the speaker uses sentences with correct symbol relations in verbal communication, but speaks ill-timed, improperly or not habitually, he tends to unconsciously violate interpersonal norms, social conventions, or run counter to the sense of worth in the culture of target language by neglecting the time and space of communication, the identity and status of speakers and the occasion of communication, which leads to the barrier of the communication and results in the interruption of the communication and failure to achieve a satisfactory desired communicative aim. Failure of this kind is called pragmatic failure.*

1.2 Classifications of Pragmatic Failure

According to researches from different perspectives, classifications of pragmatic failure are different. Ziran, HE (1996) divides pragmatic failure into "*intralingual pragmatic failure*" and "*interlanguage pragmatic failure*". Another scholar (LIU, 2008) suggests that pragmatic failure should be divided into "*listeners' pragmatic failure*" and "*speakers' pragmatic failure*". One of the most accepted one is put forward by Thomas (1983) in *Cross-cultural Pragmatic Failure*. She categorizes the pragmatic failure as "*pragmalinguistic failure*" and "*sociopragmatic failure*". Pragmalinguistic failure is usually caused by differences among languages and their reciprocal influences. Jenny Thomas thinks that "*pragmalinguistic failure occurs when the pragmatic force mapped on to a linguistic token or structure is systematically different from that normally assigned to it by native speakers.*"(1983, p.35) Socipragmatic failure refers to the improperly adopted language forms due to speakers not knowing the social protocols, etiquette rules and social customs in listeners' culture during their communication. In other words, Sociopragmatic failure occurs when the speakers and listeners fail to adopt the proper communicative strategies or choose appropriate language forms because of not realizing the two party's cultural difference or social custom difference. In the communicative process, the social status of both sides, the language context and social setting of the communication are major factors leading to pragmatic failure. Nature of the subjects of the communication and the degree of familiarity with the topics affect the generation of sociopragmatic failure. Pragmatic failure tends to result in the interruption, even the failure of communication, and many scholars believe that outcomes of the sociopragmatic failure are generally more serious than those of pragmalinguistic failure. This is because one party encountering the pragmalinguistic failure are more likely to believe that the failure results from the defects of the other party's language skills and abilities, and thus have a higher degree of tolerance.

At present, the research on pragmatic failure is mainly limited to the field of cross-culture. The range of research on it remains to be expanded and the study needs to integrate cognition, sociology, culture and the two parties of communication. Only with all the factors above taken into consideration, can the root of pragmatic failure be found out and will a corresponding way be found. This is the very point why the author tries to explore the pragmatic failure form the perspective of adaptation theory.

2. ADAPTATION THEORY

Adaptation theory was firstly put forward by Verschueren in 1999. He argues that the process of using language is also a process of choosing language with feasible principles and strategies. The reason language users can make linguistic choice is that language has the nature of variability, negotiability and adaptability. Variability makes it possible for language users to choose language. Negotiability endows language with variety and feasibility. Adaptability leads to the aim of communication after making negotiation and choice. Adaptation of language is one of the characteristics of human language as well as the starting point to conduct pragmatic analysis. Adaptation of language includes the following:

• Adaptation to context: varieties of factors considered in the process of making linguistic choice.

• Adaptation to language structures: adaptation in different levels of language and language structures.

• Dynamics of adaptation: the process of making linguistic choice and negotiation is also a process of dynamic adaptation.

• Salience of adaptation: the degree of awareness of the communicators when making linguistic choice.

According to Verschueren, the process of making linguistic choice is also a dynamic process that language structures adapt to their context. Context is composed of language context and communicative context. Language context refers to the language means that language users choose to achieve the aim of communication. Communicative context is non-language context, which includes language users, the physical world, social world and mental world of language users. Language users are the focus of communication. The contextual factors in the physical, social and mental world need to be motivated by the cognitive activities of the language users. In other words, the strategies of the language users have to adapt to the physical, social and mental world of the both parties of communication.

