# Three Layers of Pragmatic Failure Across Languages and Cultures

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**Abstract**

Recently, cultural, economical, and political relations between nations have increased in a noticeable way. People communicate and interact more and more to achieve mutual understanding and hit the target. While communicating, different language users may not understand or misunderstand intentions of their interlocutors. This misunderstanding happens due to the different lexicon used in different linguistic communities that reflect their lifestyle. Some words possess culture-specific meanings that reflect not only ways of living of a certain society but also the way the members of that society think and act. For this reason, intentionally or unintentionally, people apply their native language competence to the foreign language that will likely result in misunderstanding known as pragmatic failure. This article deals with the pragmatic failure on word, sentence, and discourse levels. Here, implicit meanings of lexical and grammatical elements in discourses across languages and cultures, namely in the English, Azerbaijani, as well as Russian, Chinese, Turkish, and Korean languages and cultures have been investigated.

**Keywords:** communicative competence, communication, culture, implicit meaning, pragmatic failure.

## 1. Introduction

Pragmatics is a term coined by Morris in 1930. He considered pragmatics as a subfield of semiotics. Pragmatics began to develop as an independent branch of linguistics in the 1970s. But what is pragmatics? Pragmatics deals with the study of the implicit (pragmatic meaning) in situational contexts. According to Yule (1996), "Pragmatics is the study of relationships between linguistic forms and the users of those forms." So we can also define pragmatics as the study of speaker's intentions, hidden goals, expectations, as well as the listener's understanding of what the speaker wants to say. It finds its reflection in pragmatic competence.

According to Hymes (1972), speaker's linguistic competence consists of grammatical competence (intonation, phonology, semantics) and pragmatic competence (effective using and understanding language within a context). The lack of these two competences may lead to pragmatic failure. However, there is a point to be focused on. We agree with Hymes's opinion because besides the grammatical competence the speaker and the listener possess pragmatic competence that is the main factor behind mutual understanding.

On the contrary, the lack of grammatical competence does not always result in misunderstanding. As for example, in the sentence *I meeted him in the street* can be grammatically wrong but yet comprehensible. In this sentence, "*meet*" being an irregular verb requires the past tense "*met.*" Nevertheless, making such a mistake is inevitable for non-native speakers. Mistakes of this kind do not make speech incomprehensible. As Thomas says, "pragmatics is the unity of speakers' grammatical competence and their knowledge about the world (Thomas, 1983)." What we can assume is pragmatic competence does not appear only from insufficiency of two above-mentioned competences. Alongside with linguistic background, culture is also the leading element in pragmatic competence.

Pragmatic failure is the misunderstanding that arises from incorrect use of language, especially by non-native speakers. Riley uses the term pragmatic error instead of pragmatic failure (Riley, 1989). By pragmatic error he means using inappropriate and foreign social rules and behaviours in one's culture by non-native users of the language.

**2. Research Methodology**

Based on previous studies, this research paper continues to investigate pragmatic failure across languages and cultures by using typological, cross-cultural, and contextual analysis. The paper seeks answers to following questions:

1) Are there any differences in meanings of words denoting animals and colours across languages and cultures?

2) What kind of differences or similarities can be observed on sentence level across languages and cultures?

3) How do people belonging to different languages and cultural backgrounds speak on the telephone?

**3. Discussions on the Topic**

*3.1 Understanding Pragmatic Failure on Word, Sentence and Discourse Levels*

Wang (2010) suggests three levels of pragmatic failure. Before discussing the pragmatic failure on word, sentence, and discourse levels, it is important to highlight what can lead to that failure. In order to understand one another and grasp what one wants to say, the sides of the communication should work in cooperation. In his Cooperative Principle, Grice introduced a model for successful communication (Grice, 1991).

Table 1. Grice's cooperative principle

| |
|---|
| A: The category of Quantity refers to the amount of what is said and consists of two maxims: |
| 1. Make your contribution as much informative as required; |
| 2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required. |
| The importance of Grice's category of Quantity cannot be denied. On one hand, too much information on speaker's behalf may mislead the listener. On the other hand, by using too many unnecessary words, speaker will miss the target, which may result in pragmatic failure. |
| B: Category of Quantity consists of one supermaxim (try to make your contribution true) and two maxims: |
| 1. Do not say things that you don't believe to be true; |
| 2. Do not say things that you cannot prove. |
| It is not a secret that providing the wrong information within a conversation and leading the hearer in the wrong direction will result not only in communicative failure but also in the loss of mutual esteem. This, in its turn, will likely trigger the break and end relations between participants involved. |
| C: Grice includes only one maxim into the category of Relevance: Be Relevant! By the category of Relevance Grice means speaking on the topic and not diverting the subject without completing one's thoughts. |
| D: The last category is the category of Manner. Here, he includes one supermaxim: Be perspicuous! and four maxims: |
| 1. Avoid obscure expressions; |
| 2. Avoid ambiguity; |
| 3. Be brief; |
| 4. Be orderly. |

