

# Exploration of Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Failures in English Interpretation and Their Solutions

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From the perspective of international market development and international cultural exchange, English is the main applied language, especially in most western countries. With the deepening of global economic integration and international trade, cultural collisions are becoming increasingly frequent, and interpretation in different languages is inevitably required. However, interpretation does not only mean transfer language, it also involves culture. In the practice of interpretation, some errors arise from the lack of cross-cultural awareness, which becomes pragmatic errors. Therefore, this article will mainly discuss cross-cultural pragmatic failures in English interpretation with some examples and specific solutions. Firstly, it will introduce what pragmatic failures are and typical types of failures, clarify the relationship between English interpretation and pragmatic failures, and then elaborate on representative cross-cultural pragmatic failures in English interpretation. Finally, it will summarize the reasons and solutions that lead to cross-cultural pragmatic failures in English interpretation, putting forward corresponding suggestions for reducing cross-cultural pragmatic failures.

*Keywords:* English interpretation, cross cultural, pragmatic failure, solutions

## Introduction

For modern professionals engaged in the field of English interpretation, the most common and biggest difficulty they encounter in practical work is the cultural differences between the target language and the mother tongue they use. That is to say, in the languages used by different countries and ethnic groups, there are often some content that belongs to their own cultural “self-evident”. But it requires more time and efforts to explain those content with cultural connotations to people speaking different language and having different cultural background. Interpreters are very different from translators who use words for translation and semantic expression. The speed of interpretation itself is required to be fast, and most of the time requires on-site translation with a certain time limit. Interpreters need to have a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of both languages and cultures in order to have the flexibility of language application and accurately translate the semantics of the language. Moreover, facing unpredictable conversation topics and interpreting information from different cultural backgrounds often require high adaptability of interpreters. So, it is necessary for interpreters to accurately identify the corresponding cultural factors of different languages in the process of communication, which requires them to constantly improve their cross-cultural awareness of cultural factors in the actual interpretation process and comprehensively grasp the differences between different languages and cultures, so that both sides can

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correctly understand the information conveyed by another language and culture. Currently, most people engaged in English interpretation are prone to encountering unexpected situations and making cross-cultural pragmatic mistakes, resulting in the inability to obtain more accurate information among people involved in communication.

### **The Definition, Types, and Specific Manifestations of Pragmatic Failure**

#### **The Definition and Types of Pragmatic Failure**

The term “pragmatic failure” was first put forward by the English linguist Jenny Thomas, who pointed out that: Pragmatic failure is the inability to understand “what is meant by what is said” (Yu, 2015). In other words, pragmatic failure mainly refers to the inability to fully and accurately understand the meaning of a discourse.

This means that in the process of communication, although the sentences of the communicating parties are grammatically correct, the content they communicate is not in harmony with the communication situation or time, or there are certain inappropriate expressions, or the language expression does not conform to the habits of the communicating parties.

At present, academic experts have made a clear distinction between English pragmatic failures, which can be summarized into two types: The first type is pragmatic failure due to language itself. The English used by non-native speakers does not conform to the language habits of native speakers, resulting in errors in the application of English expressions or incorrect usage of English expressions. The second type is social pragmatic failure, which mainly refers to errors in language form selection during communication due to differences in cultural backgrounds between the two parties and insufficient understanding.

#### **The Manifestations of Pragmatic Failure**

In terms of main manifestations, it mainly includes the following:

Firstly, vocabulary usage errors occur in English interpretation. In the process of English interpretation, interpreters choose English word meanings correctly based on the meaning of the original language, which is also an important link to ensure the accuracy and overall quality of interpretation. However, English interpreters often overlook some pragmatic differences between the two languages and simply translate English and Chinese vocabulary accordingly, which leads to the occurrence of pragmatic errors.

For example, “我很久时间没有收到她的来信了”. Pragmatic errors may occur during English interpretation. This sentence may be directly translated as “I haven’t heard from her letter for long time”. However, the correct translation should be “I haven’t heard from her for a long time”. This mainly involves translating some of the vocabulary accordingly without fully considering the differences in pragmatic meaning.

Secondly, there are errors in the use of grammar. Many people engaged in English interpretation are often influenced by the negative transfer factor of their mother tongue when learning English, resulting in them applying the expression structure of their mother tongue. Especially in specific situations, they do not achieve accurate interpretation in terms of special meanings, resulting in the translated sentences being confused with the same structure in source language. This relatively rigid application of Chinese grammar rules often leads to non-standard English or situations that do not conform to English cultural habits in English translation.

