

PRAGMATIC FAILURE AND INTERCULTURAL MISCOMMUNICATION IN MANDARIN BUSINESS DISCOURSE: A CRITICAL STUDY OF INDONESIAN–CHINESE PROFESSIONAL INTERACTION

Devi Alvionita Alindra

Universitas Islam Sumatera Utara, Medan, Indonesia

Universitas Prima Indonesia, Medan, Indonesia

Corresponding author: devi.a.alindra@gmail.com

Abstract

The increasing economic cooperation between Indonesia and China has significantly expanded the use of Mandarin in professional and international business communication. However, differences in cultural values, pragmatic norms, and communicative systems among speakers frequently lead to pragmatic failure that affects the effectiveness of professional interaction. This study aims to analyze the forms of pragmatic failure in Mandarin business discourse between Indonesian and Chinese professionals and to examine its impact on interpersonal relationship construction and business negotiation processes. This research employs a qualitative approach with a critical case study design. The data were collected through observations of business communication, in-depth interviews with Indonesian and Chinese professionals, documentation of business correspondence, and recordings of meetings and professional negotiation interactions. The analysis was conducted using cross-cultural pragmatics theory, Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to identify the relationship between language, power, and professional communication practices. Indonesian professionals tend to employ more explicit and interpersonal communication strategies, whereas Chinese speakers prioritize relational harmony, contextual implication, and hierarchical sensitivity. These differences often result in miscommunication during decision-making processes, price negotiations, and the delivery of professional evaluations. The study also demonstrates that the use of English as an additional lingua franca does not always reduce pragmatic misunderstanding because the root of the problem lies in differing cultural frameworks and communication ideologies. Theoretically, this research contributes to the development of cross-cultural pragmatics, business linguistics, and international communication studies within the context of Mandarin use in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: *pragmatic failure, intercultural communication, business discourse, Mandarin language, critical pragmatic analysis.*

1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of economic cooperation between Indonesia and China has transformed the linguistic landscape of professional communication across Southeast Asia.

As China continues to strengthen its position as one of Indonesia's largest trading partners, Mandarin has become increasingly important in business negotiations, corporate collaboration, investment activities, and transnational professional interactions (Alindra, 2023). Beyond its function as a medium of communication, language serves as a vehicle for transmitting cultural values, social norms, and ideological perspectives that shape professional relationships and organizational practices. Consequently, successful business communication between Indonesian and Chinese professionals requires not only linguistic competence but also intercultural pragmatic competence that enables participants to interpret meanings appropriately within specific sociocultural contexts (Du-Babcock, 2025).

In contemporary international business settings, communication failures are often attributed to insufficient language proficiency. However, a growing body of research in cross-cultural pragmatics suggests that many communication breakdowns occur not because speakers lack grammatical knowledge but because they interpret linguistic expressions according to different cultural assumptions and communicative conventions. Thomas (1983) introduced the concept of pragmatic failure to describe situations in which the intended meaning of an utterance is misunderstood despite the accurate use of linguistic forms. Pragmatic failure frequently emerges when interlocutors from different cultural backgrounds apply divergent norms of politeness, indirectness, contextual interpretation, and interpersonal relationship management. In multilingual business environments, such misunderstandings may negatively affect trust, negotiation outcomes, and long-term professional cooperation.

The phenomenon becomes particularly significant in Indonesian–Chinese professional interactions because both societies possess distinct cultural frameworks that influence communication behavior. Indonesian communication practices are generally characterized by interpersonal warmth, explicit clarification, and cooperative conversational strategies that emphasize social harmony through verbal affirmation. In contrast, Chinese communicative practices are strongly influenced by Confucian values, including hierarchical awareness, relational obligations, indirect expression, and the preservation of face (*mianzi*). Within Mandarin business discourse, speakers often rely on contextual cues, implicit meanings, and relational considerations rather than direct verbal statements. Consequently, Indonesian professionals who interpret communication primarily through explicit linguistic content may encounter difficulties understanding the pragmatic intentions embedded in Mandarin business interactions. Similarly, Chinese professionals may perceive Indonesian communication styles as overly direct, repetitive, or lacking sensitivity to contextual implications.

Previous studies on intercultural business communication have primarily focused on English as a global lingua franca, examining communication challenges among multinational professionals operating in English-speaking environments. Although these studies have contributed significantly to understanding intercultural communication, relatively limited attention has been given to pragmatic interactions involving Mandarin in Southeast Asian business contexts (Roshid, M. M., Webb, S., & Chowdhury, 2022). Existing research frequently emphasizes language learning, translation issues, or general cultural differences while overlooking the critical role of pragmatic competence in professional discourse. Moreover, few studies have specifically investigated how pragmatic failure manifests in actual Indonesian–Chinese business interactions, particularly in relation to negotiation processes, decision-making practices, and workplace relationship construction.