Grice's maxims are related among themselves. It is possible to see that the major category is the category of quantity and that the other categories are directly related to this category and occur around this category. Grice's Cooperative Principle is a key behind a successful communication. Although the possible pragmatic failure has not been mentioned in Grice's Cooperative Principles, one can assume that the violation of any of these categories will likely lead to communicative and pragmatic failure as stated by Fang (2010).

Pragmatic failure also happens when listeners or readers cannot understand what the speaker or the writer intends. Larson (1984) states that the "implicit meaning is a meaning that is not shown but it is the part of the conversation or intention to convey the speaker."
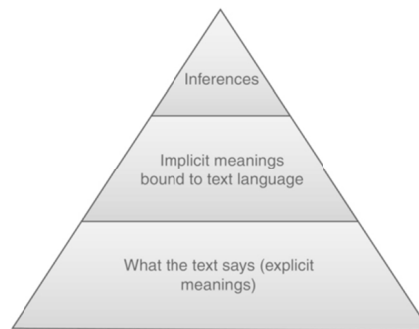
Figure 1. Charles A. Perfetti and Joseph Z. Stafura's triangle to differ implicit meaning from explicit meaning (O'Brien, Cook, Lorch, 2015)

Here, what Perfetti and Stafura mean is that the text is explicit together with the grammar and the meanings of words of the language for the speakers or writers. When connected with the text language, i.e. within a context it acquires implicit meaning and depends on the speakers' and readers' inferences.

Fang (2010) deals with pragmatic failure in three levels:

3.1.1 Word Level

Word level is concerned with the different meanings of the words in different cultures. Words expressing different animal names can be a good example of it. As for example, while the word "dog" in western cultures refers to "loyalty, faith, courage", in the Azerbaijani language besides having alike positive associations, "dog" possesses negative associations, as well. In eastern cultures like Azerbaijani, Chinese, and Korean cultures "magpie" is seen as *the herald, carrier of good news*. In accordance with beliefs existing in England, one can have a good day by saying *Morning/Afternoon Mr Magpie. How's Mrs. Magpie and all the little Magpies?* **(**Lynx, 2018).

In the Russian and Azerbaijani languages and cultures "sheep" is associated with the *stupidity,* whereas in American culture it refers to *strength*. "Owl" has negative meanings like *bad fortune, failure* in Azerbaijani, but positive meanings like *wisdom and knowledge* in Russian, as well as in western languages and cultures (Goldstone, 2014). "Cow" in Indian culture is considered to be the symbol of *sanctity and truthfulness*. Nevertheless, in the Azerbaijani language and culture the word "cow" is associated with a woman that can be offensive and indicate *fat and slow moving woman*.

We can say the same about the words expressing colours. Depending on languages and cultures, various implicit meanings have been encoded in the words referring to colours. The colour "black" means *great, tall, majestic* in the Azerbaijani language and culture. It finds it reflection in the metaphor "Garabagh" and refers to the region in Azerbaijan. Here, "gara" means *big, magnificent,* whereas "bagh" means *garden*. The colour black also indicates *mourning* like in many other languages and cultures.

Likewise, while the colour "white" is considered to be the colour of *mourning* in the Far East, it expresses *happiness* and *purity* in Europe and preferred in wedding gowns by brides. In Azerbaijani culture there is a saying—"white lie" which means a lie told intentionally. However, Turkish people use it to represent a lie told with good intentions in order to avoid discord or disagreement.

Accordingly, the colour "red" carried out this function in the East and preferred by the brides and means *luck, purity, happiness*. In America and European countries, the colour "red" symbolizes *love, passion, excitement and also anger*. Historically, the colour "red" is connected with Communism. As for Azerbaijan, it finds its reflection in the meaning of *creating a modern society and preserving the democracy* in the national flag of Azerbaijan.

The colour "green" is associated with positive meanings like *awakening, life, and luck* and negative meanings such as *jealousy* in the West. As the colour "green" is the colour of dollar it also expresses *wealth*. "Green eyed monster" in "Hamlet" means *jealousy*. Globally, "green" has also become the colour of Environmental Movement. In Muslim cultures "green" symbolizes *family, prosperity, health* and is considered as the colour of Islam. In recent period, in this meaning it finds its reflection in the national flag of Azerbaijan.