For example, in some trade negotiations or speeches at trade summits, symbolic blessings, such as “家庭幸福” in Chinese are often presented at the end. Many interpreters often directly translate “a happy family”, but this is not in line with the situation. In Chinese culture, “family happiness” is a kind of good wish, which is often used as a speech in some meetings and is a cliché. Therefore, its pragmatic meaning exceeds its referential

meaning. However, in the English translation, “A happy family” does not have this pragmatic meaning; especially in the eyes of some westerners, wishing “family happiness” at meetings often does not match the theme. Therefore, appropriate adjustments should be made during actual interpretation, such as modifications or deletions.

Finally, there are translation errors in terms of cultural connotations. In many cross-cultural communication situations, due to the fact that people from different cultural backgrounds also have different cultural understandings of the same person’s behavior or things, if English interpreters are not familiar with the cultural connotations contained in their mother tongue and target language, pragmatic errors often occur.

For example, “她乖巧的如同一只猫”. Many interpreters often translate it as “she is as gentle as a cat”, which mainly refers to the Chinese people’s understanding of this sentence as “this woman is very gentle”. However, the correct translation is “she’s as gentle as a lamb”. In English, “she is as gentle as a cat” is often believed to be “this woman has an irritable temper and likes to curse others”, because there are significant differences in the cultural cognition and connotation of cats.

### **Reasons for Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Errors in English Interpretation**

Cross-cultural communication mainly refers to the communication activities between different countries, regions, and ethnic groups internationally, while the deeper meaning mainly refers to the communication activities involving various aspects such as economy, culture, and society carried out between people with different cultural backgrounds and languages. To be precise, in cross-cultural communication, most communication parties use different languages as the medium, which is also due to their different cultures. Language communication often utilizes multiple links such as information encoding, information transmission and decoding, and feedback to form a dynamic process of two-way information exchange. The reasons for the frequent occurrence of cross-cultural pragmatic errors in English interpretation can be summarized as follows:

Firstly, there are significant differences in language and culture. Language itself is a carrier of culture, carrying the cultures formed in the historical development process of different regions. Language is an important component of culture, which can comprehensively reflect culture while also being influenced by culture. Therefore, the language used in the living environment of different regions, countries, and ethnic groups will inevitably vary.

For example, China is a multi-ethnic country, with many ethnic languages and dialects in different regions that are completely different from Mandarin. So, language use is not only constrained by structural rules, including pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary, but also by some usage rules. Cultural differences are precisely an important factor that leads to errors in English interpretation. Whether in cultural communication, business negotiations, or communication in other fields, due to a lack of understanding of the other party’s social and cultural traditions, one or both parties hold different cultural perspectives in cross-cultural communication. Always using their own perspectives to speculate on the thoughts of communicators from other cultural backgrounds will lead to the incompatibility of the two cultures, which will cause cultural conflicts. This linguistic difference is often reflected in many aspects of the life of the two sides of the communication, such as some polite terms and address terms, or some visiting terms, invitation terms, or the language used in the table culture.

In addition, English and Chinese belong to different language families, so there will inevitably be significant differences in their expression methods. From the perspective of Chinese, their sentence structure often focuses

more on the time domain of psychological time and space, while English language pays more attention to natural time and space domains. Therefore, English sentences have a very rigorous subject predicate structure, with clear levels, clear priorities. And it is very standardized. Through observation, it can be found that English sentences belong to the aggregation type, but Chinese sentences are not constrained by some forms and there is no subject predicate form that must maintain certain normative requirements. Therefore, Chinese sentences belong to the dispersed type. When interpreting in English, interpreters must pay attention to the cultural and linguistic structural differences between the two languages.

Secondly, pragmatic errors are caused by differences in living habits and customs between different ethnic regions. Our country has an extremely long history and culture. Especially with the inheritance of 5,000 years of history, it has naturally accumulated an extremely long cultural accumulation. Other western countries will inevitably have their own strengths and weaknesses in the formation of history and culture, and each country and ethnic group will often form their own unique living habits and customs in the process of historical development, including some preferences, taboos, and etiquette culture. Due to the differences in these different environments, customs, religious beliefs, and objective understanding of the world, their language meanings are different. If we compare the daily habits and some customs of China and Britain, it is not difficult to see that there are almost completely different language expressions and interpretations. For example, many people in western countries highly respect the privacy of others, even if they are very close friends. It is also rare to explore other people's private questions, such as age, salary, and whether they are married or single. But Chinese people are completely different. Most Chinese people like to ask each other about their age, salary, and whether they are already married. Chinese people believe this is a form of care and respect for the communicator, but westerners do not think so. They may feel offended or disturbed, which is a very impolite behavior.

