

A tentative analysis of pragmatic failure from the perspective of Relevance Theory

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Abstract: *Relevance Theory (RT) assumes that human beings rely on one single interpretive principle, i.e. the principle of relevance, which they invariably use in their attempt to select the interlocutors' intended interpretation. This principle states that the hearer's interpretation is a process of relevance searching consistent with the speaker's presumption of optimal relevance, which provides an optimal balance of cognitive effects and mental effort. As it will be shown in this paper, this claim is valid for any type of ostensive communication. Compared with other pragmatics theories, RT possesses its own advantages in explaining pragmatic failure, giving consideration to both the speaker and the hearer in verbal communication. This paper applies Relevance Theory (RT) to a qualitative analysis and explores the causes of and measures to avoid or remedy pragmatic failure by using RT. It also tries to prove the interpreting force of RT. Based on the principle, we propose the definition of pragmatic failure and divide it roughly into communicators' misunderstanding of the deixis, propositional meaning and pragmatic force of the utterance. We also find out the root cause of pragmatic failure which is the inconsistency of cognitive environments of the communicators during their relevance-seeking interpretation. Furthermore, we suggest some measures to reduce or avoid pragmatic failure for the readers.*

Keywords: *Relevance Theory, pragmatic failure, classification, causes, remedies*

1. Introduction

Verbal communication is based on the assumption that whatever we say will be understood as it was intended. Generally speaking, people understand each other in most cases. However, we cannot be sure that we understand each other in every case. In interpreting an utterance, we often have a range of assumptions according to our belief, our encyclopaedic knowledge and our cognitive abilities. When our assumption does not match the speaker's intended meaning, pragmatic failure is likely to occur.

Whenever pragmatic failure occurs, we often misunderstand each other. Being misunderstood is always frustrating while misunderstanding others can often lead to embarrassment. Moreover, when we misunderstand each other, we are likely to react in inappropriate ways, which might disrupt the course of communication or even cause serious conflicts. Knowing that it is often difficult to make ourselves understood, we are tempted to avoid communication with those whom we are not familiar with. Yet, whether we like it or not, with the development of socialization and globalization, we are now required to communicate with individuals from different parts of the world whose perspectives are radically different from ours. Thus, we can see pragmatic failure, including misunderstanding as its by-product, often forms an obstacle for communication. Therefore, it is important to do some research on pragmatic failure.

1.1 The Significance of the Study

Levinson (1983: 376) notes that there is considerable room for cross-cultural misunderstanding. There is no doubt that both grammatical error and pragmatic failure may hinder communication. As Thomas says: "While grammatical error may reveal a speaker to be a less than proficient language user, pragmatic failure reflects badly on him/her as a person" (1983: 97). Since the grammatical error appears to be superficial and the hearer can quickly realize it, the communication is likely to continue. However, the hearer does not have any reason to put up with the pragmatic failure made by a person who speaks English fluently. Therefore, it can be said safely that to some extent, pragmatic failure is much more serious than grammatical error. Because pragmatic failure is related to whether a speaker is speaking in a suitable manner at an appropriate time and in the right place, more attention should be given to it. It is

worth making efforts to explore pragmatic failure on the basis of linguistic theories, which will help us better understand the essence of it.

1.2 *The Rationale of the Study*

Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995) shows us the ostensive-inferential model, which leads the study of communication to cognition. They assume that speaker's meaning (explicature and implicature) is obtained by inference. Relevance Theory holds that every act of ostension carries a guarantee of relevance, which makes manifest the intension behind ostension. In general, we can say that the process of utterance understanding is a process of seeking relevance between newly presented information and its contextual assumptions, which requires some efforts of the hearer.

2. Pragmatic Failure

2.1 *The Definitions of Pragmatic Failure*

Thomas (1983) was the first to propose the notion "pragmatic failure". Thereafter, this issue has been studied by many linguists and scholars. Then what is the definition of pragmatic failure?