Another limitation of previous research lies in its tendency to treat communication

breakdowns as isolated linguistic problems rather than as socially embedded phenomena influenced by power relations, institutional expectations, and cultural ideologies. Critical discourse scholars argue that language practices cannot be separated from broader social structures that shape communicative behavior. In business settings, professional interactions often reflect unequal distributions of authority, expertise, economic influence, and cultural prestige. Consequently, pragmatic misunderstandings may reveal deeper tensions between differing communicative ideologies and professional expectations. Examining pragmatic failure through a critical discourse perspective therefore provides a more comprehensive understanding of how language, culture, and power interact within transnational business environments.

Against this background, the present study investigates the forms of pragmatic failure occurring in Mandarin business discourse between Indonesian and Chinese professionals and examines how such failures influence professional relationships and negotiation outcomes. Drawing upon cross-cultural pragmatics, Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this research explores the ways in which participants construct meaning, manage interpersonal relations, and negotiate professional identities within intercultural communication contexts. By analyzing authentic business interactions, professional correspondence, and participants' perspectives, the study seeks to uncover the underlying cultural and pragmatic mechanisms that contribute to communication breakdowns.

This research is significant for both theoretical and practical reasons. Theoretically, it contributes to the growing body of scholarship in cross-cultural pragmatics, business linguistics, intercultural communication, and Mandarin discourse studies by extending existing frameworks into the underexplored context of Indonesian–Chinese professional interaction. It also enriches Critical Discourse Analysis by demonstrating how pragmatic failures are connected to broader sociocultural and institutional dynamics. Practically, the findings may provide valuable insights for business professionals, multinational organizations, language educators, and intercultural communication trainers seeking to improve communication effectiveness in Mandarin-mediated business environments. As economic integration between Indonesia and China continues to deepen, understanding the pragmatic dimensions of professional interaction becomes increasingly essential for fostering successful and sustainable international cooperation.

2. Literature Review

a. Pragmatic Failure in Intercultural Communication

Pragmatic failure refers to communication breakdowns that occur when speakers misunderstand each other's intended meanings despite using grammatically correct language. According to Thomas (1983), pragmatic failure consists of pragma-linguistic failure, which involves inappropriate linguistic choices, and socio-pragmatic failure, which results from differences in cultural norms and social expectations. In intercultural business communication, pragmatic failure can negatively affect trust, cooperation, and negotiation outcomes.

b. Cross-Cultural Pragmatics and Business Communication

Cross-cultural pragmatics examines how cultural backgrounds influence language use and interpretation. Different cultures possess distinct norms regarding politeness, directness, and interpersonal interaction (Goddard, C., & Wierzbicka, 2021). In international

business settings, these differences often lead to misunderstandings when communicative intentions are interpreted through different cultural frameworks. Therefore, intercultural pragmatic competence is essential for effective professional communication.

c. Politeness Theory

Brown & Levinson (1987) politeness theory explains how speakers maintain social relationships through face-saving strategies. Positive face relates to the desire for approval, while negative face concerns the desire for autonomy. In business discourse, politeness strategies help manage professional relationships and reduce potential conflicts. Differences in politeness norms between Indonesian and Chinese professionals may contribute to pragmatic misunderstandings during workplace interactions and negotiations.

d. Mandarin Business Discourse and Chinese Cultural Values

Chinese business communication is strongly influenced by cultural concepts such as *guanxi* (interpersonal relationships), *mianzi* (face), and hierarchical sensitivity. Chinese professionals often prefer indirect communication and contextual implications to maintain harmony and preserve social relationships (Chang, E.-C., Chou, T.-J., Huang, C., & Wang, 2017). In contrast, Indonesian professionals tend to use more explicit and interpersonal communication strategies. These differences may create pragmatic challenges in professional interactions.

e. Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) views language as a social practice closely connected to power, ideology, and institutional relationships (Fairclough, 1995). In international business communication, discourse not only conveys information but also reflects professional authority and cultural expectations. CDA helps explain how pragmatic failure is influenced by broader social and organizational contexts.

f. Research Gap

Previous studies have primarily examined pragmatic failure in English-mediated communication and second-language learning contexts. Limited research has investigated pragmatic failure in Mandarin business discourse involving Indonesian and Chinese professionals. Furthermore, few studies have integrated cross-cultural pragmatics, politeness theory, and Critical Discourse Analysis to explore the relationship between language, culture, and power in professional communication. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by examining pragmatic failure and intercultural miscommunication in Indonesian–Chinese business interactions.

3. Research Method

This study employed a qualitative research approach with a critical case study design to investigate pragmatic failure and intercultural miscommunication in Mandarin business discourse between Indonesian and Chinese professionals. The qualitative approach was chosen because it enables an in-depth exploration of participants' communicative practices, cultural perspectives, and interpretations within authentic professional contexts (Creswell, J. W., & Poth, 2018).

