

# Study of Barriers Caused by Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Presuppositions and Teaching Strategies in Listening Comprehension

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**Abstract:** Based on the pragmatic presupposition theory in cross-cultural communication, this essay explores the possible cultural interference issues caused by six pragmatic presuppositions in listening comprehension. By analyzing the operation mechanism of pragmatic presuppositions, the pragmatic functions of discourse, and cultural differences, the essay reveals the root causes of misunderstandings in second language learners' listening comprehension due to presupposition differences, and proposes targeted teaching strategies. The aim is to effectively enhance learners' sensitivity to cross-cultural pragmatic presuppositions in listening comprehension through the method of cultural contrast teaching, context simulation training, and metacognitive strategies.

**Keywords:** Pragmatic Presupposition, Listening Comprehension Barriers, Instructional Intervention Strategies.

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## 1. Introduction

In the context of globalization, listening comprehension in cross-cultural communication not only involves language decoding skills, but also requires the mastery of implicit cultural presupposed information. The mismatch of presupposed information caused by learners' cultural background differences has become one of the core sources of listening difficulties. Therefore, exploring the interference mechanism of cross-cultural pragmatic presuppositions and corresponding strategies has significant teaching significance. The study analyzes six types of presupposition obstacles, including Existential Presupposition, Factive Presupposition, Lexical Presupposition, Structural Presupposition, Non-factive Presupposition and Counterfactual Presupposition. It further explores the reasons behind these phenomena, including the lack of cultural schema, information gaps of language and intention, and insufficient cultivation of presupposition awareness in teaching. Based on this, three effective teaching strategies are proposed—the method of cultural contrast teaching, context simulation training, and metacognitive strategies—in order to reveal the challenges faced by learners in cross-cultural communication and provide practical teaching methods to solve these problems.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. Presupposition

Presupposition is defined as "the assumptions made by the speaker when uttering a particular sentence, that is, the premises that the speaker must satisfy to ensure the appropriateness of the sentence or utterance"<sup>[1]</sup>. In 1892, the renowned German logician Frege introduced the concept of "premise"<sup>[2]</sup>. Subsequently, "presupposition" became a focus of study for linguists. They tended to view "presupposition" as the logical relationship between sentences or propositions, and mainly concentrated on the field of semantics. However, "due to the characteristics such as defeasibility and context-dependency of semantic presuppositions, more and more linguists have come to realize that presuppositions are a

pragmatic phenomenon rather than a semantic one"<sup>[1]</sup>.

### 2.2. Pragmatic Presupposition

Pragmatic presupposition refers to "those context-sensitive relationships related to the speaker's (and sometimes the listener's) beliefs, attitudes, and intentions, which are sensitive to the context"<sup>[3]</sup>. Pragmatic presupposition is the background knowledge assumed by the speaker that the listener shares, and it is context-dependent and culturally specific. Stalnaker was the first to propose the concept of pragmatic presupposition. He believed that presuppositions are not only related to the context but also to the speaker, that is, presuppositions are not a relationship between sentences and propositions but a relationship between the speaker and the discourse. According to George Yule's classification, presuppositions can be divided into six types: existence presupposition, factive presupposition, lexical presupposition, structural presupposition, non-factive presupposition, and counterfactual presupposition.<sup>[4]</sup>

#### 2.2.1. Existential Presupposition

Existential Presupposition refers to the situation where the entities or concepts mentioned in the presupposed sentence are assumed to exist. For example, when hearing "The King of France", the listener will automatically presuppose that there is a king in France.

#### 2.2.2. Factive Presupposition

Factive Presupposition occurs when a specific verb such as regret, know, realize, be aware that, be glad that or structure triggers a presupposition, suggesting that the content of the subsequent clause is true. For instance, when "She regrets that she lied" appears, the information receiver will presuppose that "she lied" is a fact.

#### 2.2.3. Lexical Presupposition

Lexical Presupposition is manifested by the use of specific words in the sentence, presupposing another implicitly stated fact or state. For example, through the information "He stopped smoking", the listener can presuppose "he used to smoke"; another example is when hearing "She managed to finish the task", the listener can presuppose "the process of completing this task was difficult".

