



PRAGMATIC FAILURE AND MISUNDERSTANDING IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION: A THEORETICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Intercultural communication is a vital component of today's globalized world. Besides linguistic proficiency, intercultural communication often faces misunderstandings, pragmatic failures, and communication breakdowns. A number of studies are available on intercultural communication, but limited research is available on the theoretical analysis of pragmatic failure and misunderstanding in intercultural communication. Thereby, the current research investigates the nature, causes, and effects of pragmatic failure in intercultural communication. The paper focuses on two primary types of pragmatic failure: pragma linguistic failure and sociodramas failure in intercultural communication that occurs due to the misuse of linguistic forms and variations in culture, norms, and traditions. These pragmatic failures are common in speech acts like request, apology, compliment, and refusal. The study aims to show how to use correct language with the help of pragmatic competence. The current study adopts existing literature and documents to fulfil the aim of the study. The study highlighted that pragmatic failure negatively impacts interpersonal relationships, workplace interactions, and cross-cultural communication. Pragmatic awareness is mandatory in language learning and teaching due to its exposure to real-life scenarios. Future research can be conducted on context-based pragmatic features across cultures.

Keywords: *Face, Intercultural Communication, Pragmatics, Pragmatic Competence, Politeness Strategies.*

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1. Introduction

The contemporary world has a fundamental hold on intercultural communication for the sake of education, business, and professional settings. People from various backgrounds with different cultures interact to fulfil needs then a common language is shared for communication. In the modern era, English is mostly used for such interactions across the globe. Therefore, effective intercultural communication could not be the result of grammar and vocabulary; in fact, pragmatic competence plays a crucial role in this setting. The ability to use language perfectly in various contexts is known as pragmatic competence. When individuals cannot fulfil the requirements of communication, it is considered a pragmatic failure. It happens due to the lack of understanding of language across cultures. The intended meanings of the speaker are not interpreted accordingly due to cultural variations. It is a significant challenge in intercultural communication.

Furtherly, pragmatics is the branch of linguistics that explores how, when, where, and why to speak. It depends on the context and conveys the intended meanings beyond the literal meanings of the word. Pragmatics includes the understanding of speech acts, politeness strategies, and face across communication. Sometimes, when communicators from different cultures interact, it may lead to pragmatic misunderstanding and communication breakdown. For example, the way of requesting across cultures could vary. In one culture, the direct request holds a special place, while in other cultures it may lead to rudeness and disrespect. The use of language for expressions or humor varies across cultures. Moreover, the study of communicative actions across context and sociocultural settings is known as pragmatics (Rose & Kasper, 2002). For teaching and learning a foreign language the expertise in the linguistic code of that language is mandatory for better understanding of traditions, norms, and cultures (Shohamy & Walton, 1992).

The speech act is an utterance that is dependent on the speaker's intention and has an effect of action on the listener. It is an action that the speaker arouses in the audience. The expressions like request, apology, warning, promise, greetings, complaint, invitation, or declaration, all considered as speech acts. Additionally, in pragmatics, communication choices designed to reduce offence and misunderstanding during communication are known as politeness strategies. It helps in the maintenance of 'Face', that is, a public image

or self-image. The face could be positive or negative. Politeness strategies are developed to maintain peace and harmony across cultures.

Moreover, the current study, pragmatic failure is the key concept that was proposed by Jenny Thomas in 1983. The inability to understand what is said is called pragmatic failure. It's not the errors in grammar, words, phrases, sentences, and structure, but it's the choice of words, expressions, and style that leads to pragmatic failure.

There are two types of pragmatic failure: sociopragmatic and pragma linguistics. Thomas (1983) took both terms from Leech (1983), who said pragma linguistics is the language knowledge of an individual. Pragma linguistics is the study of language use based on its perceptual structural resources (Crystal, 1988). The linguistic structure is the expression of a request, an apology, or a favor. On the other hand, sociopragmatics deals with sociological knowledge that affects interactions (Leech, 1983). It includes the study of the social background of the speaker and the hearer in any communication. Basically, it seeks the features such as gender, power, status, and age that influence an individual's selection of linguistic forms.

