The Application of Pragmatics into Interpretation

—A Theory-Driven Exploration

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Abstract: Pragmatics has a deep connection with translation and this study has summarized the previous research of pragmatics and interpretation. The study is divided into two parts: pragmatic theory-induced interpretation and pragmatic failures in interpretation. The first part further explains the application of adaptation theory in interpretation and the second part points out some typical pragmatic failures as well as the solutions of these problems. There are specific examples in the study to illustrate these theories and phenomena. At the end of this study, there are also some suggestions for interpreters to handle the relation between pragmatics and interpretation.

Keywords: translation, pragmatics, adaptation theory, interpretation, pragmatics failure

1. Introduction

Translation theories can inform translation practices. In a new realm of translation studies, pragmatics comes into play and builds connections with translation theories.

Pragmatics is the systematic study of meaning through the use of language. The central topics of inquiry of pragmatics include implicature, presupposition, speech act, deixis, and reference. There are various contexts in pragmatics which include physical context, linguistic context, social context, and epistemic context. Physical context refers to the objects surrounding the communication, place, and time of the communication, all of which could affect meaning construction. Linguistic context means that what has been said before in the conversation has a relationship with the communication. Social context indicates that the social relationship of people involved in communication will also influence our way of speaking. A speaker and a listener may construct a specific linguistic environment that other people cannot understand which is called epistemic context. According to the existing definitions of pragmatics and context-bound meanings, the core of pragmatics is based on theories that could guide people to properly use language in different situations.

Generally speaking, translation involves cross-linguistic and cross-cultural components because translation involves two languages that are linked to different cultures. Indeed, translators should consider the linguistic and cultural differences when practicing the translation. Moreover, translation studies focus on how translators understand the source text and how they translate the source text. It will determine the effect of translation. Based on what was mentioned before, both pragmatics and translation study linguistic comprehension and expression. Although definitional differences between

pragmatics and translation exist, there are some interconnections between the two constructs. Translators should consider the acceptability and cognitive context of target readers to ensure that readers can fully understand the translation which is similar to understanding and enforcing pragmatic functions [1].

In classic theories of translation, it is argued that translation must be based on individual words, and through this way, the translation accurately presents the original text or speech. However, this argumentation does not necessarily consider the interconnectedness between translators and readers, as well as different linguistic environments. When the translation is guided by pragmatics, translators should comprehend unbalanced information between translators and readers, attending to various issues, such as pragmatic environment and cultural background. In doing so, readers can capture the core of the translation and therefore understand the original text.

Oral interpretation is an area of interest in translation, which is a highly demanding cognitive task. The next two sections discuss how the adaptation theory guide the interpretation and some typical pragmatic failures in interpretation. The solutions of pragmatic failures also listed in this essay since the pragmatic failures in oral interpretation would lead to communication breakdown.

2. Pragmatic Theory-Induced Interpretation (The Adaptation Theory)

Discussing the relationship between pragmatics and interpretation, many scholars combined the adaptation theory with interpretation [2-4]. They provided the conceptualization of the adaptation theory and its characteristics. The relationship between the adaptation theory and interpretation is further elaborated below.

Researchers mentioned that pragmatics was an extended field building upon linguistics [5]. From Verschuren's perspective, he states that "using language must consist of the continuous making of linguistic choices, consciously or unconsciously, for language-internal and/or language-external reasons. (pp. 55-56)"

There are seven characteristics of this linguistic choice-making. First, choices are made at every possible level of structure, from tone to grammatical structure. Second, speakers should not only choose the language form but also the communication strategy. It is worth noting that the language style decided by communication strategies will affect the choice of language forms. Third, the degree of consciousness will be involved in the choice-making processes; Fourth, choices are made both in producing and understanding the language, which means during the communication, both parties must make choices; Fifth, language users must make choices between the most appropriate expression and most needed one once the language is used; Sixth, the opportunities for language users choosing language strategies are not equivalent, because the choices are restricted by many factors like social, cultural, and cognitive factors; Seventh, different choices of language strategies will affect other linguistic or non-linguistic issues: like the meaning of the words.

