Pragmatic Failure and Cognitive Context

Yunmei LUO
Hebei Vocational Art College

Abstract: This article focuses on the interpretation of pragmatic failure on the viewpoint of assumptions as cognitive context. Assumptive viewpoint of cognitive context argues that a psychological construct is a subset of the hearer’s assumptions about the world. Successful communication is guaranteed by the mutually manifest assumptions and relevant assumptions. Otherwise, pragmatic failure will occur.

Keywords: Pragmatic failure; Cognitive context; Assumption
DOI: 10.47297/wspciWSP2516-252709.20200404

Relevance theory, basically a cognitive theory, treats context as “a psychological construct, a subset of the hearer’s assumptions about the world” (Sperber and Wilson, 2001:15). Assumption, defined by Yule as “something the speaker assumes to be the case prior to making an utterance “(Yule, 1996:25). Communicators’ assumptions about the world stored in their brain construct their cognitive context in communication. Assumptions function more importantly than the immediate situational elements in the utterance understanding. That is because utterance interpretation is the combination of two kinds of information: old information before utterances and new information proposed by the utterances. Assumptions occur in the every utterance of spoken language and in the every sentence of written language, thus influence communication and can be applied in the discussion of the case of failure of communication--- pragmatic failure.

This paper will discuss the causes of pragmatic failure from the two aspects. Just like the following chart shows.

About the author: Yunmei LUO (1977-03), Female, born in Hengshui, Hebei Province, lecturer in English Teaching, master, Research Field: Pragmatic and English Teaching.
1. Mutually Manifest Nature of Assumptions and Pragmatic Failure

People’s successful communication is based on a few shared assumptions about the world by the two parties, which is defined as “mutual knowledge”. Relevance theory replaces mutual knowledge with a term “mutual manifestness”. Mutual manifestness is a set of facts of assumptions which are manifest, or potentially manifest, to both parties in communication by way of rational hypothesizing and inferring. It is well-known that mutual manifestness, is inseparable from communicators’ mutual cognitive environment which is treated as cognitive context in most researches. Successful communication depends on the mutual manifestness of the two parties and the optimal relevance of the assumptions. Mutual manifestness of assumptions guarantees the successful communication, and the failure of communication can be analyzed in three aspects: the absence of assumptions from one party in communication, the diversities of assumptions of the two parties in communication and the failure of comprehending communicative intention. The common trait of the three occasions is failing to achieve mutual-manifestness.

(1) Pragmatic failure because of the absence of assumptions

For the verbal communication, the difference of living experience, knowledge structure and world view will give a birth to diversities of cognitive structure. As the subjective characteristic of cognitive context of individuals, presupposition of mutual manifestness can not always be achieved. Therefore, it is impossible to construct a mutual manifest cognitive environment for two parties of communication and it is apt to the occurrence of pragmatic failure. Participants in communication should be aware of what they deal with. If the assumptions can not be triggered for one party of them, the communication can not be carried through. Mutual manifestness of assumptions is a key factor ensuring successful communication. So in order to mend the absence of as-
sumptions, more explanations should be made to assist the construction of adequate assumptions for the interpretation of utterances.

(2) Pragmatic failure because of the diversities of assumptions

Though all humans live in the same physical world, we don’t all construct the same representation, because of difference in our narrower physical environments on one hand, and in our cognitive abilities on the other. Perceptual abilities vary in effectiveness between individuals. Participants in communication possesses of quite different cognitive structure, background knowledge and communicative intentions. All of those elements can construct their respective assumptions toward the same matter. Most of times, for its differentia, it is apt to lead to pragmatic failure in communication for the different assumptions. People’s long-term memory and experiences also influences greatly the construction of assumptions and thus the cognitive context. For the diversities of people’s memory, the past living experience and education can construct the quite different assumptions for the same matter. The successful understanding of utterance needs triggering the adequate and appropriate assumptions. Otherwise, the communication easily ends up as pragmatic failures.

(3) Pragmatic failures for not grasping the communicative intention

A successful communication depends on whether the two parties can be manifest or mutually manifest to each other’s cognitive context or not. In the process of communication, the speakers pay their efforts to change the hearer’s cognitive context. The speakers have two intentions: one is informative intention which is to make manifest or more manifest to the audience a set of assumptions. The other is communicative intention which is “to make it mutually manifest to the audience and communicator that the communicator has this informative intension.” Any intention can be treated as a psychological state, and the content of the intention must be mentally represented. Ostension and inference are two sides of one communication process. From the speaker’s point of view, communication is a process of ostension, which the speakers provide ostensive clues as to their communicative intentions in order to guide hearers in their task of inferring those intensions. On the other hand, from the hearer’s point of view, communication is a process of inference, which means he tries to infer the speaker’s intention from all the signs.