In short, the disruption in mutual understanding due to the inappropriate expressions that may create feelings of anger or frustration is termed as pragmatic failure. These failures are due to cultural variations that happen in social interactions. In this way, the investigation of pragmatic failure in intercultural communication is critical so that it can reduce intercultural misunderstandings.

Therefore, the current study provides a theoretical analysis of pragmatic failure in intercultural communication. It explores the key features such as speech acts and politeness strategies, that can help to minimize the pragmatic failure. It reviews the existing literature for better analysis. It assists in language teaching as well as enhances pragmatic and communicative competence in cultures across the globe.

1.1. Research Questions

- What are the basic causes of pragmatic failure in intercultural communication?
- How do variations in politeness strategies across cultures contribute to communicational misunderstandings?
- How do pragmatic failure concerns about “face” (self-image and respect) in intercultural communication?

1.2. Research Objectives

- To investigate the basic causes of pragmatic failure in intercultural communication.
- To explore the variations in politeness strategies and their impact on pragmatic misunderstandings.
- To analyze how the concept of face influences pragmatic failure in intercultural contexts.

2.Literature Review

In intercultural communication, pragmatic failure has received considerable attention and reveals an evolving communicative context. Pragmatic failure is the “inability to understand what is meant by what is said”. Pragmatic failure is a term that received prefer on pragmatic error because it is comprehended that a grammar error can be explained using prescriptive rules, while the nature of the pragmatic ambivalence is so, that we cannot say that the pragmatic force of a sentence is incorrect, but that has not been able to reach the speaker’s communicative intention. Basically, it occurs when interlocutors are not able to grasp the intended meanings due to traditional variations in pragmatic norms rather than linguistic incompetence (Thomas, 1983).

Pragmatic failure occurs due to divergence in the expressions about language use in a particular context. Thomas (1983) explained the concept of pragmatic failure on the basis of its three types: first is pragma linguistic failure, second is sociopragmatic failure, and the third is cultural failure. These types help to examine the misunderstanding in the intercultural context.

Moreover, the Politeness theory is crucial in understanding the pragmatic failure (Brown & Levinson, 1987). This theory focused on the term face, which is categorized as positive face or negative face. The concept ‘face’ is a communicative strategy to make an image in front of the public. Politeness theory reduces the risk of a ‘face-threatening act’ and explains the cultural variations that cause pragmatic failure. Research was conducted to find the differences in Japanese and English speakers’ politeness strategies, which highlighted that one polite thing can be rude in another culture (LoCastro, 2003).

Then, face theory provides a supportive pillar for pragmatic failure study. It indicates that interlocutors struggle hard to save their self-image (Goffman, 1967). The face image is different in collectivist and individualist cultures, which affects the pragmatic understanding (Ting-Toomey, 1994). It is observed that indirect refusals are

preferred in East Asian cultures, while it seems ambiguous in Western cultures. Such variations between two different cultures lead a way to communication breakdown.

The cooperative principle has four conversational maxims as quality, quantity, relevance, and manner maxim (Grice, 1975). These four conversational maxims are crucial to comprehend for pragmatic failure. Maxims are culturally relevant, and violations refer to unintended implicature and misunderstanding, especially in intercultural communication (Kasper, 1990). Every culture has its implicatures, which is why variation leads to misunderstanding during communication.

A study was conducted to see the pattern of requests between cultures. It is highlighted that Japanese learners of English face problems with refusals. The way of refusals by Japanese learners is interpreted more directly and ambiguously by English speakers. It depicts the pragmatic competence gap (Beebe, Takahashi & Uliss-Weltz, 1990).

