

Strategies for Avoiding Pragmatic Errors in Chinese-German Language Communication from a Cultural Comparison Perspective

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Abstract. This paper analyzes the differences in Chinese-German language communication and the cultural background of pragmatic errors from the perspective of cultural comparison. Based on this, the paper proposes strategies for avoiding pragmatic errors in Chinese-German communication, emphasizing the importance of viewing cultural differences dynamically. It explores how the linguistic and cultural elements of both sides can be integrated into a "new language culture" on the basis of seeking common ground while reserving differences and mutual tolerance, to guide both parties' "joint speech acts."

Keywords: Chinese-German cultural differences, pragmatic errors, cross-cultural

1. Introduction

Language is the carrier of culture, and different languages carry different cultural meanings. In Chinese-German communication, due to the differences in the cultures behind the two languages, there are also differences in pragmatic rules and interaction patterns. Analyzing the differences in pragmatic rules and interaction patterns from a cultural comparison perspective helps to provide strategies to avoid pragmatic errors in communication, aiming to reduce misunderstandings and conflicts in Chinese-German cultural exchanges.

Current studies on the differences in Chinese-German cultural and linguistic communication from a cultural comparison perspective have analyzed aspects such as the cultural connotations and origins of vocabulary, for example, comparing the symbolic meanings of words related to colors, animals, and numbers [1], or analyzing the cultural differences reflected in surnames, idioms, and proverbs [2]. Some studies have explored differences in Chinese-German thinking patterns, cultural traditions, and other aspects through the comparative analysis of syntax and discourse structure [3]. This paper will analyze the cultural influencing factors of pragmatic errors in Chinese-German communication from the perspective of pragmatics.

2. Differences in Chinese-German language communication

The differences in Chinese-German language communication mainly manifest in five aspects:

1. Differences in the Written Language Systems of Chinese and German: Chinese and German have two completely different symbol systems. Chinese is a language primarily based on meaning and association, and Chinese characters are ideograms. In contrast, German is a language based on form, using an alphabetic writing system.

2. Differences in the Connotations of Many Words and Phrases in Chinese and German: This is one of the causes of intercultural errors in Chinese-German communication. Understanding the meanings of many words and phrases in both languages requires comparing and analyzing their emotional connotations, associative meanings, stylistic meanings, double meanings, emotional tone, and collocational meanings [3]. For example, many honorifics and polite terms in Chinese have no direct equivalent in German. In German, respect is often expressed using the subjunctive form of verbs.

3. Differences in Information Communication Structures between Chinese and German: These differences are evident in the sentence structure, discourse structure, and text structure of the two languages. For instance, in Chinese writing, the use of numerous references and quotations enhances the persuasiveness of the text. In contrast, German writing places more emphasis on text structure, focusing on logical and evidence-based arguments and avoiding vague references to classical works.

4. Differences in Expression Rules between Chinese and German: These differences include how issues are introduced, the method of feedback, and the opening and closing of communication. For example, in a meeting, Chinese people tend to engage in some small talk and build rapport before getting to the main topic, creating a harmonious atmosphere. They often introduce key content toward the end of the conversation. In contrast, Germans tend to be more direct, getting straight to the point with minimal off-topic discussion [4]. Although there may be a brief period for small talk before formal meetings, it is usually short. Chinese people also try to avoid direct conflicts and debates in communication, often using indirect or roundabout ways to express their feelings and emotions in the face of conflict.

5. Differences in the Selection of Topics in Chinese and German Communication: For the same event, the perspective chosen in the Chinese and German contexts is different, and the focus of the description varies. For example, when describing a "traffic accident," German students tend to describe the causes of the accident, while Chinese students focus on the results of the accident [5]. Additionally, there are different taboos in the communication contexts of both languages.

3. Analyzing Chinese-German language communication differences from a cultural perspective

Chinese and German cultures exhibit significant differences, which largely influence cross-cultural communication between the two countries. The communication differences between the two languages also reflect the distinct thinking patterns and value orientations inherent in the peoples of each language. The cultural differences reflected in language can be analyzed using Hofstede's (1980) five-dimensional cultural values theory and its derivatives, including dimensions such as power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism/collectivism, long-term/short-term orientation [6], as well as Hall's (1995) high-context/low-context theory [7].