Another important aspect of mutual manifestiness is the mutual manifestness of the informative intention and communicative intention. The assumptions of communicative intention depend on the individual’s cognitive ability. If and only if the communicative intention is aware of by the two participants in communication, the communication can reach its goal. The failure of grasping the communicative intention will induce the occurrences of pragmatic failures.
2. Relevant Nature of Assumptions and Pragmatic Failure

Another important issue related with the study of assumptions in successful communication is relevance. The central claim of relevance theory is that the expectations of relevance raised by an utterance are precise enough and predictable enough, to guide the hearer towards the speaker’s meaning. Humans pay attention to the most relevant facts. The assumption of optimal relevance is the goal for both speaker and the audience to strive for in the real ostensive-inferential communication. From the position of the speakers, they are intended to express adequate ostensive meaning and guide the audience to find an interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance. In order to confirm the informative and mostly important communicative intention of audience, the hearers should strive to find the optimal relevance between utterances and context, with the least effort of inference and work out the implication of the utterance and ensure the success of communication.

In Relevance Theory, relevance is treated as constant and context variable. The goal of human communication is to change the cognition of the other party, so the information the speakers provide should not only be new, but influence the hearer’s cognitive context in order to engender contextual effect. According to Sperber and Wilson, “[a]n assumption is relevant in a context if and only if it has some contextual effects in that context.” (Sperber and Wilson ,2001:122 ) Contextual effect is to be understood as some improvement to the hearer’s representation of the world. Technically, contextual effect is reflected in three forms: new information strengthens the current contextual assumption; new information contradicts with the current contextual assumption and eliminates the previous premises; new information along with the current information generates new contextual implications. The notion of a contextual effect is essential to a description of the comprehension process. Contextual effect produced in any form is the change of cognitive context in nature, or the birth of a new context. The new context is stored in the form of conceptual presentation and functions as a potential cognitive context for the future utterances.

All in all, cognitive context is bound up with assumptions used by speakers and hearers to interpret utterances, and all interpretive efforts are made on the basis of the relevance of given assumptions, i.e. the likelihood that adequate contextual effects are achieved with a minimum of processing efforts. The principle of relevance is regarded as part of general human psychology, and it is through this principle that humans are able to engage in interpreting utterances. Thus contextual effects influence and impel the process of communication to a great extent. Therefore, this visual angle can be applied in the analysis of pragmatic failure.
In the following passage, we will discuss the relationship between relevant nature of assumptions and pragmatic failure in the light of contextual effects.

(1) Pragmatic failure for the improper strengthening assumptions

In communication, the mind is confronted with much more information than it can possibly attend to. Communicators should pay efforts to construct and discover the relevant assumptions of utterances.

Strengthening assumptions implies that more evidence is provided for the existing assumptions. Though the more precise the utterances make, the easier inference will achieve. Sometimes it can produce a bad impression of reiteration and prolixity of the speakers. Furthermore, the improper strengthening assumptions will cause more serious consequences and block the communication. So in communication, the inappropriate strengthening assumption will cause the hostile emotion of the communicators. The more information can not always guarantee a more favorable communicative effect. In communication, speakers should pay attention to the other party’s mood, the topic they are discussing about and the proper choice of words should be also seriously concerned in the concrete affairs. Otherwise, pragmatic failure will interrupt the communication.

(2) Pragmatic failure for the nescience of contextual implications

The notion of a contextual effect is essential to a characterization of relevance, thus having a contextual effect which is a necessary condition for relevance. Contextual implications are contextual effects which “result from a crucial interaction between new and existing information” (ibid: 109) as assumptions. The proper and timely comprehension of contextual implication is a necessity in our daily communication. Otherwise, it will lead to the failure of communication.

(3) Pragmatic failure because of contradicting assumptions

Pragmatic failure can obviously occur in the situation of contradicting assumptions. Contradicting assumptions can also generate relevance between two utterances and produce contextual implications. It is natural phenomenon that contradicting assumptions will lead to the unpleasant or even hostile emotions between communicators, though a lot of cases can be ignored or forgiven in our daily life. But lots of pragmatic failures should blame to it. These contradicting assumptions will embarrass both the participants in communication obviously. In the feudalistic China, any adverse opinions against emperors were at a risk of decollation which may be the most serious consequence of pragmatic failure in the world. But in our daily life, such kind of contextual effects can block the communication frequently. These contributing assumptions embarrassed both of the two participants in communication, thus we can treat it as a case of pragmatic failure.
(4) Pragmatic failure because of irrelevant assumptions

In the verbal communication, participants are expected to produce utterances continually which may contribute new information to the existing context; therefore the communication can roll on. But unfortunately there are occasions that information does not always connect up with any helpful information presented in that context, i.e. irrelevant assumptions. The lack of relevance for assumptions can also lead to pragmatic failures. Sperber & Wilson once argue three cases of irrelevant assumptions.

So, the discussion on pragmatic failure can be summarized as the following chart:

Generally speaking, the absence of assumptions of one party, the diversities of assumptions or not grasping the communicative intention, the assumptions of the two parties can not achieve mutual manifestness can induce the occurrence of pragmatic failure in communication. The improper strengthening assumptions, the nescience of contextual implications, contradicting assumptions and the irrelevant assumptions can not guaranty an optimal relevance for the assumptions triggered by the two parties can lead to pragmatic failure.

Works Cited