Contemporary research, like the 2020s, has investigated the pragmatic failure in new contexts as globalized communication and digital discourse. English is a lingua franca, so individuals are learning it throughout the globe. A study highlighted the pragmatic failure in EFL interactions due to cultural variations in the interlocutors, and it is not an error; in fact, it is about the evolving values (Chen & Zhang, 2021). Correspondingly a research was conducted that investigated the pragmatic failure in online discourse, which revealed that the absence of paralinguistic indications as facial expressions, increases the risk of misunderstanding in intercultural communication (Li & Xu, 2022). This study reveals how online discourse leads to misunderstanding and raises a call for understanding the pragmatic awareness for intercultural communication.

Additionally, pragmatic failure is also explored in a multicultural workplace context. The research demonstrates that misunderstandings lead to face-threatening and violation of politeness, that cause communication breakdown (Zhao & Wang, 2023). The study proposed that Interpersonal pragmatic competence is crucial to comprehend in the professional setting. Pragmatic failure is observed among Indian English speakers while communicating with native English speakers (Kumar & Singh, 2020). The study investigated that speech acts as requests, refusals, and compliments, are different in every culture. It is the key reason for intercultural communication misunderstandings. This research proposed a strong need for pragmatic competence training for multicultural communication.

Second language acquisition (SLA) needs a critical aspect that is pragmatic competence. Pragmatic failure leads to incompetence, so pragmatic competence provides a developmental stage for SLA (Kasper & Rose, 2002). Later, research proposed pragmatic instructions to minimize the pragmatic failure (Kasper & Schmidt, 1996).

In sum, the literature review shows that pragmatic failure is a multifaceted phenomenon that is deeply rooted in cultures, due to cultural variations, the use of language varies as politeness strategies, face (image), and speech acts. These studies revealed a need for pragmatic competence for successful intercultural communication.

Finally, a gap is observed from the review of literature, that is, the pragmatic failure and misunderstanding in intercultural communication through a 'Theoretical Analysis'. This gap is quite helpful to understand pragmatic failure in both the past and contemporary contexts that include online and professional discourses. Therefore, the current study aims to discuss pragmatic failure and misunderstanding in intercultural communication by following a theoretical approach. Theories of Thomas, Brown and Levinson, Goffman, and Grice provide a framework for the current research.

2.1. Significance of the Study

The current study helps to understand how cultural traditions shape communication and pragmatic failure across the globe. It contributes to highlighting pragmatic failure and misunderstandings in intercultural contexts. The research depicts that language learners need learning socio-pragmatic norms and politeness strategies to communicate across cultures. Pragmatics, including speech acts and politeness strategies, must be a part of curriculum development. Moreover, the study signifies that pragmatic competence is the need of the current moment so that people can engage in communication across cultures. Pragmatics courses should be taught in ESL/EFL classes, which can minimize the risk of misunderstanding during intercultural communication.

3. Methodology

The research adopts the descriptive qualitative approach. It relies on the textual analysis of existing literature and documented examples that explored pragmatic failure. The current study uses authentic examples from journal articles and pragmatic analysis of real-life interactions. It includes case studies, research on speech acts and politeness strategies across cultures, and focuses on 2020s research to ensure modern relevance.

The analysis of the study uses a thematic approach. It includes politeness strategies, face-saving acts, speech acts and indirect speech that are compared across cultures (Thomas, 1983; Brown & Levinson, 1987). The study follows the current patterns of

pragmatics (Chen & Zhang, 2021; Zhao & Wang, 2023). The current paper is solely dependent on existing literature and empirical data to investigate the pragmatic failure and misunderstandings across cultures.

3.1. Limitations of the Study

The study does not involve any direct engagement from the participants. So, the perceptions are restricted to the existing literature. It overlooks the real-time context and involves cultures across the globe that may fail to fully represent a single cultural identity. As the study adopts a qualitative approach, it may show the bias of the researcher. The study lacks in the depiction of online discourse as it is the modern world of technology.

