

# Pragmatic Failure in the Movie *The Treatment* Seen from the Perspective of High-and Low-Context Orientation

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## Abstract

**Intercultural communication takes place in contexts. From the perspective of High-and Low-Context Orientation, the paper aims at exploring the cause of pragmatic failure in the movie *The Treatment* based on the contrasts and analyses of specific cases in the movie. And the author draws the conclusion that high-and low-context cultures serve as one of the underlying causes of pragmatic failures. It is found out from the paper that both a lack of contexts and different understanding of contexts can give rise to pragmatic failures, indicating communication failures, thus providing a new perspective for intercultural communication research and practice.**

## Keywords

**The Treatment; Intercultural communication; Pragmatic failure; High-and Low-Context Orientation.**

## 1. Introduction

As a classical movie in the film history, *The Treatment* tells a long story of intercultural communication, featuring numerous cultural differences as well as clashes. The story takes place in the St. Louis, USA. The Chinese man Xu Datong has been living in America for 8 years. He becomes a successful man in both family and work with the company of all his family members and a promising future. However, an accident drives his beautiful American dream in tatters. When Datong's father, who was just brought to America by Datong, finds out that his grandson Daniel gets a slight fever, he uses a traditional Chinese medicine therapy Gua Sha to treat the condition, leaving a lot of bruises on the back. If it occurs in China, there is nothing unusual about the grandfather's choice. Unfortunately, they are now in America where Gua Sha is something never known before for American people. And those bruises become the potent evidence when they are accused of child abuse, leading to the breakdown of the family. Luckily, with the help of his friend John, Datong gets rid of the injustice he has received and earns a family reunion at the end of the story.

The movie vividly demonstrates a range of cases of intercultural communication failures between individuals from different cultural backgrounds, which refer to pragmatic failure. And this kind of failure is deeply associated with different cultural contexts. From this perspective, this paper focuses on the relationship between pragmatic failure and high-and low-cultural contexts and analysis on the occurrence of pragmatic failures in the movie from the perspective of High-and Low-Context Orientation.

The paper generally consists of four sections. Section one is an introduction to the story and this paper. Section two introduces the pragmatic failure and one of its underlying causes, high or low context cultures. Section three contrasts and analyzes the cases of pragmatic failure in the movie from the perspective of High-and Low-Context Orientation. The last section is the conclusion to the paper, beginning with the influence of High-and Low-Context Orientation on pragmatic failure and also intercultural communication and it then offers some suggestions as well as enlightenment in the course of Intercultural communication.

## 2. Pragmatic Failure and High-and Low-Context Orientation

In intercultural communication, verbal communication is of vital importance for people engaged in it as a tool to exchange messages with each other. But, it doesn't mean that people can communicate at will; instead, speech acts also need to comply with rules of language use. If we fail to do so, failure of communication may occur as an indicator of the misuse of language. And pragmatic failure serves as a major cause of poor communication or failure in communication. According to the renowned British linguist Thomas (1983), pragmatic failure is the inability to understand what is meant by what is said. [5] It doesn't equal grammatical errors, but refers to the speaker's failure of choosing the right expressions or ways to convey his or her information. In the movie, pragmatic failures give rise to a range of conflicts of the story and push the story to its climax. Obviously, pragmatic failure is closely related to cultural differences, and this paper goes deeper into the differences in cultural patterns---high-context and low-context culture, which is considered one of the underlying causes of pragmatic failure. In his book *Beyond Culture* (1976), Edward Hall argues that Culture is contextual. Context refers to language environment, including the context, time and space, object, premise and other factors related to language use. Hall divides different cultures into two types: "high-context culture" and "low-context culture" according to how much people in different cultures depend on context in communication. [3] China and the United States belong to both ends of the context scale respectively, with the former in high- context culture and the latter in low- context culture. Context offers a premise for the interpretation of language, affecting people's understanding of the true meaning or intention of the communication which factually refers to the unarticulated communication. Therefore, pragmatic failure can be attributed to speaker's failure to put him into the other side's cultural context and his vain attempt to simply transfer the messages based on its own cultural context.

## 3. Pragmatic Failure under Different Cultural Contexts

### 3.1. Pragmatic Failure Caused By Lack of Contexts

A successful communication should entail a similar or shared context of the message from both the sender and the receiver. Otherwise, it may contribute to communication failure because one side fails to obtain the information transferred by the other. According to Chen Xuefei(2010), generally, people in low-context culture are significantly different from people from other cultural contexts in terms of personal beliefs, attitudes and life experiences, so more information should be provided in clear language during the communication. [1] Take the court trail in the movie for example, when the protagonist Xu Datong explains the traditional Chinese medicine therapy in an abstract way to the judge, he is directly interrupted by the judge and asked to offer solid evidence which means finding a medical authority to justify the treatment. The conflict arises from the cognitive divide between the two parties. The incomprehensible explanation of GuaSha is an outcome of the high-context culture and it's only accessible to people who are familiar with the treatment. Conceivably, living in low-context culture, American people tend to rely more on direct information such as words, logic and available evidence, so they don't pay much attention to the context of communication. In their eyes, Datong's statement is like complete nonsense. This communication is doomed to fail with pragmatic failure due to their failure of sharing a similar or same context of the message.