Based on these seven characteristics, Verschuren proposed the essence of the adaptation theory—three notions of language, namely variability, negotiability, and adaptability. Variability refers to the range of possibilities from which choices can be made [4]. Negotiability means that the choices are not made mechanically nor strictly follow fixed form-function relationships, instead, choices are conducted on flexible principles. Adaptability means that language users could make negotiable linguistic choices based on a range of possibilities to meet the requirements of communication. These three characteristics consist of the basic elements of language usage in which variability and negotiability are the foundation, and adaptability is the final ultimate purpose. The first two notions provide the possibility and ways of language choices respectively, and adaptability makes proper language choices that satisfy the needs of communication on this basis.

Associating the adaptation theory with translation/interpretation, Song specifies that adaptability is more directive to the translation process compared with the other two notions [2]. Due to the fact

that translation is a process of continuous linguistic decision-making. For example, translators need to properly select the text to be translated based on cultural perspectives, textual meanings, etc. Translation has the nature of multiple combinations of choices, and choices are made to achieve the success of translation. This pattern of constant linguistic choices is precisely in line with the characteristics of the adaptation theory which highlights the relationship between adaptability and translation. There are four angles of investigation in the adaptation theory which are contextual correlates, structural objects, dynamics, and salience of the adaptation process [3]. As one of the communicative forms, the interpreting process is also dynamic. The style of interpretation should conform to the dynamic process and it involves many complex factors. Interpretation is influenced by the context, the interlanguage parties, the use of language, the content of the speech, as well as the target audience. Interpretation must be consistent with the original speech style of the speaker, at the same time interpreters ought to consider the linguistic behaviors of listeners. In the process of interpretation, interpreters must choose the appropriate language expression of both parties based on the semantic meanings of the speaker and the listener, henceforth the translated language can reproduce all the meanings of the original language and achieve the purpose of unhindered communication between the two parties.

Similarly, Ren argues that "interpretation, as a complex form of information communication, also bears the characteristic of choice-making underlying language use. (pp. 26) [2]" Interpreters' conscious or unconscious choices of language and the adaptation of language are concrete manifestations of the interpreter's subjectivity [6]. In Mo's argumentation, the context changes constantly in accordance with the changes in the communicative process, and interpreters can only adjust their choice of language and the way of adaptation according to these changes.

Prior studies have identified the different utilities of the adaptation theory in interpreting [3,4,6]. Gong divided the application of the adaptation theory in interpretation into five parts: adaptation of context, lexical adaptation strategy, English-Chinese syntactic adaptation, the adaptation of dynamic process of interpretation, and the adaptation of cultural context in interpretation [3]. Ren classified adaptation into linguistic adaptability, contextual adaptability, dynamic process of adaptation, and salience in interpreting [4]. It is important for interpreters to adapt the theme of communication, the adaptation of linguistic structure, and overcoming the difficulties caused by contextual ambiguity, to find accurate meaning [6].

In their articles, there are some shared arguments. Firstly, in the process of interpretation, interpreters have to ensure the coherence and logic of the translation. This requires interpreters to fully understand the information structure of the original text, and make linguistic choices based on the structure. In some cases, the speaker may omit some evident information from his/her side but interpreters should complement the translation to prevent audience misunderstanding the meaning. Meanwhile, interpreters should also pay attention to the syntactic difference between two languages. For example, Chinese is more parataxis and English tends to be more hypotaxis. Hypotaxis means that words or clauses of a sentence are connected by subordinating conjunctions to indicate the grammar and logic while parataxis means that the words or clauses are not connected by subordinating conjunctions. Indeed, when interpreters translate Chinese into English, they need to add some logical connectives in translation to enhance the logical flow, thus making the translated text more understandable. If interpreters translate the text without clear logic directly, the audience may be confused. It is better to restructure the source text during interpretation, making it conform to the logic of listeners. In doing so, the audience could understand the speaker's intention.

Another point is that interpreters should follow the dynamic process of interpretation. They should know the language structure of the original text and analyze the use of language. And interpreters should adapt interpreting strategies based on their understanding of the source text inclusive of linguistic structure and language use. For example, when facing some culturally specific items and

terminologies, interpreters should choose the appropriate translating method according to the comprehension and acceptance level of listeners. When listeners with poor comprehension, interpreters may need to give extra prompts for those culturally specific words and terminologies while those people with high linguistic and cultural competencies, they could use literal translation.