Jenny Thomas defines pragmatic failure as "the inability to understand what is meant by what is said" (1983: 92), which has nothing to do with grammatical mistake. And she holds that pragmatic failure comes from the inappropriate ways of speaking. What's more, she notes: "pragmatic failure has occurred on any occasion on which H (the hearer) perceives the force of S's (the speaker's) utterance as other than S intended s/he should perceive it" (1983: 94). Her point is that pragmatic failure will occur if:

- a: H perceives the force of S's utterance as stronger or weaker than S intended s/he should perceive it;
- b: H perceives as an order an utterance which S intended s/he should perceive as a request;
- c: H perceives S's utterance as ambivalent where S intended no ambivalence;
- d: S expects H to be able to infer the force of his/her utterance, but is relying on a system of knowledge or beliefs which S and H do not, in fact, share.

(Jenny Thomas, 1983: 94)

(1) (illustrating a)

A: Do you know who caught fire last night?

B: No, it's not me.

A: Oh, I don't mean that.

A only wanted to know who had caught fire, but B perceived the force of A's utterance to be stronger than what A had intended. As a result, B gave A an answer that A did not intend to get.

(illustrating b)

Boss: Are you free this evening? Will you come to my house to have a chat?

John: I will come. (John was not free in fact, but he perceived the utterance of his boss as an order.)

(illustrating c)

A: There's a football match tonight. Would you please go with me?

B: Ok.

A: (Later on) Are you sure you want to go?

B: Ok, let's not go. I've something to read. (B perceived A's utterance as ambivalent, so he changed his decision.)

(illustrating d)

A: Do you like rugby?

B: I am a New Zealander, you know.

A: (confused)

A was confused because A and B did not share the same system of knowledge or beliefs. A did not know that New Zealanders love rugby.

Communication is an interactional process, which involves two participants. Both participants take the responsibility to ensure the success of communication. Sperber and Wilson point out that "A speaker who intends an utterance to be interpreted in a particular way must also expect the hearer to supply a context which allows that interpretation to be recovered. A mismatch between the context envisaged by the speaker and the one actually used by the hearer may result in a misunderstanding" (1995: 16). Thus,

pragmatic failure with misunderstanding as its by-product may be caused by the speaker, or by the hearer, or by both.

Now we may tentatively define pragmatic failure as follows: the hearer misunderstands the speaker's meaning because of the speaker's inappropriate utterance and/or the hearer's misinterpretation.

2.2 The Interpreting Force of Relevance Theory in Explaining Pragmatic Failure

The Relevance Theory proposed by Sperber and Wilson has made up these defects. According to them, the process of understanding is the process of seeking relevance between newly presented information and its contextual assumptions. There are two parameters for us to judge whether an utterance is relevant or not. They are processing effort and contextual effect. In their opinion, the more contextual effects, the greater the relevance; the less processing effort, the greater the relevance. Here we can see Relevance Theory highlights processing effort of the speaker. At the same time, the ostensive-inferential model of Relevance Theory includes both the implicit and explicit aspects of verbal communication. In a word, Relevance Theory has its own interpreting force in studying verbal communication, including pragmatic failure in verbal communication.

3. The Classification of Pragmatic Failure from the Perspective of Relevance Theory

Thomas (1983) gives pragmatic failure a definition. Besides this, she also classifies it into pragmalinguistic failure and sociopragmatic failure. She points out that in cross-cultural communication pragmalinguistic failure "arises when the pragmatic force mapped by 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", while sociopragmatic failure "stems from cross-culturally different perceptions of what constitutes appropriate linguistic behavior" (1983: 100-108). For example:

(A is a foreign teacher from America, while B is a Chinese student.)

A: Thanks a lot. That's a great help.

B: Never mind.

What B wants to say is "Not at all" or "It's my pleasure". However, due to the influence of Chinese way of the replying to other's gratitude, he adopts a literal translation "Never mind" from Chinese (meiguanxi). But this expression is only used when others apologize to you in English.

This example reminds us that each culture possesses its own way of expression. Thus, we should bear in mind that we'd better try to avoid violating the pragmatics principles or conventions of the other culture.