4. Data Analysis and Findings

In intercultural communication, pragmatic failure is the misinterpretation of one's intentions based on different cultural backgrounds. Misinterpretation is despite grammatical rules; in fact, it's of language in use. This section of the study is focused on the analysis of previously documented examples through a theoretical framework. Pragmatic failure is divided into two main types (Thomas, 1983). One is pragma linguistic failure, and the second is sociopragmatic failure. These two types of pragmatic failure serve as a foundation for this analysis.

Pragma linguistic failure occurs when there is a mismatch between the utterance's meaning and its interpretation among interlocutors in a target language. This type of failure occurs due to variations in cultural background. It comes up with differences in the way speech acts are performed, linguistic choices are used, and communicative conventions that are associated. The communication is linguistically correct, but culturally it may be inappropriate. For instance, an East Asian English speaker says, "You must come to my home", which seems a polite invitation. It is interpreted as a warm request, but in English, it may be perceived as a command. This misalignment stems from a direct translation of L1 (first language) cultural values into L2 (second language) structures.

In simple words, pragma linguistics is the use of a phrase that is common in native speakers of a language, but it is not the standard usage of language in the target language of communication. As 'How are you?' in English is used as a greeting, while in other cultures it may be interpreted as a direct question about health.

Non-native English speakers from collectivist cultures reveal a potential to use imperative constructions in invitations and offers, assuming that it equates to sincerity. On the other side, native English speakers value autonomy and interpret such imperative constructions as controlling (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993). In an intercultural

communication scenario in the Japanese language, the speaker uses a phrase as “Please do your best”, which seems to be an expression of encouragement. But such a sort of encouraging expressions may seem awkward in the English language. In this way, it depicts the lack of contextual groundings that are different due to cultural differences. When language is used without the pragmatic adjustment, then it reveals the lexical and structural interference.

Sociopragmatic failure occurs when there is an error in communication due to inappropriate comprehension of social and cultural values in a given language or situation. This type of failure happens when language learners or intercultural communicators misunderstand social cues or fail to adapt their language use according to the context. Sociopragmatic failure is more damaging because it involves misinterpretation of cultural norms such as politeness, power, formality, and speech acts. For example, English speakers are expected to be more direct and informal, especially in American culture. The use of expressions by Spanish and Arabic may be considered inappropriate by native English speakers.

It depends on social context, too. It happens when an individual tries to be casual with someone who belongs to a high status. As the way of expressing gratitude is different across cultures, ‘Thank you’ is used in a culture that may be expressed by some other ways in other cultures. In a culture, if someone says, ‘I’m busy,’ which seems polite and direct, on the other hand, it may seem rude, so that culture may use ‘Sorry, I’m busy with my work.’

A study on Chinese EFL learners highlighted that these learners face sociopragmatic failure in the domain of requests (Chen, 2001). Chinese culture respects indirectness, so learners of EFL avoid making direct requests. Chinese EFL learners use “I don’t know if it’s possible.....” instead of “May you please ...?” In American English, such phrases may seem a sign of hesitation and unclarity.

Additionally, sociopragmatic failure led a way to face-threatening acts. In politeness theory, maintenance of face is central. The concept of face (self and public image) is different across cultures (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Face is categorized as positive face (desire to be liked) or negative face (desire to be free). Hence, in an intercultural context of communication, a failure to recognize which aspect of face is being protected can result in miscommunication or misunderstanding.