3.1. Power distance

Due to the deep influence of Confucian culture, a higher power distance is in line with traditional Chinese cultural traits. Chinese culture contains more historical and philosophical ideas about "power." In traditional Chinese society, the principle of "hierarchy" and "order between the elder and the younger" was emphasized, and respecting authority and social hierarchies was a core value. This is reflected in communication, where respect and admiration for elders or superiors are evident, with the language containing numerous honorifics. German culture, on the other hand, is relatively more egalitarian, with a significantly lower power distance than China, and power distribution is more even. Communication in Germany tends to adopt a more equal and open approach, with fewer formalities.

3.2. Uncertainty avoidance

Chinese culture generally exhibits a higher tolerance for uncertainty. In communication, this may be reflected in a flexible approach to changes and less planning. In contrast, Germany shows a significantly higher level of uncertainty avoidance, with a greater emphasis on planning and organization. Germans tend to exhibit a clear structure in their communication, with an emphasis on logical planning and well-organized writing habits, highlighting well-supported arguments.

3.3. Individualism/collectivism

Chinese culture leans more toward collectivism. The interests of the family, community, and team are often considered more important than individual interests. Communication emphasizes teamwork, a sense of belonging to a group, and harmonious interaction. Confucian teachings advocate for "harmony" as a value, meaning peaceful coexistence and avoidance of conflicts, which is why indirect and tactful expressions are commonly used. In contrast, German culture places a greater emphasis on individualism, highlighting individual rights and independence. In communication, Germans are more likely to emphasize personal autonomy and individual achievements.

3.4. Long-term/short-term orientation

Chinese culture exhibits a clear preference for long-term orientation. Traditional values emphasize long-term investment, patience, and the importance of planning for the future and pursuing sustainability. In communication, this is reflected in a focus on long-term goals and an emphasis on traditional values. German culture, however, tends to strike a balance, integrating both long-term orientation and attention to short-term practical issues. In communication, Germans may place more emphasis on resolving current issues and making plans for the near future.

3.5. High/low context

According to Hall's (1995) high/low context theory, German culture is considered a low-context culture. German communication tends to be more logical and explicit, with speakers using evidence to support their arguments. In contrast, Chinese culture is a high-context culture, placing greater importance on implicit meanings, requiring deeper empathy between communicators, and understanding through association and imagination. German is a language that is very logical, and Germans tend to express their viewpoints clearly and then back them up with convincing data. Typically, one party makes their statement without interruption, and once they finish, the other party immediately follows with their own statement, with little pause. In Chinese communication, the conclusion often comes at the end, and during the process of one party presenting their viewpoint and leading to the conclusion, the other party may frequently interrupt to provide feedback, showing interest in the conversation. However, after one party finishes their statement, there is typically a pause before the other person starts presenting their point of view, allowing time to process the information received and ensure better understanding, followed by collaborative feedback.

4. Pragmatic failures in Chinese-German language communication

Thomas first introduced the concept of "pragmatic failure" [8], which can be divided into two types: linguistic pragmatic failure and social pragmatic failure. Linguistic pragmatic failure refers to problems in the expression of language due to inappropriate language use, such as vocabulary or grammatical errors, which occur in cross-cultural communication [9]. Social pragmatic failure, on the other hand, refers to language expression errors that arise due to differences in social customs, thinking habits, and values between communicators from different cultural backgrounds during communication activities. Thomas argues that communicators from different cultural backgrounds are more tolerant of errors in pronunciation and grammar, but deviations from or violations of discourse communication rules are considered intolerable or incomprehensible, or even impolite. Pragmatic failure in cross-cultural communication is thus classified as social pragmatic failure. This kind of failure often occurs because the communicators are unaware of the differences in social and cultural values that exist in the two languages.

5. Avoiding pragmatic failures in communication from a cultural comparison perspective

Pragmatic failures in language communication caused by a lack of awareness of cultural differences can be an important factor leading to communication failure. In Chinese-German cross-cultural communication, both parties need to understand each other's cultural standards and interpretive models from different perspectives, to reconcile the respective values and worldviews of both Chinese and German societies, seeking common ground while reserving differences. This will help to minimize misunderstandings and conflicts caused by pragmatic failures, ensuring effective cross-cultural communication.