In the enlightenment of explicature and implicature mentioned in RT, we can divide pragmatic failure into communicators' misunderstanding of the deixis, propositional meaning and pragmatic force of the utterance.

3.1 Misunderstanding of Deixis

If the hearer misunderstands the thing which the deixis refers to, he/she will misunderstand the speaker's intended meaning. At this time, pragmatic failure arises.

Hemingway (1933) wrote a novel *Winner Take Nothing*. In the novel, there is a conversation between the father and the son, which goes like this:

(The son had a cold at that time. As the doctor told his father that his (the son's) body temperature is 102 °F (39 °C), the son thought that he would die because he had no idea about the difference between the Fahrenheit and Celsius temperature. He (the son) tried to behave bravely before his father, hiding his dread toward death.)

Father: It's nothing to worry.

Son: I don't worry, but I can't keep from thinking.

Father: Don't think. Just take it easy.

Son: I'm taking it easy.

(Hemingway, 1933: 37)

In this conversation, the father used the phrase "take it easy" to console his son, but the son thought "it" referred to his (the son's) death. Thus, the son was frightened although he behaved as if he did not

care about his (the son's) disease. In fact, pragmatic failure occurred between the son and his father due to the son's misunderstanding of the deixis "it".

3.2 Misunderstanding of Propositional Meaning

If the hearer fails to understand the meaning of a word, a phrase or even a whole sentence, he/she will misunderstand the propositional meaning of the speaker's utterance. Then pragmatic failure will occur. For example:

(There is a fellow passenger on a long-distance coach. And he asks the driver what time the coach gets to Birmingham.)

The passenger: (to the driver of the coach) Could you tell me when we get to Birmingham, please?

Driver: Don't worry, love, it's a big place—I don't think it's possible to miss it.

(Thomas, 1983: 94)

In this conversation between the passenger and the driver, the driver misunderstands the meaning of "when", which results in the pragmatic failure. Concretely speaking, the passenger wants the driver to tell her the time of arriving in Birmingham (she uses "when" clause as an object clause), while the driver misinterprets "when" clause as an adverbial clause of time. According to the driver's understanding, the moment the coach reaches Birmingham, he reminds the passenger of their arriving. We can see the hearer misunderstands the propositional meaning of the speaker's utterance and then pragmatic failure arises in this example.

3.3 Misunderstanding of Pragmatic Force

Pragmatic force mainly refers to the implicature of an utterance. It is indeterminate and depends heavily on the cognitive assumptions of the communicators (speaker and hearer). It is expressed in an indirect way in most cases. Thus, if the hearer cannot understand the pragmatic force of the speaker's utterance, pragmatic failure is likely to occur. For example:

(An American woman was visiting Israel. One evening she went to the flat of one of her friends. There was a conversation between the American woman and the host.)

Host: What do you like to drink?

The American woman: Well, I've been on whisky all day.

(The American woman intended to indicate indirectly that, having been drinking whisky previously, she would prefer to stick with whisky. Unfortunately, the host misinterpreted her indirectness and thought that, as she has been on whisky all day, she didn't want any more to drink.)

Host: (smiled and walked away)

The American woman: (confused and embarrassed)

In this example, the American did not present her intended meaning directly but in an ambiguous way, which results in the misinterpretation of the host. In other words, the contextual assumptions of the host and the American woman were different, which leads to the pragmatic failure.

In a word, this paper divides pragmatic failure into three types: communicators' misunderstanding of Deixis, propositional meaning and pragmatic force of the utterance.

4. The Causes of Pragmatic Failure

Since not all communicators can pay attention to the fuzziness of language and coincide in cognitive environments, pragmatic failure is unavoidable.

4.1 On the Speaker's Part

Whenever the speaker produces an utterance, he/she must first take the hearer into consideration. If he/she fails to do so or makes some wrong assumptions, pragmatic failure is likely to occur.