#### 2.2.4. Structural Presupposition

Structural Presupposition refers to the presupposition triggered by a specific syntactic structure. For instance, when hearing the interrogative sentence "When did you leave?", the listener will directly presuppose "you have already left"; or when hearing the Wh-clause "What surprised me was...", the information receiver will presuppose that "something surprised the speaker".

#### 2.2.5. Non-factive Presupposition

Non-factive Presupposition is triggered by specific verbs (such as dream, imagine, pretend), and is generally considered that the content of the subsequent clause is not necessarily true. For example, when hearing "dreamed" in the sentence "He dreamed that he was rich", the listener will consider the following content not to be true, and thus will not presuppose that he is very rich.

#### 2.2.6. Counterfactual Presupposition

Counterfactual Presupposition is triggered by specific structures (especially the subjunctive mood), and is generally considered that the described situation is contrary to the facts. For example, "If I were you..." can presuppose the virtual situation of "I am not you".

### 3. Specific Manifestations of Cross-cultural Pragmatic Presuppositions on Hearing Comprehension Interference

In cross-cultural communication, due to significant differences in pragmatic rules and language habits among various cultures, various interference occurs during the process of hearing comprehension. These interferences not only affect the accurate reception of information but also may lead to misunderstandings or communication failures. The following will elaborate on the main manifestations of the 6 types of cross-cultural pragmatic presuppositions on hearing comprehension interference.

#### 3.1. Entity Deficiency of Existential Presupposition: Cognitive impairment in the identification of referential objects due to cultural background differences

The core of "existence presupposition" is the "existence" of "entities". Due to cultural background differences, learners may experience a deficiency of cultural entity in Western culture, thereby failing to establish a "cognitive" understanding of the "referential objects", that is, encountering a presupposition obstacle. For example, in the listening material snippet "Discussing the issue with your parish priest might offer some spiritual guidance.", the speaker presupposes that the community where the listener is located has the role of "parish priest", and it is a common way to seek spiritual guidance. However, for learners from non-Christian cultural backgrounds such as most areas in China, the Middle East, and certain Asian countries, who do not live in a society divided by specific religious communities, upon hearing "parish priest", they may be confused about who "parish priest" specifically refers to. They may guess whether it is a pastor, a priest, or a community leader. Besides, they may not understand why or how people can seek guidance from "parish priest".

#### 3.2. Decrease of the Truth of Factive Presupposition: Obstacles in Understanding Shared Information Caused by Conflicts in Cultural Script

The core of "factive presuppositions" lies in the presupposed information is "true". The obstacle arises from the differences in cross-cultural "cultural scripts", leading to conflicts. That is to say, although the listener realizes that the event is true, they cannot deeply understand or agree with the "shared information" presupposed by the speaker due to cultural differences and other reasons. For example, in the listening material snippet "We all regret that the Thanksgiving Day parade was canceled due to the storm.", the verb "regret" triggers the factual presupposition: the cancellation of the Thanksgiving Day parade is a fact. However, for learners who are not familiar with North American culture, they may not understand what "Thanksgiving Day parade" is, and its significance or cultural meaning. Although they can understand the literal meanings of "canceled" and "regret", they cannot deeply experience the presupposed, culturally-consensus-based sense of loss shared by the speaker and "all of us".

#### 3.3. Semantic Tension of Lexical Presupposition: Obstacles in Decoding Implicit Information Triggered by English Euphemism

Lexical presupposition refers to the underlying preconditions or background knowledge associated with certain words in a specific language context. English euphemism often avoids directly mentioning unpleasant or sensitive topics by choosing specific words, and the selection of these words is closely related to cultural background. For example, "correctional facility" is used instead of "prison" to reduce negative associations with the prison. However, in cross-cultural communication, if the cultural backgrounds of communicators are different, the understanding of such euphemism may be greatly impaired. For instance, in some cultures, discussing prisons or punishments is common and does not require the use of euphemisms, while in English culture, such euphemisms may be used to appear more polite or formal. If the listener fails to recognize the cultural differences behind these words, they may misunderstand the speaker's intention and even think that the other party deliberately avoids certain facts.