5.1. Enhancing sensitivity to cultural differences to avoid social pragmatic failures

Due to different values and psychological-cultural environments, people's pragmatics also differ. Communicators should consciously think about and evaluate the other party's culture, perceiving cultural phenomena from their perspective, analyzing the various dimensions of cultural differences, and judging the other party's speech forms and communication rules. For example, according to Chinese thinking, phrases like "It's nothing, it's no big deal" might be used to comfort a patient or respond to bad news. However, Germans might misunderstand this form of comfort as a sign of indifference or lack of concern. In such cases, following German communication habits, expressing empathy and wishing the person a speedy recovery would avoid communication conflicts.

5.2. Respecting both Parties' cultural orientations and understanding their communication thinking to establish communication rapport

Both parties should acknowledge each other's culture. Every culture has the right to maintain its uniqueness, and both communicators have the right to choose their own communication methods. Both sides must have a deep understanding of their own and the other party's culture and be positioned in the middle ground, forming a communication mode specific to the communication situation at hand. For instance, Germany's lower tolerance for uncertainty is reflected in their precise descriptions of time, weight, and other quantities. In contrast, Chinese culture tends to tolerate uncertainty more, which is reflected in the frequent use of vague terms like "a little while" or "a little" instead of "five minutes" or "2.5 grams." When communicating with Germans, it would help to supplement vague expressions like "a little while" or "a little" with more specific quantities to ensure that the Germans understand the underlying meaning of such expressions in different contexts, thus improving the efficiency and quality of communication.

5.3. Precise word usage in context of cultural background

Every language contains a large number of words with cultural significance that are unique to the language. These words have different origins, and even simple words may carry deep associative meanings. Before communicating, both parties should have a thorough understanding of the meanings of words in different cultural contexts and use words appropriately to ensure the meaning and usage are correct. This is essential for smooth cross-cultural communication. For example, in both Chinese and German, there are words that have cultural connotations that may trigger different semantic associations. For instance, Chinese people tend to have a positive association with the word "dragon," often metaphorically viewing it as a symbol of good fortune. Words associated with "dragon" usually have a positive connotation. However, in German culture, a "dragon" is seen as a "monster" or an "ominous sign," so sentences containing the word "Drachen" (dragon) in German usually carry a negative connotation.

5.4. Strengthening knowledge sharing between both parties

In cross-cultural communication, both communicators can actively share knowledge and experiences about their own culture and language, exchange tips, and collaboratively solve communication challenges. This promotes mutual understanding and trust. At the same time, both parties can better understand each other's thinking patterns and cultural values, exploring the integration of language and cultural elements from both sides. By seeking common ground while reserving differences and embracing mutual tolerance, a "new linguistic culture" can be formed, guiding the joint verbal behavior of both parties.

6. Implications of cross-cultural pragmatic failures for German language teaching

6.1. Increasing learners' awareness of cultural differences

In the process of German language teaching, teachers should cultivate students' sense of national identity and cultural confidence while simultaneously fostering good multicultural awareness and an understanding of cultural differences. This will enhance learners' sensitivity to the differences in thinking patterns, value orientations, and behavioral norms in cross-cultural communication practices. By strengthening cultural comparison, teachers should guide learners to always be aware of the impact of cultural factors on Chinese-German language communication.

6.2. Developing learners' cross-cultural competence in practice

During the German language teaching process, teachers should actively explore practical teaching models, creating opportunities for students to communicate with native speakers through activities such as exhibition services, cultural exchanges, etc. Teachers should guide students in cross-cultural communication practices, helping them cultivate attitudes of mutual tolerance, respect, openness, reciprocity, fairness, and justice. This will help broaden students' cultural horizons, increase their awareness of cultural contrasts, and explore communication patterns to avoid pragmatic failures. Teachers should also encourage students to inherit Chinese culture and effectively tell the Chinese story.

7. Conclusion

Language and culture evolve with the development of society. Culture is diverse, and it is precisely due to this diversity that pragmatic rules differ across languages. In order to avoid pragmatic failures in cross-cultural communication as much as possible, communicators should adopt an open attitude towards understanding cultural differences, view cultural differences from a dynamic perspective, and explore points of integration between the linguistic and cultural elements of both sides. By seeking common ground while reserving differences and embracing mutual tolerance, communicators can achieve their communication objectives.

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