Adaptation to the context focuses on the adaptation of the linguistic choice to the communicative context in the process of communication, which could be demonstrated as follows (Figure 1):
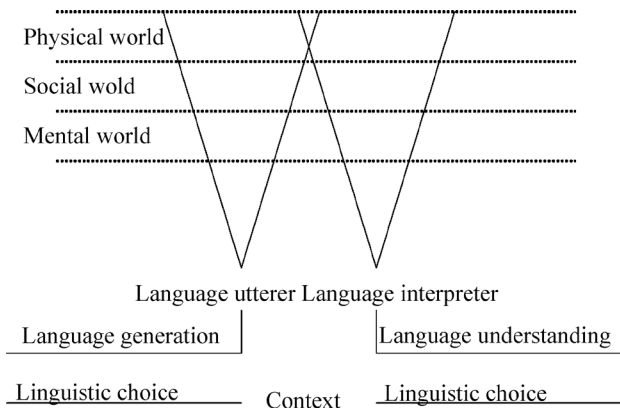
Physical world

Social wold

Mental world

Language utterer Language interpreter

Language generation | Language understanding

Linguistic choice   Context   Linguistic choice

Figure 1

3. ANALYSIS OF PRAGMATIC FAILURE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ADAPTATION

In the current study on pragmatics, researchers usually adopt cooperation principles or politeness principles to analyze the reason of pragmatic failure, which regards the speaker's intentions (language output) as a core, that is, principles of cooperation and politeness strategies are followed to achieve the purpose of communication. As is known, communication is initiated by both sides with neither party ignored. Output and input of language are equally important. Neither principles of cooperation nor politeness principles can separately explain pragmatic failure, in that they it might ignore the problems caused by language understanding to explain a result of pragmatic failure. Verschueren's adaptation theory can make more reasonable explanation to pragmatic failure from the perspective of both the utterers' and interpreters'. Compared with cooperation and politeness principles, adaptation theory can define context more comprehensively. Adaptation theory scientifically explains the internal relationships of linguistic context and communicative context. It says communicative context and linguistic context should be adapted to dynamically when linguistic choice is made in the process of communication. The classification of context and the description of language in adaptation theory integrate cognitive, social, cultural aspects as well as other aspects of language communication, breaking through the single category of culture and making a comprehensive interpretation of pragmatic failure. Adaptation theory goes beyond the traditional research model of pragmatics. It believes that language has the nature of variability, negotiability and adaptability and the use of language is also the choice of language. Verschueren' adaptation theory thinks the use of language should be based on contextual adaptation, structural adaptation, dynamic adaptation and salience of adaptation, which presents a complete theoretical framework for the study on pragmatic research and

puts forward a practical way for a variety of pragmatic phenomenon including pragmatic failure. On view of what is stated above, the thesis explores to analyze the root of pragmatic failure from the perspective of adaptation.

3.1 Failure to Adapt to the Language Users

Language users are those who participate in conversations as well as those who are related to the content of conversations. The thesis mainly focuses on the two parties of communication for convenience of discussion herein. In verbal communication, the age, position, identity, value and relationships of both sides of communication as well as some other factors should be taken into consideration. When making linguistic choices, language users should try to adapt to these factors; otherwise it would lead to the interruption or the failure of communication.

> Example 1: A black journalist was sent to have an interview with a black housewife. The host of the black family opened the door and talked to the journalist with smiling (John Gumperz, 1982)
> Husband: So y're gonna check out ma ol lady, hah?
> Interviewer: Ah, no, I only came to get some information.
> Smiling face of the host disappeared instantly and he turned back without saying anything before calling his wife

Pragmatic failure could be found here if we examine the conversation carefully. The black journalist ignored the verbal style of the host with a typical way of opening remarks among the blacks. The journalist should respond to the host with such typical Black English as "Yea, I'ma git some info". When he speaks Standard English, he fails to adapt to the speaking style of the host and makes the host a bit embarrassed, resulting in the failure of communication.