The colour "yellow" symbolizes *treachery and jealousy* in France and Germany. Even in X century, the doors of traitors were painted yellow. In northern America, it symbolizes *warmness*.

The colour "blue" expresses *depression, sadness* in the West. As well, it is used in the logos of American banks like "Bank of America" and "Citibank" and conveys the meaning of *trust and security.* Ancient Turks associated the colour "blue" with the sky and that is why it was considered sacred. They called God "Goy Tanri" – Blue God. Nowadays, blue is the symbol of Turkishism.

Considering all that, it can be said that without the knowledge of the meanings of the words in various cultures it is hard to achieve pragmatic competence.

3.1.2 Sentence Level

Pragmatic failure on sentence level happens when speakers do not use the foreign language word combinations or sentences in a context appropriately. For example, if the English use *never mind* as a response to an apology, the Chinese use it as a response to a gratitude of which English counterparts are *it's okay, don't worry about it, don't sweat, not a big deal, don't mention, not at all, etc. Never mind* is translated into the Azerbaijani language as *eybi yoxdur* and is used the same way as it is used in the English language. The reply to *thank you* is provided like this: *buyurun, dəyməz, xoşdur, etc.*

In English *excuse me* is used for asking permission to say or to do something; or for apology when one bumps into the other: *excuse me, can you tell me the time please? Excuse me, could I get past?* However, *I am sorry* is the right utterance to say when one wants to apologize: *Oh, sorry, did I step on your foot?* (Jacobsson, 2004). In the English language *I am afraid* can also be used as a means of apology. It is not a direct apology; however, it can be used to express the speaker's apologetic attitude towards some affairs. As for example,

-We are going to celebrate birthday of Jane. How about joining us?

-I am afraid I cannot.

In Azerbaijani *bağışlayın* or *üzr istəyirəm* is used in both situations, which can be confusing for non-native speakers and may lead to pragmatic failure. Nevertheless, *qorxuram ki* (in English: *I am afraid)* is used in the same situation as its counterpart. As for example,

-Axşam bizimlə kinoya gələcəksən? (Will you come to the cinema with us in the evening?)

-Qorxuram ki, gələ bilməyim (I am afraid I shall not be able to).

Linguistic expressions like *come here, keep silence, close the door, etc.* in the English language can be understood differently depending on the type of intonation the speaker utters them. If said with falling intonation, they may be understood either as request or a command. However, if uttered with a rising intonation, they will denote a question. Here, the tone of the speaker, as well as facial expressions, will also play a very important role. Angry tone of voice and sullen expression may offend the listener. When used by non-native speakers, such kinds of direct utterances may be the reason behind misunderstanding of the intention that is known as pragmatic failure. In fact, English people try to express their feelings in a more polite way using specific word combinations that are named pragmatic force idioms by Fraser (1996):

*Would you please keep silence? Do you mind closing the door? How about you come here?* Such phrases prevent unnecessary pressure, avoid misunderstanding, and denote polite suggestion.

Utterances that may lead to pragmatic failure on sentence level are *I can't agree with you* and *I can't agree more.* The first expression means that the speaker's thoughts do not coincide with the thoughts of his/her interlocutor. However, in the second expression, despite being in negative form, it means that the thoughts of the speaker overlap with the thoughts of the listener. This utterance has two counterparts—negative and positive—in Azerbaijani: *Mən sizinlə razıyam—Mən sizinlə razılaşmaya bilmərəm.* Semantically, these utterances possess positive associations like in English.

3.1.3 Discourse Level

People belonging to different languages and cultures try to adjust their language knowledge to the discourse of the foreign language so as to make conversation successful. In order to identify what a pragmatic failure on a discourse level is, first of all, we should reveal the nature of a discourse itself. According to Foucault (1972), discourse not only reflects the speaker's knowledge of the world, but also actively builds the person's identity in his or her cultural environment. Halliday defines discourse as "a unit of language larger than a sentence and which is firmly rooted in a specific context" (Bronwen & Ringham, 2006). Harris (1952) considered discourse as related language part consisting of two or more sentences. Thoughts about the discourse are numerous. However, all of them share something in common that a text is an inseparable part of discourse. Discourse is a text and a text is an abstract grammatical structure that can be pronounced. It is not a coincidence that grammatical structures unite within a situation and context to form discourse. Veyselli (2010) uses the term "consituation"

that is unity of context and situation. Context and situation help to formalize a text, to make discourse successful and understand what is said without difficulty. So, it is hard to imagine discourse without a situation, as it is hard to imagine it without a text. Considering all this, it is possible to say that discourse is realization of context and situation with the help of a text.