The aforementioned researchers also state that the context surrounding the mental and physical world will build different mental images and representations that affect interpretation. In terms of the mental world, interpreters should understand both the inner thoughts of the speaker and the audience. What is the purpose of the speaker to give a speech and what are the expectations of the audience? If the speaker gives a motivating speech, interpreters will also use equally empowering words to achieve communicative purposes. With regard to the physical world, the time and location could also affect interpretation. For example, if a speaker is giving a speech at an opening ceremony, interpreters could roughly infer the logical structure and language style of his speech. Indeed, they are supposed to choose proper words according to the venue.

All the studies well synthesized the relationship between the adaptation theory and oral interpretation. They provided insightful perspectives for people to understand the interconnection between pragmatic theory and translation practices.

3.   Pragmatic Failures in Oral Interpretating Practices

From the previous section, it can be seen that pragmatics is of great importance in interpretation and interpreting practices can be informed by pragmatic theories (the adaptation theory in particular). Additionally, there are pragmatic failures or mistakes which cause communication breakdown in interpretation which requires interpreters to understand and improve their interpretation abilities.

Pragmatic failure does not necessarily refer to performance errors in wording and phrasing but implies the communicative failure caused by inappropriate expressions [7]. Pragmatic failure is a cross-cultural communication error rather than a purely grammatical one. In cross-cultural verbal communication, the appropriateness of a second language speaker's utterances seems more critical than grammatical correctness [8]. The lack of pragmatic knowledge may lead to pragmatic failures in cross-cultural communication. To be more specific, pragmatic failures occur when the hearer fails to perceive the illocutionary force of an utterance or when the speaker fails to convey the intended illocutionary force [13]. For example, when guests invited to your home say that the house is a little bit stuffy, they do not just merely tell you this fact. Their extra intentions are to suggest you opening the window or turning on the air conditioner. Under this condition, people are supposed to comprehend the illocutionary force conveyed by the speaker.

Most scholars divided pragmatic failures into two types: pragma-linguistic failure and socio-pragmatic failure [8, 10]. Pragma-linguistic failure means the expression of interpretation does not follow the linguistic habits of target readers or misuses the English expression. For example, in Chinese, people can use "没关系(never mind)" as a response to either thanks or apology while the English expression "Never mind" is used only in declination to an apology [8].

Socio-pragmatic failure means that interpreters do not adequately consider the cultural and social differences between the source text and target text which cause communicative errors. It often occurs in cross-cultural communication when two sides interact with each other according to the politeness rules in their own cultures [8]. For example, if the typical Chinese greeting "你没怎么变" is interpreted literally as "You have not changed much", it would make native English speakers feel confusing because it means depreciation without any implication of "compliment (you do not age)". Socio-pragmatic failure also includes some misunderstandings in national cultural phenomena, historical events, institutions, etc. These items are easy to be misused [12]. The conflicts in the concepts of values and unacceptable cultural patterns may also cause socio-pragmatic failure [13].

The division of these two types of pragmatic failure is not dichotomous [8]. Different contexts of communication lead to different intentions and different interpretations of an utterance. The same pragmatic failure may be taken as both a pragma-linguistic failure and a socio-pragmatic failure.

Interpretation is also a cross-linguistic and cross-cultural communication. Interpreters should pay attention to the linguistic and cultural differences during interpretation to avoid pragmatic failures mentioned before. In this situation, interpreters serve as the bilingual and bicultural mediators between the speaker and the listener.

The causes of pragmatic failures can also vary across contexts. It is said that the causes of pragmatic failures in interpretation could be divided into two kinds: culturally-enriched expressions and cultural perceptions [11,13]. While Feng explained the reasons for pragmatic failures in interpretation of seven categories of speech acts: greetings, compliments, responses, invitations, accepting and declining invitations, offers, and requests [8]. This essay focuses on the above-mentioned types of causes: culturally-enriched expressions, cultural perceptions, and speech acts.

