



# Cultural Norms and Pragmatic Errors in Verbal Communication

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## Abstract

Pragmatics is the study of how people effectively carry out verbal communication in a specific environment. Different cultures require different behaviors, which is a kind of cultural norms. Language and culture are closely linked. By understanding the relationship between language, culture and communication, this paper explores the manifestation of pragmatic errors in verbal communication, and emphasizes that in order to smooth cross-cultural communication and avoid pragmatic errors, the communicative parties should understand each other's cultural background. In verbal communication, language should be combined with social situations and interpersonal relationships, and cultural norms should be observed.

**Key words:** Cultural norms; Verbal communication; Pragmatic errors

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Language communication is a social behavior in which people engage in various social activities and achieve various social goals through language communication in human society. Every social group has its own shared knowledge, and every language has its cultural

characteristics and expression habits. Pragmatics is the study of how people effectively carry out verbal communication in a specific environment. The errors that occur in verbal communication due to the failure to achieve perfect and appropriate communication results are called pragmatic errors, which are mistakes made when speaking inappropriately, or when the way of speaking is inappropriate, and the expression is not in line with habits, resulting in the failure to achieve the expected communication effect. Every ethnic group has its own living habits, ways of thinking, language psychology, behavioral norms, values, and cultural traditions. The unique culture of each ethnic group determines certain characteristics of its language and endows it with certain special cultural meanings. How people express their ideas appropriately and accurately understand each other's meaning depends entirely on their understanding and adherence to cultural norms. In cross-cultural communication, only by understanding the background knowledge of English and Chinese cultures, selecting appropriate language expression forms based on corresponding contextual factors, can we correctly understand and accurately grasp and use this language, and carry out more effective and smooth communication, thus achieving communication goals.

## 2. THE CONCEPTS AND INTERRELATIONS OF LANGUAGE, CULTURE, AND COMMUNICATION

Any language can be seen as a symbol system that reflects a specific culture and is a manifestation of the subjective and objective world of that culture. The nature of language determines the intricate connections between the language we use and the culture we possess. This connection is particularly close in language phenomena that reflect the unique characteristics of a certain culture.

Language is the carrier of culture, and its rich cultural connotations and cultural load convey endless cultural information. Language is a part of culture and plays an important role in it. Some sociologists believe that language is the crown stone of culture --- without language, there is no culture. From another perspective, language is also influenced by culture and reflects it. It can be said that language reflects the characteristics of a nation, not only containing its historical and cultural background, but also containing its views, way of life, and way of thinking on life.

Communication is a product of culture and an inseparable component of culture. The foundation of communication is cultural background, and language is the main means and form of cultural expression (Rabiah, 2012). There is a close connection between ethnic culture and ethnic language. Without ethnic culture, it is impossible to master the language of this ethnic group, and language cannot play its communicative function, so there can be no communication.

The content and process of communication are not universal, and people from different ethnic cultures have different understandings of the actual situation around them. The social traditions, customs, language etiquette, behavioral norms, and moral standards are all directly related to culture, and only in the context of its culture can the language of the ethnic group be correctly mastered.

### 3. THE MANIFESTATION OF PRAGMATIC ERRORS IN VERBAL COMMUNICATION

In cross-cultural communication and comparative study of language, it has been found that the same concepts or language functions have completely different ways of expression in different languages. People have also found that the expression of the same language function in language A may not necessarily be found in language B. This is clearly influenced by cultural factors.

Each ethnic group has its own cultural customs, and when people speak different languages, misunderstandings may arise due to cultural differences, even if the language structure is accurate. People with different cultural backgrounds engage in verbal communication, and if they do not understand each other's social habits, even if they speak the same language, it is difficult to have effective communication. Take a look at the following two dialogues:

- Host: Would you like some more dessert?

Guest: No, thank you. It's delicious, but I've really had enough.

Host: OK, why don't we leave the table and sit in the living room?

- Host: Have some.

Guest: I'm full.

Host: I know you're full but have some more for X's sake.

Guest: As much as I like X, I do have to refuse.

Host: For my sake, have some, I cooked the food.

Guest: For your sake, I'll take some.