4.1.1 Overestimation of Hearer's Resources

According to Sperber and Wilson (1995), in aiming at relevance, the speaker must make some assumptions about the hearer's cognitive abilities and contextual resources, which will necessarily be reflected in what she chooses to make explicit and what she chooses to leave implicit in verbal

communication. A speaker aiming at optimal relevance will leave implicit everything her hearer can be trusted to supply with less effort than would be needed to process an explicit prompt. The more information she leaves implicit, the greater the degree of mutual understanding she makes it manifest that she takes to exist between her and the hearer. Of course, if she overestimates the degree of mutual understanding, there is a risk of making her utterance harder or even impossible to understand. For example:

(In a hospital, a doctor speaks to the mother who takes her child to see the doctor. The doctor explains the child's disease to the mother who lacks medical knowledge.)

The doctor: Morse's Disease is one of a small number of known diverse diseases in which the primary and secondary stages are caused by the two separate viruses or by two morphologically distinct stages of virus. The primary virus designated TK-112 retards diffusion of beta-keto acids from cells, particularly in the epidermis. The secondary virus, TK-113.....

The mother: (confused)

In this dialogue, the doctor overestimates the mother's ability to understand medical terms. To some extent, the doctor neglects the fact that most of the patients and their relatives who go to see the doctor do not have enough medical knowledge. In other words, the doctor overestimates the degree of mutual understanding between him and the mother. Ultimately, this kind of overestimation results in the mother's confusion about her child's disease and pragmatic failure occurs.

4.1.2 Underestimation of Hearer's Resources

Like overestimation, speaker's underestimation of hearer's resources can cause pragmatic failure as well. In communication, especially in cross-cultural communication, language users usually hold different values, which guide their behavior. In English-speaking countries, people value individualism, which emphasizes the importance of independence. They do not want others to tell them what they should do and what they should not do. However, in China, people value collectivism, which emphasizes the harmonious relationship in interpersonal communication. In many cases, they will directly make comment on others' personal affairs and give their advice to show concern for others. The following conversation between a Chinese student and his American classmate demonstrates this point.

(Xiao Ming, a Chinese student, was studying in America. One day, he visited Peter, his American classmate, who had caught a cold.)

Peter: What a pity. I can not play football with you to beat Class Two this week.

Xiao Ming: I am sorry to hear that. I think you should take pills on time and drink more water. Besides, you should wear more clothes and rest more ...

Peter: (uncomfortable) ...

In this conversation between the two classmates, due to Xiao Ming's ignorance of Peter's value, Xiao Ming interferes with Peter's personal affairs by telling Peter what to do. To some extent, in Peter's opinion, Xiao Ming underestimates Peter's ability to deal with the disease by himself. This is the reason why Peter feels uncomfortable.

4.2 On the Hearer's Part

Once an utterance is produced, it depends on the hearer to interpret it. If the hearer lacks the ability of correctly establishing the relevance between the utterance and the intended meaning of the speaker, then pragmatic failure will arise.

4.2.1 Inability to Establish Potential Relevance

Sperber and Wilson state that humans are not in the business of simply assessing the relevance of new information. They try to process information as productively as possible. That is to say, they try to obtain from each new item of information as great a contextual effect as possible for as small a processing effort as possible. The assessment of relevance is not the goal of the comprehension process, but only a means to an end, the end being to maximize the relevance of any information being processed. It is not that first the context is determined and then relevance is assessed. On the contrary, people hope that the assumption being processed is relevant (or else they would not bother to process it at all), and they try to select a context which will justify that hope: a context which will maximize relevance. In verbal communication in particular, it is relevance which is treated as given, and context is treated as a variable (1995: 141-142).

In some cases, the communicator's utterances seem irrelevant to the audience, but in fact there is a kind of potential relevance between the speaker's utterance and his intension. Just because of the hearer's inability to find the relevance, communication ends in failure. For example:

(Two students are talking about their English teacher. At this time, the teacher is coming.)

Student A: I don't like our English teacher because his oral English is so poor.

Student B: I think Chongqing is a beautiful city.