#### 3.4. Contextual Misjudgment due to Structural Presuppositions: The Lack of Cultural Consensus Implied by Syntactic Forms

"Structural presuppositions" are triggered by "syntactic forms" to convey their implicit presupposed information. The obstacle is caused because learners experience a "crack" in their "cognition" and are unable to recognize and accept such presuppositions due to their lack of consensus in the target language's culture. For instance, "it seems that..." is commonly used in English to present an opinion without seeming overly absolute. However, people from different cultural and language backgrounds may have different understandings of this structural presupposition. In some listeners' native cultures, this indirect expression may be regarded as ambiguous or lacking sincerity because it conceals the speaker's true viewpoint and stance. Therefore,

listeners may mistakenly believe that the speaker is unwilling to be honest or is trying to avoid addressing the core of the issue. Hence, being familiar with the language habits and structural presuppositions in different cultures and adapting to them are crucial for improving cross-cultural listening comprehension ability.

### **3.5. Imaginary Conflict of Non-factive Presupposition: The Incompatibility of Fictional Expression and Cultural Cognitive Frameworks**

"Non-factive presuppositions" involve "fictional expressions", such as the appearance of words like "pretend", "imagine", "dream", etc. The obstacle lies in the fact that different "cultural cognitive frameworks" have varying degrees of acceptance, understanding methods, and emotional responses towards fictional content, leading to difficulties in "compatibility" and understanding of the presupposed non-factuality and intention. For example, in the listening material segment "The child pretended that the broomstick was a magnificent horse.", the verb "pretended" triggers a non-factive presupposition: the broomstick is a magnificent horse, which is not a fact. Understanding this humorous or childlike scene requires the listener to: 1) understand the meaning of "pretend". 2) understand that in Western children's games, transforming a broomstick into a horse is a common and accepted behavioral pattern, which is a cultural script. For learners without such an imaginative game in cultural background, they may only be able to understand the literal meaning but fail to appreciate the childlike charm or cultural connotations, or even they may think that there is no functional or visual connection between a broomstick and a horse, and be puzzled about "why the broomstick can be a horse".

### **3.6. Historical Fraction of Counterfactual Presupposition: The Gaps between Virtual Situations and Target Historical Cultural Cognition**

"Counterfactual presupposition refers to the presupposed content that is not only unreal but also contradicts the facts. This presupposition is commonly found in sentence structures with the subjunctive mood, such as some unreal conditional sentences"<sup>[5]</sup>. The obstacle of "counterfactual presupposition" lies in the huge "gap" in the learners' cognition of the key historical events or backgrounds in the target language culture, which makes it impossible for them to understand the real historical basis on which this presupposition relies and the significance of its counterfactual reasoning. For example, in the listening material fragment "If the American Civil War had never happened, the debate over states' rights versus federal power would look very different today, wouldn't it?", this hypothetical conditional sentence triggers counterfactual presupposition: the American Civil War did not never occur. The interrogative sentence "wouldn't it?" reinforces this presupposition's consensus. Learners who are not familiar with English subjunctive mood (especially the past perfect tense indicating the opposite of past facts) may not be able to accurately identify this as a counterfactual assumption and mistakenly think it is a real condition or future presupposition. Moreover, for learners with a weak grasp of historical knowledge, if they do not understand the basic facts of the American Civil War (time, causes, results, core disputes "state

rights v.s. federal power"), they will completely fail to understand the starting point and significance of this counterfactual presupposition. The presupposed occurrence of the Civil War and its impact are the cornerstone for understanding the whole sentence.

## **4. Analysis of the Causes of Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Presuppositions' Interference on Listening Comprehension**

The interference of cross-cultural pragmatic presuppositions on listening comprehension is a complex phenomenon, resulting from multiple factors. Understanding these causes is crucial for enhancing the effectiveness of cross-cultural communication. Here are three main causes, including the lack of cultural schema, information gaps of language and intention, and insufficient cultivation of presupposition awareness in teaching.