The participants consisted of Indonesian and Chinese professionals working in business sectors that regularly use Mandarin in meetings, negotiations, business

correspondence, and workplace communication. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their experience in cross-cultural professional interactions involving Mandarin communication.

Data were collected through four techniques: (1) observation of business communication activities, (2) in-depth semi-structured interviews with Indonesian and Chinese professionals, (3) documentation analysis of business correspondence such as emails, reports, and written messages, and (4) recordings and transcripts of professional meetings and negotiation interactions. These multiple data sources were used to ensure data triangulation and enhance the credibility of the findings (Miles, Huberman, 2019).

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis supported by three theoretical frameworks: Cross-Cultural Pragmatics, Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory, and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The analysis involved several stages, including data transcription, coding, categorization of pragmatic failure types, identification of intercultural miscommunication patterns, and interpretation of the relationship between language use, cultural values, and professional power relations.

To ensure trustworthiness, the study applied source triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing. Ethical considerations were maintained by obtaining participants' informed consent, ensuring confidentiality, and anonymizing all personal and organizational information. Through this methodological framework, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how pragmatic failure emerges in Indonesian–Chinese professional interactions and how it influences business communication effectiveness.

4. Result and Discussion

4.1 Result

a. Pragmatic Failure in Indonesian–Chinese Business Communication

The findings reveal that pragmatic failure frequently occurred in interactions between Indonesian and Chinese professionals, particularly during meetings, negotiations, business correspondence, and workplace discussions. Although most participants possessed adequate Mandarin proficiency, communication problems continued to emerge because speakers interpreted messages through different cultural and pragmatic frameworks.

Two major forms of pragmatic failure were identified: pragma-linguistic failure and socio-pragmatic failure. Pragma-linguistic failure occurred when participants misunderstood the pragmatic function of certain Mandarin expressions. Chinese professionals often employed indirect expressions to communicate disagreement, hesitation, or rejection. However, Indonesian professionals sometimes interpreted these expressions literally and assumed that discussions remained open for further negotiation. As a result, misunderstandings developed regarding commitments, decisions, and future business actions.

Socio-pragmatic failure was found to be more dominant. This type of failure emerged from differences in cultural expectations regarding politeness, hierarchy, and professional communication. Chinese participants generally preferred indirect and context-dependent communication, while Indonesian professionals tended to expect explicit explanations and direct responses. Consequently, the same utterance could be interpreted differently by each party, creating confusion and reducing communication effectiveness.

b. Intercultural Miscommunication in Business Negotiations

One of the most significant findings concerns the role of pragmatic failure in business

negotiations. The data indicate that misunderstandings frequently occurred during discussions involving pricing, project implementation, contractual agreements, and decision-making processes.

Chinese professionals commonly utilized indirect communication strategies to maintain interpersonal harmony and preserve future business relationships. Rather than explicitly rejecting a proposal, they often used expressions suggesting reconsideration or further discussion. From a Chinese cultural perspective, such strategies are considered polite and professional because they minimize confrontation and protect interpersonal relationships.

In contrast, Indonesian professionals generally preferred direct confirmation regarding whether a proposal was accepted or rejected. Consequently, indirect responses were often interpreted as uncertainty rather than rejection. This difference occasionally prolonged negotiations and created unrealistic expectations regarding potential agreements.

The findings demonstrate that negotiation success depends not only on economic considerations and language proficiency but also on intercultural pragmatic competence. Understanding the cultural meaning behind communicative choices is essential for avoiding misunderstandings and facilitating effective business cooperation.

c. Politeness Strategies and Face Management

Analysis of the data shows that politeness strategies played a crucial role in shaping communication behavior. Consistent with Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, Chinese professionals frequently employed indirectness as a strategy for maintaining face and preserving social harmony. Criticism, disagreement, and requests were often expressed through softened language in order to reduce potential threats to interpersonal relationships.

For example, when discussing project weaknesses or performance problems, Chinese managers tended to provide suggestions and indirect comments rather than direct criticism. Such communicative behavior was intended to avoid embarrassment and maintain positive professional relationships. However, several Indonesian participants reported difficulty interpreting the seriousness of these comments because the intended message was not always explicitly stated.

Meanwhile, Indonesian professionals generally preferred direct clarification when discussing workplace problems or evaluating project outcomes. They viewed explicit communication as a means of increasing transparency and reducing ambiguity. Although both groups valued harmonious relationships, they employed different communicative strategies to achieve this goal. These differences frequently became sources of pragmatic misunderstanding.

d. Cultural Values and Communication Practices

The findings further demonstrate that intercultural miscommunication was strongly influenced by differing cultural values. Chinese professionals emphasized relational harmony, hierarchical sensitivity, and face preservation in their communication practices. Their discourse often relied on contextual interpretation and implicit meaning rather than explicit verbal statements.