Student A: (confused)

Student B's comment on Chongqing seems to take no notice of Student A's criticism of the English teacher. In other words, B's response appears to be irrelevant to A's comment, but in fact it is highly relevant. B's switching the topic from the English teacher to Chongqing is just to remind A that the teacher is approaching and A should stop talking about the teacher. However, A is not aware of this point and cannot establish correspondence between B's remark and his intension. Therefore, A feels confused. In this case, pragmatic failure occurs.

4.2.2 Misunderstanding of the Implicated Premise and Drawing Incorrect Implicated Conclusion

Sperber and Wilson argue that implicated premises must be supplied by the hearer, who must either retrieve them from memory or construct them by developing assumption schemas retrieved from memory. What makes it possible to identify such premises as implicatures is that they lead to an interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance, and that they are manifestly the most easily accessible premises to do so. Implicated conclusions are deduced from the explicatures of the utterance and the context. What makes it possible to identify such conclusions as implicatures is that the speaker must have expected the hearer to derive them, or some of them, given that she intended her utterance to be manifestly relevant to the hearer (1995: 195). Thus, implicated premises and conclusions are both identifiable as parts of the first inferable interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance. Sperber and Wilson also say that implicatures are merely made manifest by the act of communication (again on the further assumption that the speaker is trustworthy). Some implicatures are made so strongly manifest that the hearer can scarcely avoid recovering them. Others are made less strongly manifest (1995: 197). It is enough that the hearer should pay attention to some of these weaker implicatures for the relevance of the intended interpretation to become manifest. For instance:

(In *A Dream of Red Mansions*, Tai-yu is a beautiful but narrow-minded, sensitive girl. She pays too much attention to what others say and can be easily hurt by others' words. Nearly all the people around her know this, so they are cautious about choosing words when speaking to Tai-yu. However, sometimes some of them fail to do so and hurt her unconsciously. Here is a dialogue between Tai-yu and Mrs. Chou, the wife of Chou-rui who brings some flowers for Tai-yu.)

Tai-yu: Am I the only one getting these? Or have the other girls been given some too?

Mrs. Chou: Each of the young ladies has some. These two are for you. Miss.

Tai-yu smiling bitterly: I might have known. I wouldn't get mine till the others have taken their pick.

(Yang Hsien-yi, *Gladys Yang*, 1987: 104)

Tai-yu misunderstands Mrs. Chou's remark "Each of the young ladies has some. These two are for you. Miss." due to her sensitivity. In other words, Tai-yu misunderstands Mrs. Chou's implicated premise: bringing happiness to Tai-yu with the flowers. Then Tai-yu draws the incorrect implicated conclusion that Mrs. Chou gives the good-quality flowers to others and leaves the worst to her. But in fact, Mrs. Chou does not differentiate the flowers. Thus, pragmatic failure arises here.

4.2.3 Inability to Distinguish Explicature from Implicature

Explicature is an explicitly communicated assumption, while implicature is an implicated assumption. Explicature expresses the surface meaning of the utterance; implicature gives the hearer more freedom to recover the speaker's intention in certain context. Sometimes the hearer cannot distinguish explicature from implicature, which results in pragmatic failure. For example:

(It is raining outside and one eleven-year old boy wants to go out. The following is a dialogue between his mother and him.)

Mother: Where are your boots?

Boy: In the closet.

Mother (angrily): I want you to put them on right now.

(Gumperz, 1982: 45)

The explicit content of the mother's question is to ask her son about the location of the boots, but the implicit content of the utterance is to request the child to fetch the boots by himself. Unexpectedly, the child does not work out his mother's intention (the implicature of his mother's utterance), and takes the literal meaning of the utterance as his mother's intention. Thus, pragmatic failure comes out.

Here is another example:

(A husband and his wife are at home. The wife brings a cup of coffee to his husband.)

Husband: Did you put sugar in the coffee?

Wife: I don't think so. Does it taste as if it is?

In this conversation, the wife interprets her husband's question as an inquiry, but in fact, her husband is blaming her for not putting sugar in the coffee. In other words, the wife does not get the implicature of her husband: her husband wants her to admit her mistake and add some sugar to his coffee. Thus, if the hearer cannot distinguish the explicature from the implicature or cannot recognize the implicature of the speaker, pragmatic failure will occur.

