Pragmatic Failure in Consecutive Interpreting

DE L'ECHEC PRAGMATIQUE DANS L'INTERPRÉTATION CONSECUTIVE

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Abstract: Consecutive interpreting is extensively used to help people speaking different languages overcome the barriers to cross-cultural communication. Pragmatic failure in consecutive interpreting can lead to misunderstanding or even offense. The paper analyzes possible causes of pragmatic failures in consecutive interpreting in terms of pragmalinguistic failures and sociopragmatic failures and the differences in languages, thoughts and cultures behind the pragmatic failures, with an intention to raise interpreters' sensitivity to pragmatic force and cultural differences in cross-cultural communication..

Key words: pragmatic failure, pragmalinguistic failure, sociopragmatic failure, cultural difference, consecutive interpreting

Résumé: Dans l'activité communicative transculturelle qu'est l'interprétation consécutive, si l'enterprète ne prend pas conscience de l'échec pragmatique, il entraînera des malentendus dans la communication. L'article présent, sur la base de la théorie de l'échec pragmatique, analyse les raisons de l'échec pragmatique avec des exemples de l'exercice d'interprétation dans l'intention d'élever le niveau de conscience de l'interprète sur l'échec pragmatique pour favoriser la communication. L'analsye s'effectue sous les angles de l'échec pragmalinguistique et de l'échec sociopragmatique.

Mots-Clés: échec pragmatique, échec pragmalinguistique, échec sociopragmatique, différence culturelle, interprétation consécutive

1. WHY STUDY PRAGMATIC FAILURE IN CONSECUTIVE INTERPRETING

As Thomas (1983:97) puts it, " 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.." In consecutive interpreting, interpreters' main task is to convey the possible meanings of the speakers. When the interpreter makes grammatical errors, native speakers seldom have difficulty understanding the meaning and the communication is likely to continue; however, pragmatic failures can lead to an unpleasant conversation because one speaker is apt to be irritated by pragmatically inappropriate meaning conveyed by the interpreter, which is assumed to be the other speaker's original meaning. Therefore, it is necessary to raise consecutive interpreters' awareness of pragmatic failures to avoid misunderstanding in cross-cultural communication.

2. WHAT IS PRAGMATIC FAILURE?

2.1 Thomas' Definition of Pragmatic Failure

Jenny Thomas (1983:94) notes that 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 she or he should perceive it". Thomas (1983) also offers the following examples to illustrate the point: H perceives the force of S's utterance as <u>stronger or weaker</u> than S intended s/he should perceive it; H perceives an utterance as an <u>order</u> which S intended s/he should perceive as a request; H perceives S's utterance as <u>ambivalent</u> where S intended no ambivalence; S expects H to be able to infer the force of his/her utterance, but is relying on the system of knowledge or beliefs which S and H do not <u>share.</u> On the basis of the nature of the failures, Thomas classified pragmatic failures into two

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categories: pragmalinguistic failure and sociopragmatic failure.

2.2 Pragmalinguistic Failure

In Leech's definition, pragmallinguistics refers to "the particular resources which a given language provides for conveying particular illocutions" (Leech, 1983:11). The pragmalinguistic failure " arises when the pragmatic force mapped by speakers 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" (Thomas,1983:99).

2.3 Sociopragmatic failure

Sociopragmatics is described by Leech (1983: 10) as "the sociological interface of pragmatics". According to Thomas (1983), sociopragmatic failure occurs when the non-native speakers fail to choose the appropriate language because of lacking the knowledge of cultural differences.

3. CAUSES OF PRAGMATIC FAILURES IN CONSECUTIVE INTERPRETING

This part intends to analyze the possible causes of pragmatic failures in consecutive interpreting in terms of pragmalinguistic failure and sociopragmatic failure, and the differences in languages, thoughts and cultures behind the pragmatic failures.

3.1 Causes of pragmalinguistic failure in consecutive interpreting

He Ziran (2003:223) points out that " pragmalinguistics in translation refers to the study of pragmatic force or language use in the context from the viewpoint of linguistic sources. Pragmatic force, or illocutionary force in speech acts theory of pragmatics, is the intended meaning for a given message. There are two major kinds of pragmatic force, implicit, below the surface and unstated, and explicit, on the surface and stated. It is important to identify the implicit forces as they appear in their various social contexts, for frequently the apparent intention of a message is not the same as the actual intent." This idea can be applied into identifying the pragmalinguistic failure in consecutive interpreting: the interpreter's failure in conveying the intended meaning of the message as the result of the inappropriate use of language.