Discourse can also be identified as a text requiring a relation between people. Here includes people's interaction at various social gatherings, telephone conversation, greetings, job interview, positive and negative answers to an invitation, etc.

Pragmatics learns what one means by what one says. It means that pragmatic (implicit) meaning is achieved on discourse level. Pragmatic failure on discourse level depends on the cultural factors and the structure of the speaker's mother tongue. This happens when people belonging to various languages and cultures interact; they try to apply their culture to the structure of a foreign language, consciously or unconsciously.

3.1.3.1 The Analysis of Telephone Conversation on Discourse Level

Telephone conversation consists of different rituals in different cultures. Structurally, telephone conversation begins, keeps on, and terminates with clichés. Telephone conversation differs from face-to-face conversation. The degree of pragmatic failure in face-to-face conversation is lower than in telephone conversation. This happens due to the verbal and non-verbal linguistic means that can be used in face-to-face conversation, which makes the sides of the conversation understand what they want to say by deciphering them.

Openings in telephone conversation are brief and compact (Schegloff, 1986). Another important characteristic of a telephone conversation is its formal character.

Schegloff (1986) includes the followings into the structure of the telephone conversation:

1) Summon – answer;

2) The identification - recognition sequence. Caller and receiver define whom they are talking to;

3) The exchange of greeting tokens (*hi/hello*);

4) The *how are you* sequence.

If we analyse the structure of the telephone conversation in Azerbaijani culture, it is possible to observe the same structure. Both in Azerbaijani and English culture, the receiver opens the telephone conversation.

If the caller is unknown, the conversation develops as following (https://www.espressoenglish.net/telephone-english-phrases/):

**Rebecca**: Hello, may I speak to Linda please?

**Linda's sister**: Who is calling?

**Rebecca**: Rebecca

**Linda's sister**: Please wait.

**Rebecca**: OK.

If the caller is known:

**Linda:** Ryan?

**Ryan:** Hi Linda, it's Ryan. How's it going?

**Linda:** Pretty good, thanks. How about you?

**Ryan:** I'm fine. Sure glad it's Friday. Hey, is Peter there?

**Linda:** Yeah, hold on, I'll get him. Peter! Ryan's on the phone.

Schegloff (1986) names such kind of telephone conversation as canonical. Sides in telephone conversation, in both languages, can use various linguistic expressions depending on the situation and then pass to the main subject. In comparison with common face-to-face conversation, telephone conversation develops around a certain topic and talking of that topic is inevitable. Telephone conversation ends with the gratitude of the sides *(Thank you, bye; Sağ ol)* before hanging up.

Both in telephone and face-to-face conversation (if we don't take video calls into consideration) there are two sides: the caller and the receiver or the speaker and the listener. In conversations the sides wait for the turns to take that is called turn taking in pragmatics. Levinson (1983) describes it as follows:

I participant: speaks and stops;

II participant: speaks and stops. As a result, we get A-B-A-B-A-B structure while communicating.

Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson (1974) introduce turn-taking model. In accordance with this model, it is possible to identify how the sides get a turn to speak during the conversation. This model consists of two components:

1) Turn-constructional component that includes words, phrases or sentences;

2) Turn allocation component that makes the speaker create an opportunity for the listener to speak (Ellis & Beattie, 1986). This may happen both implicitly and explicitly. Implicitly, it can be any gesture towards the listener and explicitly, it can be the name of the speaker (Marijke, 2010).

3.1.3.1.1 Backchannel Signals in Telephone Conversation

While speaking of telephone conversation, backchannel signals cannot be avoided. "Backchannel signals are kinds of gestures or voices made by the listener to show his or her involvement in the conversation but not to get a turn to speak" (Tottie, 1991). For example, *hmm, mmm, oh, yeah, My God, never,* etc. These types of backchannel signals can express different feelings such as happiness, sadness, surprise, or bewilderment depending on the type of the discourse and intonation. Backchannel signals are also named as attention signals, accompaniment signal, minimal response, continuers, feedback signals, etc. Backchannel signals can also be of a prosodic character and consist of exclamations.

Täljeblad-Steiner (2005), rightfully, speaks of the laughter as a backchannel signal. Laughter is also a signal showing that the listeners are involved in the conversation and find funny what the speaker tells.