### **4.1. The Lack of Cultural Schema**

In 2020, professor Jiang and professor Song mentioned that the presupposition theory allows speakers to express themselves with the most concise language, and at the same time enables listeners to understand the meaning of the discourse with less effort, that is, communicators achieve the greatest communicative success with the least effort.<sup>[6]</sup> Therefore, presuppositions must be known to communicators on both sides. In other words, both communicators need to have a common cultural schema. Cultural schema refers to a series of cognitive frameworks or patterns formed by individuals based on their own cultural background, which help people understand and predict social behaviors and communication rules. However, in cross-cultural communication, when listeners lack sufficient understanding of another culture, a so-called "lack of cultural schema" occurs. For example, in English, "between jobs" or "a little under the weather", in some cultural contexts, they may not be immediately recognized as euphemistic expressions but rather understood literally. This kind of understanding deviation caused by the lack of cultural schema not only affects the accurate reception of information but also may lead to misunderstandings or negative emotions, because learners fail to capture the true intention or emotional attitude of the speaker during the listening process. Therefore, teachers should enrich students' cultural background knowledge, help students refine their cultural schemas, and expand the common background knowledge with native speakers, so that students can obtain more cross-cultural pragmatic presuppositions.

### **4.2. Information Gaps of Language Structure and Intention Structure**

Another reason for difficulties in listening comprehension is the information gap of language structure and intention structure. In 2001, Professor Zou and Professor Zeng mentioned that one of the reasons why listeners misunderstand or misinterpret the speaker's original meaning or intention and encounter pragmatic presupposition obstacles is the existence of information gaps of language structure and intention structure.<sup>[7]</sup> Such a phenomenon is mainly caused by pragmatic ambiguity, that is, the same discourse can correspond to multiple ways of expressing speech acts or the same speech act can correspond to multiple

interpretations of a structure or a certain word in the discourse. In English listening tests, students often misunderstand materials due to the mismatch between language form and pragmatic function. For example, the question "Would you mind turning down the music?" often appears in English listening tests. On the surface, it is asking for the other person's willingness, but in fact, its true pragmatic function is expressing a request. On the contrary, in the Chinese context, saying "Please turn down the music" is more in line with the expression habit. If students only understand it literally as "Do you mind turning down the music?", they may misjudge the speaker's true intention and choose the wrong answer "The speaker's intention is to ask for the other person's willingness". Moreover, the same language form may carry completely different presuppositions in different cultures, or even lead to opposite interpretations. For example, in business negotiations or daily communication, "That's an interesting idea" is often used to express a euphemistic negative or reserved attitude rather than literal appreciation. However, for Chinese language learners, due to differences of cultural background and language habit, they may mistakenly think that this sentence is an honest appreciation of their own viewpoint, thus failing to perceive the implicit criticism or refusal. Such misunderstandings not only affect the accurate transmission of information but also may lead to emotional imbalance between the communication parties and even trigger unnecessary conflicts. Especially in cross-cultural communication, when the listener cannot identify the pragmatic function behind the language form, it is easy to cause information reception deviation, thereby affecting the overall communication effect. Therefore, understanding the specific functions and implicit meanings of these language forms in different cultures is an important part of improving cross-cultural listening comprehension ability.

### **4.3. Insufficient Cultivation of Presupposition Awareness in Teaching**

Finally, the insufficient cultivation of students' presupposition awareness during the teaching process is also an important factor contributing to the barrier in cross-cultural listening comprehension. Many foreign language teaching focuses on vocabulary and grammar learning, but neglects how to understand and handle pragmatic presuppositions in different cultural contexts. If students do not receive adequate guidance to understand the cultural connotations and social functions behind these expressions, they will have difficulty accurately grasping the speaker's intention in actual communication. Moreover, the lack of practical opportunities also limits the process of students converting theoretical knowledge into practical communication ability. Therefore, teachers should strengthen the cultivation of students' presupposition awareness in foreign language teaching and provide more cross-cultural communication practice opportunities, which is of great significance for improving students' cross-cultural listening comprehension ability and promoting effective communication.