3.1.1 Inappropriate transfer of semantically identical structures

Interpreters' inappropriate transfer of some semantically identical structures from their mother tongue is the main cause of pragmalinguistic failure. For example: when the English speaker asks for the information of check-out in the hotel, the Chinese receptionist says: " nin zui-hao zhong-wu shi-er dian qian ban-li tui-fang shou-xu". The interpreter conveys the meaning as "You'd better check out before 12 am." It sounds clear, but is it appropriate? The literal meaning of "zui-hao" is "had better", but they express different manners of speaking. "Zui-hao" in Chinese is used to give suggestions while "had better" sounds like an order or command in English and it is inappropriate to use it when talking to the people of higher or superior position. In the above situation, the receptionist is not expected to order the guest; therefore, the literal rendering of "zui-hao" into "had better" is not appropriate and may even irritate the English speaker. It would be much better if the interpreter conveys the meaning as a suggestion in English. Many failures in literal meaning are often attributed to poor language ability, but in fact they are pragmatic failures resulting from the negative transfer of the mother tongue. When the Chinese speaker says "wo-men xi-wang chan-pin neng-gou jin-ru guo-ji shi-chang. Dang-ran, zhu-yao de mu-biao hai-shi xian zhan- wen guo-nei shi-chang, zhong-guo de shi-chang qian-li ju-da, " "dang-ran" is by no means similar to " of course" in English. After analyzing the semantic relationship between the two sentences, the interpreter would find "dang-ran" means "but" here. Only in this way can the original meaning be conveyed clearly and logically. With the literal interpreting of "dang-ran" into "of course", the meaning sounds downright confusing, or even worse, irritating because "of course" has the implied meaning in English that it is a common sense and only a man with low IQ or little knowledge does not know it. Another frequently seen example is that in Chinese farewell speech, the guest would normally express gratitude by saying : "zhong-xin gan-xie nin de sheng-qing yao-qing"(Lin,2004). And the interpreter would use a striking adjective "heartfelt" to convey the meaning of "zhong-xin" in case that the host would not realize how grateful the guest feels. However, Lin Chaolun (2004), a distinguished interpreter who has interpreted for the British Prime Minster and other high-level British officials many times, claimed that he had never heard a native English speaker use the expression "heartfelt thanks". In English, the simple expression "Thank you for…" is usually used to express appreciation. The "heartfelt thanks" sounds over-polite, and to make things worse, it may even give the listener the impression that the gratitude is not sincere. Similarly, a Chinese host of a symposium usually gives floor to the speaker by saying "xian-zai qing mou-ren wei da-jia zuo jing-cai de yan-jiang". And the interpreter is likely to interpret it as "Let's welcome Mr./ Ms. to give us a wonderful speech". The English speaker may wonder whether his or her speech is good enough to be called "wonderful" and thus even feeling uneasy. In addition, certain forms of expression such as understatement and irony may be difficult or even impossible for the interpreter to reproduce in a different language word by

word. For example, an English speaker says "it is interesting" as a comment on a proposal with an ironic tone. Under the circumstance that the speaker is completely dissatisfied with the proposal, the interpreter should convey the real meaning either through choice of synonyms or by rewording the sentence, or at least through the appropriate tone of voice. Otherwise, the literal interpreting of the meaning would make the Chinese speaker assume that the English speaker approves of the proposal.

3.1.2 Lack of knowledge on the contrasts between Chinese and English

The ignorance of differences between Chinese and English may result in literal interpreting of vocabulary, thus leading to pragmalingusitic failures. Chinese people prefer to use "four-character expression" to achieve harmony in syllables. Therefore, some modifiers are used just for this purpose and they are by no means meaningful. If these modifiers are interpreted literally from Chinese into English, the English speakers will consider the meaning redundant. For example, if the Chinese word "shen-ru tan-tao" is interpreted into English as "explore deeply or thoroughly", the English speaker would wonder why Chinese people overemphasize it because in English, the word "explore" contains the meaning of examining thoroughly in order to test or find out about it. They may even assume the Chinese speaker implies that the previous exploration is less thorough. Similarly, there is no need to interpret "bu-duan wan-shan" into "perfect continuously" because the word "perfect" implies a continuous process. Some Chinese sentences are ended with such words as "ju-mian"、"qing-jing". According to Lian shuneng (1993), these are category words indicating the categories which behaviors and phenomena belong to. The use of category words in Chinese is intended to make abstract concepts concrete. However, these words should be cut off in English because English expression is apt to be abstract. For example, in the following sentences " ta chan-sheng le jue-wang de nian-tou", " xing-cheng le lao-lao-shao-shao dou zai tan-lun WTO de ju-mian , "nian-tou" and "ju-mian" are category words. If the sentences are interpreted literally as "He has the idea of desperation" and "The situation has been created that both the elderly and the youth are talking about WTO", they sound redundant and confusing and do not conform to the rules of English. Therefore, English speakers would understand much better if the interpreter conveyed the meaning as "He begins to feel desperate" and "Everyone is talking about the WTO".