4.1. Common Speech Acts Lead to Pragmatic Failure

Speech acts are the actions that are performed through utterances. It serves as a communicative function that goes beyond the conveying of information. Common speech

acts lead to pragmatic failure in intercultural communication that including greetings, refusals, requests, compliments, and responses.

a. Requests

In the context of speech acts, the request is a direct act that is performed by the hearer. A request can be comprehended as a face-threatening act. The way of expressing a request varies across cultures. English speakers prefer direct and polite strategies, while individuals from other cultures prefer indirect requests (Blum Kulka et al., 1982). For example, the phrase “It’s cold in the room” may be helpful to interpret that the speaker needs an action from the hearer to close the window. Conversely, L2 learners may not comprehend it due to the indirect request, so the hearer may overlook it.

b. Refusals

In speech acts, refusals refer to an act of declining an invitation, request, or proposal. It is a delicate form of speech act. Refusals often hold a high potential of pragmatic failure or misunderstanding in intercultural communication due to the variation in cultures (Beebe et al., 1990). The speakers of the Arabic language prefer to give justifications for a refusal, while English speakers try to be concise and direct. So, it may be comprehended as rudeness in other cultures that leads to pragmatic failure. Refusals are a face-threatening act. Direct refusals include “no” or “I don’t,” while indirect refusals include justifications like “no, I’m not interested because I have another opportunity”.

c. Compliments and Responses

Compliments and sometimes responses pave the way to a mismatch in communication. In the English language. Saying, ‘You look nice today,’ is a positive attitude, while in Japanese tradition, receiving a compliment may be perceived as modesty or refusal. It is a speech act that is used to give credit to other persons than the speaker. In sum, both compliments and their responses are social acts that are based on shared cultural norms. In the response to a compliment, an English speaker says ‘no, really not’, which seems inappropriate or rude.

4.2. Cultural Dimension Analysis: Hofstede's Model

Hofstede’s (2001) model is a framework used to understand how cultural backgrounds can impact business interactions across the globe. This model offers a lens to understand pragmatic failure and misunderstanding in communication. The key points of the model include;

Individualism vs. Collectivism: Individualist cultures, in which people or individuals of a society prefer to act as individuals (e.g., USA, UK), value intentionality and self-expression, while collectivist cultures (e.g., China, Pakistan) favor unity, interdependence, and indirectness.

Power Distance Index (PDI): People in a society or group accept unequal division of power and status. High power distance cultures accept hierarchy and expect formal language in communication with superiors. Misunderstanding of these expectations can cause unintended disrespect and misunderstanding in communication.

Uncertainty Avoidance index: This dimension indicates that the people of a society feel uncomfortable, ambiguity and uncertainty. High uncertainty avoidance index, prefers structures and rules, while a low uncertainty avoidance index society tolerates risks and changes.

In cultures high in uncertainty avoidance (e.g., Japan), ambiguous or spontaneous speech acts can be disturbing. With the help of Hofstede's model, pragmatic failure can be spotted when interlocutors operate on it due to cultural variations. A low-context speaker may misinterpret the meaning of an indirect refusal that leading to misjudgments of character or intent.

Some cases are analyzed that are collected from secondary sources. A significant number of empirical studies also promote theoretical claims for the current study.

Japanese learners of English are found to use the grammar correctly, despite learners failing to communicate efficiently to make requests or proposals. Specifically in the context of high status, such learners fail to communicate, which leads to misunderstandings (Taguchi, 2008). Jordanian students who use the English language to communicate mostly are found to use long-winded sentences and justifications in requests and responses (Al-Khatib, 2001). While English speakers interpret this act as illogical and irresponsible. Moreover, Greek EFL learners use politeness markers, so learners seem to fail in managing the level of directedness and formality of the context. This act results in pragmatic failure and misunderstanding in communication.

Then, Ishihara & Cohen (2010) focused on L2 speakers that these speakers lacked metapragmatic knowledge. Metapragmatic refers to the study of how language users are aware of pragmatic aspects of language use that include setting, social rules, and effects of communication. It goes beyond the meaning of words; in fact, it is based on the contextual use of words. It helps to repair the pragmatic failures and misunderstandings.

Taiwanese university students are unknowing of the cultural expressions like idioms and sarcasm that are used in American English, which leads to misunderstanding

in intercultural communication. Furtherly, a study revealed that Vietnamese learners overuse the expressions in the digital discourse like emails, which confuses the native speakers (Nguyen, 2013).