The first group is a dialogue between two Americans. When the host asks the guest to eat, he does not try to persuade the guest again and again to show his enthusiasm. The guest does not try to refuse again and again to show his good manners. If the guest hasn't eaten, you can just say, "Yes, I'd like some more, thank you." If you haven't eaten and say, "No, thank you," you will go hungry. Because the host believes that your rejection is sincere and straightforward, he advocates: "Don't beat around the bush." "Get to the point." This emphasizes directness in verbal communication. The second conversation takes place between two Arabs. In the Middle East and some other regions, hosts make guests refuse to eat for the first and second time, and only decide whether to eat for the third time. There is a joke about an Arab visiting a friend's house in the United States for the first time. The host brought him a delicious sandwich, but he refused the first time and then the second time. To his regret, the host did not persuade him again, so he had to stare at it and refuse. If Chinese people or foreigners who come to China for the first time do not know some cultural differences in advance, they may encounter such "culture shock".

Various cultural differences may have an impact on cross-cultural communication, causing various communication difficulties and problems. These difficulties and problems can be divided into two categories: one is "communicative failure", that is, the listener does not understand or misunderstands the speaker's intention; the other is "communicative conflict", that is, lack of understanding or misunderstanding leads to discord and friction between the two sides. Different cultures require different behaviors, which is a cultural norm. The cultural norms of language use refer to the norms that should be followed when combining language with social situations and interpersonal relationships (Liu, December 2023). Further exploration will be conducted from several aspects below.

#### 3.1 Appellation

Various languages have specific appellation systems and usage rules. In English speaking countries, the younger generation can call the elder's name directly, but not in China. Chinese people have a habit of respecting their ancestors. The address reflects the traditional cultural concept of the Han nationality. The names of ancestors and elders must not be called directly. Even to the child's name should pay special attention not to the same word with the elder's name (Mi, 2024). For example, the Chinese word "Hello Teacher" reflects the cultural tradition of respecting teachers and valuing morality. The term "teacher" here is not just a call sign or a honorific, but in English, "teacher" cannot be used as a call sign, let

alone a honorific. In English speaking countries, primary and middle school students generally address teachers by adding Mr., Mrs., or Miss before their last name, while college students address teachers by their academic titles or degrees, adding Professor before their last name for teachers above associate professors, adding Dr. before their last name for teachers with doctoral degrees, and adding Mr. Mrs. or Miss before their last name for others. In addition, British people pay attention to the closeness of both sides in terms of address terms. For example, once a British professor meets his students, he will ask students to call him by his Christian name to show closeness. The Chinese pay attention to respect and keep a certain distance.

### 3.2 Greeting

In China, greetings between acquaintances often use phrases such as “Have you eaten?” “Where are you going?” “Why are you wearing so little? Be careful of catching a cold.” and so on. These are just small talk, not the real problem. But if you say to an English or American person, “Have you had your meal?” They will understand that you want to invite them to dinner. In such a situation, it is appropriate to say: “Hello, a lovely day, isn’t it?” When encountering someone on the road, if you say “Where are you going?” or “Where have you been?” It will make people feel that you are interested in their personal affairs or are being questioned by the police. If you say “Hi, glad to meet you here.” It sounds much more natural. For example, if you see a friend going out and say, “It’s cold outside. Put on more clothes.” to show concern, he may mistakenly think that you think he has poor abilities and cannot take care of himself, and need someone to remind him. In such situations, it is advisable to say, “Enjoy yourself.” or “Have a good time”.

### 3.3 Farewell

In China, when guests bid farewell and leave, the host often uses polite words such as “go well”, “take it easy”, “come again”, etc. These expressions cannot be directly translated into English, otherwise they may cause misunderstandings. There are many ways to say goodbye in English, and it varies from person to person. Generally, there are several ways to say goodbye: “Good-bye. See you later. See you. So long. I’ll be seeing you. It’s nice meeting you. I hope we’ll be able to get together again.” Moreover, when British people are guests at other people’s homes, they usually express their intention to leave minutes in advance. They usually say this: “I’ll have to be going soon. I have an appointment at 10.” “It’s been lovely to see you again, but I must be leaving soon.” “I think I’d better leave, it’s getting late.”

### 3.4 Appreciation

The following is a dialogue between a foreign guest and a Chinese student after the Chinese student accompanied him to visit:

---Thank you very much.

---It’s my duty to do so.

What reaction will this foreign guest have? He will definitely feel unhappy and angry. Because in British and American culture, duty is associated with some kind of compulsion. The foreign guest may think that you are not willing to accompany him on the visit, which is out of helplessness rather than voluntary. The way to answer “Thank you” in English depends on different situations, and there are usually several ways to answer: “Not at all. Don’t mention it. It’s a pleasure. You are welcome. That’s OK. It is really nothing. Forget it please.”