3.1.3 Inappropriate choice of language style and language function

The pragmalinguistic failures can also occur as the result of inappropriate choice of language style and funciton. Language can perform seven basic functions as phatic, directive, informative, interrogative, expressive, evocative and performative.(Hu, et al. 1988) Deng yanchang and Liu Runqing (1989:129-130) points out that "in many languages, people will change their speech from one variety or style to another, depending on the situation. Different languages have a different number of varieties. Martin Joos, a well-known linguist whose views on this matter are widely quoted throughout the world cites five different varieties of American English speech: frozen (or oratorical), formal (or deliberate), consultative, casual and intimate". Different styles should be adopted in different situations and to fulfill different purposes. The interpreters with a good command of the foreign language may also make mistakes in it. For example, if a Chinese speaker says "hen rong-xing you ji-hui can-jia zhe ci hui-yi" in an international conference, the English version of "I am happy to be here" sounds too causal. Instead, the interpreter should choose more formal expressions such as "It is my honor to attend this conference" to make the language style conform to the situation. The interpreting of some Chinese slogans is more difficult than it appears. "qing bu-yao da-sheng xuan-hua" is a typical Chinese slogan. It seems appropriate to interpret it as "Don't make noise, please!" However, "Don't make noise" is an expression of directive function which is used as a command, while "please" plays the function of a request. Therefore, they conflict with each other in terms of the language functions. The Chinese slogan reveals that Chinese people value the harmonious relationship. They add the word "please" to make the slogan sound less abrupt and more polite.

3.2 Causes of sociopragmatic failure in consecutive interpreting

Sociopragmatic failure is caused by mismatches which arise from intercultural different assessment within some parameters affecting linguistic choice: social distance and relative rights and obligation etc (Thomas, 1983). To be more specific, sociopragmatic failure in consecutive interperting is a failure that stems from the interpreter's unawareness of the different sociocultural rules in first-language and foreign language societies. Compared with Chinese people, the English-speaking people abide by an entirely different culture and they tend to have different social values and ways of thinking. Since sociopragmatic failure is mainly culture-specific, interpreter's lack of the knowledge on cultural differences can result in sociopramatic failure in consecutive interpreting. For example, when a Chinese meets an English-speaking guest at the airport, the Chinese will customarily say: "xing-li hen chen ba, wo lai bang ni na." It is traditional Chinese way of showing the host's hospitality and friendliness to the guests. However, the literal interpreting of the meaning into "The luggage must be heavy. Let me help you with it" will not reveal the host's intended meaning. On the contrary, it may annoy the English-speaking guest because English-speaking people usually value privacy. According to Deng and Liu (1989:96-97), "The English have a saying *A man's home is his castle*, meaning a

man's home is sacred to him; no one should come in without permission. So it is also with his life and personal affairs." Therefore, the English-speaking guest who considers the luggage his personal belongings would mistake the Chinese host's hospitality as interference with his privacy. If the English-speaking guest happens to be elderly, the implication of the meaning conveyed by the interpreter would be even misunderstood as "You are too old to carry the luggage, so let me help you with it." As far as the Chinese social norms are concerned, it is a virtue that the young help the elderly to show due respect whereas the English-speaking people have different opinions. They don't like to be seen as old people because being old implies one is incapable and worthless. So the host's offer may even irritate the English-speaking guest. And the Chinese host, unaware of the cultural difference, will feel surprised at the guest's reluctance to accept the offer to help. In fact, the interpreter can change the expression into interrogative questions indicating suggestion: "Would you like me to help you with the luggage? Or "May I help you with the luggage?" In this way the misunderstanding can be avoided. On the other hand, the host's concern is also conveyed to the guest. It can be seen from this example that knowledge on cultural differences is crucial to interpreters because they are the ones that gap the cultural bridge between the speakers from different cultural backgrounds. Another example is also typical in Chinese. When the host shows the English-speaking guest around a city, he says: "fa-xian you shen-me bu-zu de di-fang, huan-ying ti-chu bao-gui de yi-jian." It is a typical Chinese expression of modesty. Under the influence of Confucianism, the Chinese nation has always been famous for its virtue of modesty and prudence. Self-evaluation often appears in the form of self-depreciation, which is a fixed psychological pattern of self-value in Chinese traditional culture. The Master once said: "Even when walking in a party of no more than three I can always be certain of learning from those I am with. （ Confucius, translator: Arthur Waley,1998:86-87 ） Chairman Mao has also said:

"Modesty brings about progress, while pride backwardness". If the expression of self-depreciation is rendered into English literally, the English-speaking guest would be put in an awkward situation. He or she would assume that the Chinese host is expecting some serious comments on the change of the city. But he or she does not know what kind of opinion is "valuable". In fact, the Chinese host does not mean to bother the guest with a serious question on that occasion. It is just an expression characteristic of Chinese modesty. Therefore, the interpreter can render it by reproducing the meaning as "What do you think of our city! Or your ideas about the change of our city will be appreciated."

In fact, the distinction between pragmalinguistic failure and sociopragmatic failure is not always clear-cut. Viewed from different perspectives, the same pragmatic failure may be regarded either as a pargmallinguistic failure or as a sociopragmatic failure. For example, if the ending of a Chinese speaker's speech "zhe shi wo yi-xie bu tai cheng-shu de xiang-fa, qing da-jia pi-ping zhi-zheng" is rendered into English literally as " These are my immature ideas. Please give some critical comments on them", the interpreter fails to convey the intended meaning of the speaker that it is the end of the speech; on the other hand, the interpreter uses inappropriate expressions due to the ignorance of the cultural differences.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Since consecutive interpreters start interpreting after the speakers finish their speech, they have time to analyze what the speakers intend to mean. Only with a good command of both linguistic knowledge and cultural knowledge can interpreters fulfill the task of helping the speakers from different cultural background communicate successfully.

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