The pragmatic failures derived from culturally-enriched expressions are mainly due to social and custom distinctions and image patterns [13]. Pertaining to social and custom distinctions, there is a typical example. Chinese people address old people as "叔叔(uncle)", and "阿姨(aunt)" in China to show respect. However, western people do not address people in a similar fashion. They think everyone is equal and tend to follow the reciprocal or symmetrical address form, like sir or madam. There are also salient differences between Chinese and western rhetoric implications of images. For example, Chinese people think highly of "dragon" which has a positive referent like power, dignity, and honor in Chinese. However, in western culture, "dragon" may represent "evil" or other negative meanings in western countries. Therefore, these different cultural expressions may cause pragmatic failures and subsequently communicative problems in cross-cultural interpretation.

Pragmatic failures could also be derived from cultural perceptions, which include world perceptions and mental and thinking patterns [11]. The most distinct difference is that Chinese people mainly believe in Confucianism, Taoism, and value collectivism. This emphasizes the close ties between the society and individuals. While western people predominantly believe in Christianity, God, and individualism which make people lay emphasis on individuality. This directly influences the thinking pattern and world perception of these two groups of people. For example, Chinese people value modesty and tend not to show their feelings in public. Therefore, Chinese people may not say "我爱你 (I love you)" in public even to whom they are very close. However, western people usually say "I love you" to their friends in public which is a good way to express their way of rapport. Indeed, the difference in cultural perceptions would also cause misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication.

In addition to the cultural-enriched expression and cultural perceptions, speech acts should be paid attention to. As mentioned before, the failure in speech acts has seven parts [8]. The reasons could be summarized into these points: the negative transfer from Chinese, inadequate knowledge of the target language, failure in interpreting certain speech acts, inappropriate degree of politeness, different value systems of different cultures, and unawareness of the pragmatic force of the target language. For example, in Chinese, we often use a person's title or spell out the occupation to show politeness, such as designer, teacher, and architect, as a form of address, but this kind of address form may sound unintelligible to native English speakers when interpreting into English. Because Westerners will call their teacher Mr. or Miss X instead of addressing them by Teacher X [8].

Adding to the theoretical accounts of pragmatic failures, the above-mentioned literature also provides practical suggestions to help interpreters avoid pragmatic mistakes in interpretation. To avoid mistakes caused by cultural-enriched expressions and cultural perceptions interpreters should improve their cross-cultural awareness [11,13]. Because interpreters ought to be sensitive to both source and target culture at the surface and deep levels so that they could adjust to constant changes

when interpreting. Interpreters should improve their cultural knowledge which includes history, geology, politics, literature, etc. With abundant cultural knowledge, interpreters' cultural understanding will also be improved, allowing them to make correct judgments during interpretation. As for the pragmatic failures caused by speech acts, interpreters should improve their pragmatic competences like pragma-linguistic knowledge since interpreters should know how to apply those expressions and know the pragmatic functions of certain linguistic forms during interpretation. Interpreters should also distinguish what kind of linguistic form can express different intentions in different contexts so that they could avoid using inappropriate expressions which may confuse listeners. For example, "I am hungry" could be used to express a fact, request, or suggestion and interpreters should pay attention to the language use and tone during interpretation.

These studies emphasize the importance of pragmatic theories in interpretation by explaining those pragmatic failures and the solutions to these problems. This further indicates the deep relationship between pragmatic theory and interpretation through another perspective.

4. Conclusion

In summary, interpretation can be driven by pragmatic theories and the essay underscores the interconnection between pragmatics and interpretation. The adaptation theory serves as the guidance when practicing interpretation. It is argued that interpreters should ensure the coherence and logic of translation and understand the needs of the speaker and listener. Interpreters should also analyze the structure and style of the source text and choose proper interpretation strategies based on this. Additionally, some interpreters may not apply pragmatic theories well to interpretation which leads to pragmatic failures such as pragma-linguistic failures and socio-pragmatic failures. These are some commonly seen errors in interpretation and interpreters should improve their skills in order to avoid them. From these two aspects, it could be seen that pragmatic theories are of great importance in interpretation and interpreters should understand to adopt pragmatic theories during interpreting.

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