The above-mentioned cases give us the right to consider the silence as a backchannel signal, as well to highlight the listener's attention in the communication. However, the silence will carry neither implicit nor explicit meaning in comparison with the above-mentioned cases and cannot be properly understood by the speaker. In telephone conversation, we mostly wait for the speaker silently to finish his or her words. As for this reason, the speaker, from time to time, asks *Hello? Do you hear me?* Nevertheless, one can easily identify the intention behind the silence in face-to-face conversation. That is to say whether the silence is the sign of listening or indifference.

For example (Oliveira, 2013), There's a lot of background noise - I can barely hear you; you're breaking up; could you call me back? We have a bad connection; Sorry – I didn't catch what you just said; Could you speak a little louder? *(say this if the person is speaking too quietly);* Could you speak a little more slowly?" *(say this if the person is speaking too fast);* What did you say?" *(informal);* Could you repeat that? Could you say that again? *(more formal)*.

3.1.3.1.2 Turn-Taking in Telephone Conversation

Turn-taking in telephone conversation has been investigated by Hopper (1992). Telephone conversation consists of continuous turn-takings, as well. However, turn-taking may differ for its content and length. In face-to-face conversation, it is possible to take a floor by using various means: facial expressions, gestures, intonation, eye contact, or avoiding one's eyes. In telephone conversation as the sides cannot see each other, none of these means are possible to use. The fall of the tone of the voice or long pauses in telephone conversation are the indicators that the speaker has reached the end of his/her speech. Only then the listener can take a floor to speak. Nevertheless, if the listener wants to speak, he/she had better not wait for a long time. Otherwise, his or her interlocutor may take it as a sign of the end of the conversation.

Formal telephone conversation, that is to say business telephone conversation, differs structurally. In English speaking discourse, the receiver introduces himself by saying his name and sometimes surname, and says the name of the place he or she works for. In Azerbaijani, receiver says the name of the place he or she works for; he or she can also say his or her name. For example:

The telephone rings (Oliveira, 2013):

Helen: Midtown Computer Solutions, Helen speaking. How can I help you?

Ryan: Hello, this is Ryan Bardos. May I speak with Natalie Jones, please?

Helen: One moment please - I'll put you through.

Helen: Mr. Bardos? I'm sorry, Natalie's in a meeting at the moment. Would you like to leave a message?

Ryan: Yes, could you ask her to call me back as soon as possible? It's pretty urgent.

Helen: Of course. Does she have your number?

Ryan: She has my office number, but let me also give you my cell - it's 472-555- 8901.

**Helen:** Let me read that back to you - 472-555-8901.

**Ryan:** That's right.

In the Azerbaijani language:

**R:** Hər vaxtınız xeyir. "Xəyal" Oyuncaq Mağazası, (Arzu eşidir) buyurun? (Good day. "Imagination" Toy Shop. Arzu speaking. How can I help you?)

**C:** Salam, mən meneceriniz İlyas bəylə danışmaq istəyirəm (Hello, I'd like to speak to your manager).

Or

**C:** Salam, mən sizdə olan məhsul barədə məlumat almaq istərdim (Hello, I'd like to get info on a product you sell).

Then the telephone conversation develops. At the end, the conversation terminates with the sides expressing their gratitude and thanking each other before hanging up. For example,

In English (Oliveira, 2013):

**Helen:** Okay, Mr. Bardos. I'll give her the message.

**Ryan:** Thanks a lot. Bye.

Or:

**Ryan:** Take care.

**Peter:** Bye.

In Azerbaijani:

**C:** Köməyiniz üçün təşəkkürlər, sağ olun (Thank you for your help, bye).

**R:** Kömək edə bildiyim üçün şadam (və ya buyurun), sağ olun (glad to be a help, bye).

## 4. Conclusion

Communication, especially within different cultures, has its own rules and behavioural etiquettes at word, sentence, and discourse levels. If the carriers of different languages are not aware of these rules or the various meanings of words and utterances in different contexts and situations, conversation may result in pragmatic failure. Therefore, it can be concluded that understanding pragmatic failure plays a very important role in communication within different cultures. In this sense, this paper helps people belonging to different cultures, and languages to be careful of the meanings of the words and sentences in different contexts and situations, as well as in selecting appropriate words according to those contexts and situations.

The result of this paper illustrated possible misunderstandings on word, sentence, and discourse levels in the Azerbaijani and English languages. Comparison of words denoting animal and colour names showed that notable differences exist in meanings of these words both in the English and Azerbaijani Languages.

The comparison of sentence level in languages (English and Azerbaijani) also revealed possible inconsistencies, which is the reason behind pragmatic failure.

The analysis of discourse level dealt with the telephone conversation in English and Azerbaijani. It has been shown that openings and endings, as well as turn-taking in telephone conversation, may differ culturally.

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