4.3 Inconsistency in Cognitive Environments of the Communicators

The cause of pragmatic failure happening in many cases lies in the inconsistency of cognitive environments of the speaker and the hearer.

4.3.1 The Communicators' Lack of Lexical Knowledge

Words and expressions may have different meanings in different situations as well as in different cultures. Many Chinese words and expressions seem to be identical with their English counterparts in meaning. However, they possess different pragmatic implication and function. Here is an example, which shows this point.

(One day, Xiao Qiang, a Chinese student, had a free talk with his foreign teacher, David, who came from America.)

Xiao Qiang: Is your wife an intellectual?

David: Well, no, she is an engineer. (confused)

In China, the term "zhishifenzi" is taken as the counterpart of its English version "intellectual" by most people, but in fact, they have different connotations. In China, the term "zhishifenzi" covers a much wider range of people who have received high education, such as teachers, college students, doctors, lawyers and engineers. Whereas in English-speaking countries, "intellectual" has a narrow scope and mainly refers to college professors or those who have similar high achievement in academic field. Sometimes, "intellectual" is even used in its derogatory sense: it refers to those people who are engaged in empty thinking and theorizing, and are unable to solve practical problems. Due to the above difference we have mentioned between "zhishifenzi" and "intellectual", David differentiates his wife's career from "intellectual" in haste. This kind of embarrassment or pragmatic failure is caused by Xiao Qiang's lack of the lexical knowledge of the word "intellectual" and its Chinese counterpart "zhishifenzi".

4.3.2 The Communicators' Lack of Encyclopaedic Knowledge

If the communicators want to succeed in communication, especially in cross-cultural communication, they should share the same language as well as the same or similar background knowledge. This kind of knowledge is called encyclopaedic knowledge in Relevance Theory. Otherwise, if the communicators do not share some encyclopaedic knowledge, pragmatic failure is likely to occur.

To sum up, due to the fault of the speaker and the hearer, pragmatic failure frequently occurs in verbal communication. However, since we have found the causes of pragmatic failure, we can seek measures to reduce or avoid it. Thus, the next part of this chapter presents some measures to reduce or avoid pragmatic failure.

4.4 Measures Taken to Reduce or Avoid Pragmatic Failure

The purpose of this study is not only to prove the interpreting force of Relevance Theory in probing into the causes of pragmatic failure, but also to shed some light on how to reduce or avoid it (pragmatic failure) in verbal communication.

4.4.1 Enlarging Lexical and Encyclopaedic Knowledge

Sperber and Wilson point out that the only way to make sure that misunderstanding could not arise would be to make sure that the context actually used by the hearer is always identical to the one envisaged by the speaker (1995: 17). As a by-product of pragmatic failure, misunderstanding should be solved in this way. Thus, pragmatic failure may require the same solution. The communicators should manage to enlarge their lexical, encyclopaedic, cultural and social knowledge in order to converge as much as possible in their cognitive environments. The ultimate goal of doing so is to reduce or avoid the possibility of pragmatic failure.

4.4.2. Taking Context into Consideration

Sperber and Wilson indicate that the context of an utterance is the set of premises used in interpretation (1986:15). It is assumed that the hearer starts with an initial context left over from his processing of the preceding utterance. He calculates the contextual effects of the utterance. If the contextual effects are not enough to make the utterance worth his attention, he expands the context to include what is going on in the immediate environment or some related common-sense knowledge, obtaining further effects. He repeats the process until he has enough effects to make the utterance optimally relevant in a way the speaker could manifestly have foreseen. At that point, he arrives at an interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance. Then he should stop. As we know, context plays an important role in the process of utterance interpretation. Thus, we should pay more attention to it.

5. Conclusion

Since pragmatic failure is inevitable, what we can do is to classify it, probe into its causes and find out ways to solve it. The above-mentioned measures are just tentatively proposed solutions. Hopefully they will be helpful for readers to deepen understanding of pragmatic failure and reduce or avoid pragmatic failure in verbal communication in the future.

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