All above discussed studies highlight that pragmatic failure is common in intercultural communication, which causes ambiguity and misunderstandings among interlocutors. It is not the linguistic ability; indeed, it's the situational and contextual awareness.

4.3. Pragmatic failure impacts multiple domains.

Pragmatic failure impacts academic settings, workplaces, healthcare, and digital communication.

In educational settings, international students may offend the professor with the wrong choice of words. This failure may occur due to different cultural backgrounds. Moreover, in workplace communications, people interact with different cultures. The tone, way of requesting, formality, and choice of words may cause pragmatic failure for the workers. Furtherly, politeness and indirectness in healthcare can cause mistrust, specifically in the situation of bad news. Lastly, the use of emojis, slang, abbreviations, and online tone may lead to misinterpretation. Such misinterpretations occur due to cultural filters.

4.4. Analysis in Digital and Globalized Contexts

With the rise of digital communication, pragmatic failure has become even more highlighted. Digital resources as email, instant messaging, and video conferencing, lack the paralinguistic cues that often compensate for pragmatic misunderstanding. The textual communication can intensify intercultural pragmatic gaps because users most of the time depend on literal interpretations in the absence of context or tone (Herring, 2004).

For instance, in professional emails, phrases like “Please revert soon” (common in South Asian English) might confuse native speakers who interpret “revert” differently. Such examples depict how English varieties across the globe bring localized pragmatics that may not align with standard expectations.

The current paper reveals that pragmatic competence must be a part of educational courses. A significant number of studies promote the integration of intercultural pragmatics into language education (Rose & Kasper, 2002; Tatsuki & Houck, 2010). Learners must get an opportunity to learn pragmatic competence with the help of role-play and practice to understand pragmatic values. Learners should be made culturally aware so that better communication with the help of speech acts can be made possible. However,

pragmatic failure is a global issue in intercultural communication, and syntactically competent people can face it.

Thus, the findings of the analysis revealed that pragma linguistic failure occurs due to the literal translation of L1 into L2 speech acts. Sociopragmatic failure occurs due to cultural misinterpretations on the basis of politeness, social distance, and power. Speech acts include requests, refusals, responses, and compliments. Learners of EFL who belong to high-status groups face more challenges due to shared backgrounds; in fact, this struggle is absent in low-setting communication. Teaching pragmatic competence is crucial and effective, but it is underrepresented in traditional curricula. Pragmatic failure has real-world results to face in academia, business, healthcare, and digital settings.

It is indicated that speech acts are comprehended differently across cultures. For instance, an indirect refusal common in Asian cultures might be seen as ambiguous or evasive in Western contexts. Similarly, politeness strategies vary across cultures, affecting how face is managed and how formality is conveyed. When these strategies are misaligned, speakers may unintentionally offend or confuse their interlocutors.

5. Conclusion

The study concluded that misunderstandings in intercultural communication happen due to inappropriate use of language functions, cultural misalignment, and variations in politeness strategies. The distinction is pragma linguistic failure and sociopragmatic failure is the pivot of the study. It is helpful to understand the effects and causes of communication breakdowns. In a global world, effective intercultural communication is an essential task in several domains as healthcare, the workplace, and academia. Misunderstandings and pragmatic failure can lead to social barriers and damage relationships. So, the awareness about cultures holds an essential place for learners and professionals.

Finally, pragmatic competence serves as a bridge between linguistic knowledge and cultural knowledge that enables interlocutors to communicate confidently and efficiently. The prioritizing of pragmatic failure in research and pedagogy is important to uncover the causes and effects of misunderstandings across cultures during communication. Future research can focus on empirical analysis that involves authenticity in intercultural communication. It will be helpful to comprehend the real-world contexts that lead to pragmatic failure. Additionally, a comparative study across cultures can be conducted.

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