## **5. Teaching Strategies**

To reduce the interference of cross-cultural pragmatic presuppositions on listening comprehension effectively, a series of targeted teaching strategies need to be adopted in the teaching process. These strategies can not only help students better understand the implicit meanings behind the language

forms but also enhance their adaptability in actual communication. Here are three effective teaching strategies: cultural contrast teaching, context simulation training, and metacognitive strategies.

### **5.1. Cultural Contrast Teaching**

The cultural contrast teaching method is a teaching approach that helps students identify and understand differences by directly comparing language expressions and pragmatic rules in different cultural contexts. In 1999, Professor Jing proposed that foreign language courses, by their nature, are a comprehensive course that integrates language knowledge, cultural background knowledge, and language application skills.<sup>[8]</sup> Therefore, in foreign language classes, what the teacher teaches is not only language knowledge and skills, but also helps students enhance their cultural awareness and cross-cultural communication abilities. For example, when teaching English euphemisms, the teacher can compare the different interpretations of "that's an interesting idea" in English culture and Chinese culture. In the English business environment, this sentence may be used politely to express disagreement or negation, while in Chinese culture, similar expressions are often regarded as sincere praise. Through this comparison, students can clearly recognize the potential meanings and functional differences of the same expression in different cultural contexts. This method not only enhances students' cross-cultural awareness but also strengthens their understanding of the complex pragmatic functions behind different language forms.

### **5.2. Context Simulation Training**

The purpose of context simulation training is to create an environment that closely resembles real language usage, allowing students to experience and practice how to correctly understand and use the target language in specific situations. Teachers can arrange various cross-cultural communication scenarios through role-playing and situational dialogues, such as business negotiations and social gatherings. For example, in a simulated business meeting, students might hear "we may need to revisit some aspects of the project", which actually means that there are problems with certain parts of the project that need to be re-examined. Through repeated practice of such scenarios, students not only learn to identify the actual intentions of the speakers, but also improve their ability to use appropriate expressions in similar situations. Moreover, this training can also help students enhance their sensitivity to non-verbal cues such as facial expressions and body language, thereby enabling a more comprehensive understanding of the true intentions of others.

### **5.3. Metacognitive Strategies**

The cultivation of metacognitive strategies emphasizes students' ability to monitor and regulate their own learning process, which is crucial for coping with the challenges of listening comprehension brought about by cross-cultural pragmatic presuppositions. Teachers should guide students to learn to reflect on their listening process, identify comprehension obstacles, and take effective measures to overcome them. For example, when encountering difficult English expressions, students should learn to understand information from the context, or try to reinterpret the expression from others' perspective of culture. In addition, teachers should encourage students to record and analyze their misunderstandings, which can help them summarize

lessons and gradually form more flexible and adaptable listening comprehension skills. By cultivating students' metacognitive strategies, not only can their cross-cultural communication abilities be improved, but also their lifelong learning habits can be promoted.

## 6. Conclusion

Cross-cultural pragmatic presupposition barrier is an implicit challenge in listening teaching, which requires a dual approach of cultivating cultural awareness and training pragmatic strategies. The essay analyzes six types of presupposition obstacles on listening comprehension, including Existential Presupposition, Factive Presupposition, Lexical Presupposition, Structural Presupposition, Non-factive Presupposition and Counterfactual Presupposition. It further explores the reasons behind these phenomena, including the lack of cultural schema, information gaps of language and intention, and insufficient cultivation of presupposition awareness in teaching. On this basis, three effective teaching strategies are proposed: the method of cultural contrast teaching, context simulation training, and metacognitive strategies. These research findings and suggestions not only reveal the challenges faced by listening comprehension in cross-cultural communication but also provide practical solutions to address these issues. Future research can further explore the acquisition paths of presuppositions for learners of different language proficiency levels and develop corpus-based diagnostic tools for

presupposition interference, so as to provide support for personalized listening teaching.

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