### 3.5 Apology

The function of “apology” is to remedy some rude behavior and restore a harmonious relationship between both parties. How to apologize and how to accept apologies are important components of verbal communication. In Chinese, when accepting an apology from someone, it is often said: “It doesn’t matter.” But in English, “It doesn’t matter” cannot be used to indicate acceptance of the apology, but rather “That’s all right,” “That’s OK,” or “No problem.” When one’s work is praised and appreciated by others, Chinese people often use “nothing” and “it’s okay” to express humility, but in English people cannot say “Never mind” because “Never mind” is also used in situations where the other person apologizes and one does not mind, as it is an idiom used to comfort the other person and show politeness.

### 3.6 Compliment

Different cultures have different rules about what to say when giving a compliment. In Western culture, it is common for men to praise women’s appearance, body shape, clothing, and appearance. However, this is basically a taboo in Chinese traditional culture (Lutz, 2017). Therefore, if an American man who has learned Chinese praises a Chinese girl he meets with the words “you are a pretty sexy girl”, it is not easy for Chinese people to accept. For Americans, it seems that there is nothing inappropriate, and even mothers can use it to praise their daughters. For example, when people are praised or congratulated, Chinese often use phrases such as “where, where”, “too much, too much”, “ashamed, ashamed” to respond, indicating the humility of the praised person. However, it is very inappropriate to use “You flatter me”, “I feel ashamed” and other words in English communication. Foreigners will think you are hypocritical and dishonest after hearing this, because Westerners will readily accept others’ praise of themselves and thank them for their generous praise with “Thank you”.

### 3.7 Exclamation

In almost all languages, the most basic interjections used by people are several vowel phonemes derived from physiological factors, such as [a:], [au], etc. However, with the process of cultural acquisition, the selection and

use of interjections learned by people reflect the influence of different cultures on their self-expression and emotional expression. When Western people are in a hurry, they turn to God for help. They long for heaven after death and fear going to hell. So their exclamations are often related to God and heaven: Oh, my God! Good God! Gee! Gosh! Golly! By Gum! God Almighty! Oh Lord! Oh Heavens! Goddammit! Heck (Hell)! Chinese people believe in fate and ghosts, interjections with such kind of words: Criminy! Oh, Shit! Bodhisattva bless! Amitabha Buddha!

### 3.8 Taboo

Taboo is reflected in language as linguistic taboo. In language communication, if the speaker violates language taboos, it can lead to communication failure and even unimaginable consequences. There are significant differences between English and Chinese in taboo topics. In our culture, colleagues and friends almost have everything to say and talk about. British and American people emphasize independent personalities, and their personal affairs and privacy are absolutely inviolable (Gao, December 2013). Topics related to political orientation, marital status, religious beliefs, age and generation, personal finances, and other aspects are all taboo category. How much do you get per month? How much did you spend buying this car? How much do you have in the bank? How much money are you going to spend on this trip? These topics are rarely mentioned among friends, let alone between people in general relationships. In our country, it is common to ask the other person how much money they can earn in a month, and there is nothing inappropriate about asking how much their clothes cost.

### 3.9 Euphemism

In verbal communication, people do not directly say things that are unpleasant or habitually considered inappropriate, but often use a gentle, pleasant, and implicit way to express them. There are euphemisms for death, crime, war, money, politics, race, disease, ignorance, excrement, sexual life, gods, and so on. In contemporary English, many euphemisms are related to social life. For example, in the United States, “poor” is not referred to as the poor people, but rather as the disadvantaged, the unprivileged, the low-income group, etc. “Rise of prices” is referred to as upward price readjustment; “slums” is referred to as culturally depressed environments; “street dwellers” is referred to as urban-camping; “hunger” is referred to as food insecure, and “second-hand cars” are referred to as pre-owned cars; “firing” is said to be a

termination of employment, declaring staff redundant. The store that deals with cheap goods is called a budget shop or economy shop; the person who cannot afford medical expenses is called a medically indigent person; and installment payments are called deferred payments.

## 4. CONCLUSION

Language and culture are closely linked, and all verbal communication takes place within a certain cultural background. In cross-cultural communication, when using a certain language to achieve a communicative purpose, it is necessary not only to understand the cultural characteristics of the ethnic group, but also to respect their traditional customs. The saying “Do as the Romans do” is based on this principle. People’s speaking styles or habits also vary under different cultural backgrounds. Communication is a two-way process, and in order for cross-cultural communication to proceed smoothly and effectively, both parties should enter into each other’s cultural background, start from each other’s culture, communicate in the true form of each other’s language, and adhere to cultural norms.

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