Indonesian professionals, on the other hand, tended to prioritize interpersonal openness, collaborative discussion, and verbal clarification. These differences were particularly evident during discussions involving professional evaluations, business risks, and

strategic decision-making. Messages that Chinese participants considered sufficiently clear were occasionally perceived as ambiguous by Indonesian counterparts.

From a cross-cultural pragmatics perspective, these findings indicate that communication effectiveness depends on participants' ability to understand the cultural assumptions underlying language use. Pragmatic competence therefore involves not only linguistic knowledge but also awareness of sociocultural norms and communicative expectations.

e. Language, Power, and Professional Interaction

The Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) revealed that communication practices were closely related to professional authority and organizational power structures. In many interactions, Chinese professionals occupied positions associated with managerial authority, investment control, or strategic decision-making. These institutional roles influenced how communication was conducted and interpreted.

Indirect communication often functioned as a mechanism for maintaining authority while preserving professional harmony. At the same time, Indonesian professionals frequently sought explicit information and direct feedback to ensure operational clarity. The interaction between these differing expectations occasionally produced perceptions of uncertainty and insufficient transparency.

The findings suggest that pragmatic failure should not be understood solely as a linguistic issue. Instead, it reflects the complex relationship between language, culture, power, and professional identity within international business environments.

4.2 Discussion

The results support Thomas's (1983) theory that pragmatic failure occurs when interlocutors interpret utterances according to different sociocultural norms. Both pragma-linguistic and socio-pragmatic failures were identified; however, socio-pragmatic failure emerged as the more significant factor because it was rooted in differing cultural assumptions regarding appropriate communication behavior.

The findings also support Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory. Chinese professionals relied heavily on indirectness and face-saving strategies to maintain interpersonal harmony, while Indonesian professionals preferred direct communication to achieve clarity and efficiency. These contrasting politeness orientations frequently contributed to misunderstandings in professional interactions.

Furthermore, the study demonstrates that communication problems cannot be solved solely through language proficiency or the use of English as a common lingua franca. Even when participants communicated using English, cultural patterns of indirectness, hierarchy, and relational orientation continued to shape interpretation. This finding suggests that intercultural communication challenges are fundamentally pragmatic and cultural rather than purely linguistic.

Overall, the study highlights the importance of intercultural pragmatic competence in contemporary business communication. Successful Indonesian–Chinese professional interaction requires not only mastery of Mandarin but also an understanding of cultural values, politeness norms, and communication ideologies that influence meaning construction. As economic cooperation between Indonesia and China continues to expand, intercultural awareness will become increasingly important for promoting effective communication, successful negotiations, and sustainable professional relationships.

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that pragmatic failure is a significant and recurring phenomenon in Mandarin business discourse between Indonesian and Chinese professionals. The findings demonstrate that communication breakdowns are not primarily caused by linguistic deficiency, but rather by differences in cultural values, pragmatic norms, and communicative ideologies that shape how meaning is constructed and interpreted in professional contexts.

Two main types of pragmatic failure were identified: pragma-linguistic and socio-pragmatic failure. While pragma-linguistic failure occurs due to misinterpretation of linguistic expressions, socio-pragmatic failure is more dominant as it originates from contrasting cultural expectations regarding politeness, hierarchy, indirectness, and interpersonal communication styles. These differences frequently lead to misinterpretation in business negotiations, decision-making processes, and professional evaluations.

The study further shows that Indonesian professionals tend to adopt more explicit, direct, and interpersonal communication strategies, whereas Chinese professionals prefer indirectness, contextual implication, and face-saving strategies grounded in relational harmony and hierarchical sensitivity. These contrasting communicative orientations often generate misunderstandings that affect trust, efficiency, and the smooth progress of business interactions.

From a theoretical perspective, the study confirms the relevance of cross-cultural pragmatics, Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, and Critical Discourse Analysis in explaining intercultural miscommunication. Pragmatic failure is shown to be not only a linguistic issue but also a socially and ideologically constructed phenomenon influenced by power relations and professional identities.

In addition, the findings reveal that the use of English as a lingua franca does not necessarily eliminate pragmatic misunderstanding, as the underlying issue lies in deeply rooted cultural frameworks rather than language choice alone. Therefore, effective intercultural communication requires more than linguistic competence; it demands pragmatic awareness and cultural sensitivity.

Overall, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of Mandarin business discourse in Southeast Asian contexts and highlights the importance of intercultural pragmatic competence in ensuring successful Indonesian–Chinese professional cooperation. Future studies are recommended to further explore other multilingual business environments and to develop practical intercultural communication training models for global professional settings.

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