> Example 2: John wants to borrow a bicycle from his friend
> John: There wouldn't I suppose be any chance of your being able to lend me your bicycle for just a few minutes, would there?
> John's friend became annoyed because he thought John was laughing at him.

The reason to cause pragmatic failure here roots in John's failure to adapt to the relationship between his friend and him when he chooses such formal expressions.

3.2 Failure to Adapt to the Physical World

Physical world mainly refers to the reference of time and space. Time includes event time, time of utterance and reference time. Space is composed of the absolute spatial relations and relative spatial relations. In addition, physical world includes the communicators' poses, gestures, appearances and physiological characteristics. Neglecting to adapt to the factors above tend to result in making wrong linguistic choice and failure of communication.

Example 3: A Chinese female graduate takes an interview with an American boss for a job application. In the interview, the interviewer has been smiling and gazing at the graduate. For sake of shyness, the graduate keeps avoiding eye contact with the interviewer consciously

or unconsciously. Although, she feels good about herself in the interview, she is told she is not employed. Later, the graduate learns that the failure is attributed to her avoidance of eye contact, which leaves bad impression on the interviewer. Chinese tend not to gaze at others when talking, while Americans think that gazing means politeness and confidence. What could be learned from the example is that nonverbal factors play major roles in making linguistic choices in many cases. Failure to adapt to the nonverbal factors in communication may lead to the failure of communication.

3.3 Failure to Adapt to the Social World

Social world refers to occasions of communication, social setting and norms and principles of communication which regulate the communicators' speech acts. Linguistic choice of the language users must meet the communication norms in the corresponding social occasions, social settings and social community. Culture is a major factor among all the factors of the social world in that language users live in a specific society and their speech acts are inevitably subject to the norms of society and culture. Therefore, failure to adapt to these norms and principles of communication may lead to pragmatic failure.

Example 4: A Chinese student (A) meets his friend (B) who is an American in the campus and they have a talk.

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

B: I am feeling sick. A cold, maybe.

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?

In Chinese culture, people tend to show their concern with others and express friendliness by asking about others' affairs and giving suggestions, which is sharply different from that in American culture in which people focus on privacy and do not mean to accept too much care and concern. Hence, A's concern seems to be unnecessary and is suspicious of invading others' privacy. Failure to notice the cultural difference and make necessary adaptation to the different social norms might cause pragmatic failure.

3.4 Failure to Adapt to the Mental World

Mental world is mainly related to the personality, emotions, desires and intentions and other cognitive and emotional aspects of the two parties of communication. The process of interpreters' making linguistic choice is also a dynamic process to adapt to the addressee's and his own mental world. Result of the failure to adapt to the mental context of the addressee would range from failure of the communication to the misunderstanding of the addressee.

Example 5: A Chinese visiting scholar (A) brought his 5-year-old daughter (B) to visit one of the staff (C) of international office of an American university.

B: Good morning, grandpa!

(C looks a little puzzled with the greeting "grandpa" and B tries to explain it)

A: Sorry. My daughter is from China and you know it's polite to greet an old gentleman with "grandpa" in China.

C: What? Do you mean that I am old? I am not old, and I can do my job well.

In Chinese culture, old people are always respected, while in American culture few people would like to admit they are old since old age means "useless" or "not qualified". That's why the American gentleman feels hurt when the visiting scholar thinks he is old. Failure to adapt to the mental world of the addressee might cause pragmatic failure.

CONCLUSION

The process of using language is the process of making linguistic choices. When making the linguistic choice, language users should follow highly flexible principles to adapt to language and context. Linguistic choice must adapt to a variety of contextual factors in that different contextual factors require making different linguistic choice, including language styles, language structures. If language users fail to make language adapt to the context--- failure to adapt to language users, physical world, social world, and mental world, it will result in the inappropriate use of language which would lead to pragmatic failure. In this paper, adaptation theory explains the causes of pragmatic failure that pragmatic failure derives from language users' failure to make linguistic choice adapt to a variety of contextual factors.

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