During the intercultural communication, people from different context cultures tend to understand the verbal messages in different ways. For people from low-context culture, they focus on the literal meaning of the message and are less proficient in interpreting nonverbal cues. On the contrary, people from high-context culture prefer to explore implied meanings which refer to conversational implicature. Thus, the ability of finding the conversational

implicatures of the message plays an important role in the communication with people from high-context culture because the true communication intention always lies on those hidden meanings. For instance, when John knows the truth that Datong takes the blame for his father who is the one that actually gives Daniel the treatment, he goes to ask Jianning why he chooses to do so. Jianning replies to him with a short, simple sentence---“because he is Chinese”. Evidently, John is confused on hearing the words. Of course, he knows Datong is a Chinese. So the problem still lies in the fact that they only communicate from their own cultural contexts. John only understands the literary meaning of the message, but actually what Jianning tries to convey is that Chinese people pursue filial piety. As a filial son, Datong is willing to take the blame for his father. And in America, they believe everyone is born to be equal and independent and also attach less importance to emotional connections and blood ties when confronting a dilemma of choosing kinship or law. Therefore, John just fails to get the conversational implicature by lack of a similar or shared context of the message.

### 3.2. Pragmatic Failure Caused by Differences in Contexts

When both parties involved in the communication all know the context of a message in both side's culture, then whether the context is the same one becomes one of the defining causes of the feasibility of the communication. Only with sufficient shared cognition to the message can the two sides interpret it in the same way. Otherwise, different understanding of the context may result into disagreement in the same thing due to pragmatic failure. In the movie, Datong and John have different understanding of “friend”. For emotional Chinese people, friends can always be the solid backing in every time of life and they spare no effort to lift you out of trouble. Although he knows John is not a professional in family-related cases, he still clings to the belief that John will definitely exert himself to win the case. And as a man from high-context culture, he takes for granted that John shares the same understanding of it, but he is just being too confident. American people focus more on truth and logic and solid evidence always takes priority over personal relationship. Individuals are totally independent and they don't need to comply with others' requirements even for a friend or a little child. Consequently, when John sees those bruises on Daniel's back, his low-context culture propels him to rely more on the solid evidence of child abuse instead of trusting him as a friend. And he even chooses to be the witness of the prosecution party, proving Datong's previous behavior of smacking the kid. That further deteriorates the situation and makes Datong suspected of child abuse. Undoubtedly, Datong becomes extremely angry and he even chooses to resign as a protest of John's betrayal. Being a representative of Chinese man, Datong has a strong sense of belonging to his group, so when he goes into trouble, his deep-rooted collectivism comforts him that he will be protected by the whole group. It is the Chinese traditional thought of collectivism and the emphasis on friendship that drive Datong to believe in and rely on John wholeheartedly. Unfortunately, his blind and over-ideal belief on the group in America only ends up with disillusion. The differences in their understanding of the context of “friend” lead to pragmatic failure, thus making the two sides run into enormous conflict.

According to Jia Xiaoqing (2009), cognitive context is not an objectively existing situation, but a knowledge construction related to language use that has been conceptualized and cognitized, and its construction requires experience.[4] An example is the characters' different attitudes towards “smacking children” ranging from the father, the kid and the American friend John. For Datong, he smacks the kid so as to show respect to his boss. Raised up in China, Datong is profoundly influenced by the traditional Chinese thought “spare the rod and spoil the child.” However, as a kid living in America and educated in the American way from birth, Daniel cannot understand the idea due to his American values that beating a child is a misdeed. Moreover, for John, a typical American, smacking children is a kind of violation of human rights and can even be regarded as a crime. And for that reason, he even suspects that Datong really abuse his

children. It is the first dramatic conflict between the two friends. And when John is told that smacking children aims at “saving his face”, he become extremely confused and even has words with Datong. Based on their different cultural contexts, the conflict can be owed to their different understanding of the “face”. People cannot live without communication and communication cannot live without “face”. “Face”, according to Brown and Levinson (1987), is “the kernel element in folk notion of politeness”. They define “face” as an individual’s self-esteem, and further distinguish two kinds of face: positive face---the desire to be approved of, and negative face---the desire to be unimpeded in one’s actions. [2] This definition is well-applied to John but not Datong, a representative of Chinese people. For more emotional Chinese people, “face” has a far more profound meaning serving as the demonstration of its high-context culture. It refers to a kind of thing offered to the other side with a purpose to protect his or her image before other people and make them feel comfortable psychologically. Daniel beats John’s son and refuses to make an apology. What he has done is damage to John’s face, so, as a friend, Datong thinks he should take prompt action to protect John’s face and he just chooses the most direct way---violence, of course not a vicious one. But, for John, he does not have any knowledge about Chinese understanding of face, so he just fails to find the counterpart in his rational low-context culture. As a result, Datong’s well-intended attempt to show respect turns out to be a substantial divergence between him and John, becoming one of the contributing factors of the breakdown of their friendship. To conclude, in these cases, pragmatic failure all emerges as a mark of their communication failure.

#### 4. Conclusion

Intercultural communication takes place and develops in contexts. The sharing of a same context between the sender and the receiver can have a direct influence on the smooth running of the communication. Otherwise, lack of contexts and different understanding of contexts can give rise to pragmatic failure, a mark of communication failure. For ordinary people, learning culture and language are of vital importance. The absence of cultural contexts may lead to communication failure at a minimum, or even the long-term prejudice and misunderstanding of a certain culture. Economic exchange may be achieved in a short term, but cultural exchange requires both sides to embrace unfamiliar knowledge, try new experiences as well as welcome the collision and integration of thinking with an equal, inclusive heart so as to avoid unnecessary pragmatic failures.

The paper only focuses on several aspects of the differences of high and low context cultures, so the analyses on pragmatic failures in *The Treatment* tend to be limited and not fully developed. And written communication skills and lack of critically thinking also remain as apparent drawbacks to the essay. There is still a long way to go for improvement.

#### References

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