Thirdly, there are differences in thinking styles due to different cultures. For Chinese people, their way of thinking is often lateral and circuitous. In the process of communication, they will rely on some hidden expressions or obscure language to reveal their inner thoughts. However, westerners' way of thinking is often more direct, and all information will be directly transmitted from one side to the other. Therefore, English is a language with a prominent subject. Chinese, on the other hand, is a language with prominent themes, and the difference in this way of thinking lies in language. The manifestation of this aspect is that Chinese emphasizes "parataxis", which means that its sentences are connected using the meaning of words. English, on the other hand, focuses on "hypotaxis", which refers to the need for strong logical coherence between language symbols. In Chinese explanations are gradually made in chronological and logical order with the help of verbs, and events are elaborated layer by layer. The structure of English sentences is relatively compact and rigorous, and English emphasizes the subordination and modification relationships between various components very much. Most English sentences are connected by conjunctions and prepositions, so when interpreting in English, it is necessary to pay attention to the characteristics of both languages, sort out their ways of thinking, and comply with their laws.

### **Suggestions for Avoiding Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Errors in English Interpretation**

#### **Strengthen In-depth Learning and Understanding of English Language and Culture, and Improve One's Cross-Cultural Communication Abilities**

In the process of English interpretation, as an interpreter, it is necessary to have a comprehensive grasp of cross-border cultural knowledge, especially to strengthen the learning and in-depth understanding of English

language and cultural knowledge. Carefully feeling the thinking patterns of different language and cultural backgrounds, as well as the differences in language habits, an interpreter can improve one's sensitivity to the English language.

In actual interpretation, it is necessary to be able to handle vague and unclear language encountered in actual communication appropriately, or choose to highlight the topic, or cleverly avoid it, to ensure that the translated language is concise and accurate.

Interpreters need to examine whether the target language is appropriate from the perspective of the relationship between language and culture, and accurately convey the true meaning of the original language. In order to cultivate and improve interpreters' cross-cultural pragmatic competence, they must do the following two things: First, they must learn cross-cultural knowledge. To gain a deeper understanding of the cultural background of the target language as much as possible; the second step is to gain a deeper understanding of the pragmatic meaning of the language in the context of cross-cultural communication knowledge. Generally speaking, cross-cultural knowledge mainly covers politics, economy, astronomy, geography, history, military, literature, and philosophy. It is necessary to have a deep understanding of all the habits, etiquette, and thinking of English language users, as cultural knowledge has obvious cultural identity, which is precisely reflected in the language aspect. For example, the United Kingdom and the United States have unique characteristics and rules in many aspects, such as people's names, place names, discourse structure, language rules, stylistic features, and nonverbal communication. Therefore, in addition to learning professional knowledge, English interpreters should also comprehensively and extensively understand the content of cross-cultural communication, including semantics, lexicology, rhetoric, and stylistics. They should read more articles in the original English, so as to understand the language logic of English, including the thinking of writers. Only by fully perceiving and mastering cross-cultural knowledge can their language sensitivity be improved. During the interpretation process, one can proficiently apply some pragmatic knowledge and translation skills to reduce the occurrence of cross-cultural communication pragmatic errors.

### **Emphasis on Proficient Application and Innovative Research of Various English Interpretation Techniques**

In the process of English interpretation, interpreters must focus on systematic research on interpretation techniques. For example, applying some interpretation techniques to handle cultural elements in interpretation process can greatly reduce the occurrence of pragmatic errors. For example, it is relatively simple to avoid literal translation, which is usually one of the main factors causing pragmatic errors in cross-cultural communication. Due to the fact that the two parties involved in the communication come from different cultural backgrounds, as interpreters, it is necessary to have a comprehensive understanding of the cultural habits of both parties and make appropriate substitutions or modifications to the content of the conversation based on the cultural habits of both parties, without affecting the accurate transmission of language content, in order to maintain the cultural characteristics of their original language as much as possible.

### **Conclusion**

Interpreters act as a bridge in cross-cultural communication. As mentioned in the above article, for some interpreters, cross-cultural awareness refers to a cognitive standard and regulation method that often arises consciously or unconsciously due to their own language and cultural background in the actual cross-cultural

communication process, which mainly results from cultural sensitivity. Most people's language output and language structure organization are often subject to their mother tongue and mother tongue culture, which is a language and cultural awareness gradually formed from birth and influenced by the language environment, which can have a certain impact on interpreters when learning a second language. Therefore, it is necessary for interpreters to be able to clarify cultural differences and increase their sensitivity to them in order to accurately assist both parties in cross-cultural communication in semantic communication.

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