

## Investigating Socio-pragmatic Failure in Cross-cultural Translation: A Theoretical Perspective

**Abdali H. Shihan al-Saidi**

Department of English, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication,  
Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia

**Abdali H. Shihan al-Saidi**

Department of English, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication,  
Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia

### Abstract

Pragmatics of translation is mainly concerned with how social contexts have their own influence on both the source text (ST) initiator's linguistic choices and the translator's interpretation of the meanings intended in the target text (TT). In translation, socio-pragmatic failure (SPF), as part of cross-cultural failure, generally refers to a translator's misuse or misunderstanding of the social conditions placed on language in use. In addition, this paper aims to illustrate the importance of SPF in cross-cultural translation via identifying that such kind of failure most likely leads to cross-cultural communication breakdown. Besides, this paper attempts to answer the question of whether translators from English into Arabic or vice versa have recognized the ST intentionality and rendered it in the TT or no. Furthermore, the examples examined in this paper were selected from many published works and these examples include, among others, Qur'anic and Biblical translations, extracts from literature and newspaper headlines. The said examples are analyzed according to the functional pragmatic approach to translation where the norms of both the ST and the TT are bilaterally considered. Moreover, this paper contributes to the literature on translation by highlighting that SPF, as one of the major issues in cross-cultural translation, has not been given due attention in the studies on translation from Arabic into English or vice versa. Finally, this paper concludes that when translators have adequate linguistic competence, communicative competence and cultural knowledge, SPF can be overcome and *socio-pragmatic success* is possible.

**Key words:** Context, linguistic choice, pragmatic competence, socio-pragmatic failure, socio-pragmatic success.

## Introduction

Pragmatics is simply defined as the study of language in use within a given context (Leech, 1983). Accordingly, studies on pragmatics show that it is mainly concerned with four main interdependent variables, i.e. language, context, and interlocutors in the process of cross-cultural communication in addition to the relationship between those interlocutors (Livenson, 1983; Leech, 1983; Thomas, 1983; Yule, 1996). In pragmatics, language is examined in terms of how linguistic expressions are paired with and 'encoded by their context' (Levinson, 1983: 8). Furthermore, interlocutors, as two basic components, namely, a speaker (or writer) and a listener (or reader) are largely focused on taking into account both their relationship and ability to encode and decode meanings through social interactions. In other words, pragmatics is much more concerned with the study of meaning as communicated and interpreted by those interlocutors (Livenson, 1983; Yule, 1996). Besides this, a speaker's intention and hearer's interpretation, of 'what is meant by what is said' are highly stressed, since they are the determinant variables in relation to whether the process of communicating meanings cross-culturally succeeds or fails (Thomas, 1983; Shammas, 1995; Xialoe, 2009; Tang, 2013). More specifically, "pragmatics includes the study of how the interpretation and use of utterances depends on knowledge of the real world; how speakers use and understand speech acts; how the structure of sentences is influenced by the relationship between the speaker and the hearer" (Lou & Goa, 2011, p.183).

In the same vein, context is also an integral part in understanding meaning in cross-cultural interactions. Context is, on the one hand, social since it "encompasses the internal organization of a society, its intentions, internal differences, sub-groupings, and so on" (Nodoushan, 1995, p.17). On the other hand, context is interpersonal as it concerns itself with the interlocutors involved in cross-cultural communication (Nodoushan, 1995). Furthermore, context is divided into 'language context and communicative context' where the former is concerned with interlocutors' linguistic choices, whereas the latter refers to language users as well as their physical, social and mental worlds (Tang, 2013, p.77).

Most importantly, Thomas (1983) defines socio-pragmatics as "the social conditions placed on language in use" (p.99) where the interdependent relation between linguistic forms and sociocultural contexts have enjoyed a supreme significance (Harlow, 1990). Similarly, socio-pragmatic competence, i.e. the knowledge of 'when to use what' or of how to adequately adapt 'language output' in cross-cultural communication according to 'different situations and/or social considerations', has been seriously considered in sociolinguistics, in general and the pragmatics of translation, in particular (Harlow, 1990; Sarac, 2008; Tang, 2013).

This study stresses the fact that it is not enough to have "linguistic and lexical knowledge to be competent in using a foreign language. Therefore, "both pragmatic and socio-pragmatic considerations come into play and constitute the important features of using a language effectively" (Sarac, 2008, p.2) With the presence of pragmatics, language is taught and studied in terms of a purposeful functional use where the emphasis is heavily placed on the meaning of language as a communicative vehicle (Brown, 2007; Malakzadah, 2012).

In this regard, the problem to be examined in this study is that failure to use appropriate socio-pragmatic features may result in what is called "pragmatic failures', which are generally caused by language users and translators' inadequate knowledge of either the linguistic or cultural backgrounds of the source language (SL) and the target language (TL) or both (Thomas,

1983; Hashimian, 2012). Finally, the significance of this research lies in the fact that SPF, in research on cross-cultural translation from Arabic into English or vice versa, has not been given due attention (Shammas, 1995; 2005). Also, a review of the literature revealed that, to date, research has examined socio-pragmatic failure (henceforth SPF) mainly from the perspective of EFL context whereby only language learning pragmatic errors and not translation pragmatic failures have been discussed (Al-Hindawi et.al, 2014).

### Literature Review

Despite the fact that a clear-cut definition of pragmatics is still lacking (Ellis, 2008) due to the boundaries between pragmatics and other disciplines such as semantics, sociolinguistics and extra-linguistic context, have not yet been clearly determined (Leech, 1983; Nodoushan, 1995; al-Hindawi, 2014), there are many workable definitions of pragmatics in the literature that can be considered.

One of the many definitions of pragmatics is that it is regarded as the study of language in use where language users, their goal-oriented linguistic choices, their relationship, the effect of their language use on the hearers' and the context in which they interact are all taken into account (Levinson, 1983; Leach and Thomas, 1985; Verschueren, 1999; Richards & Schmidt, 2002; Hashmian, 2012). Lou & Goa (2011) has also aptly posited that

pragmatics is the study of the use of language in communication, which includes the study of how the interpretation and use of utterances depends on knowledge of the real world; how speakers use and understand speech acts; how the structure of sentences is influenced by the relationship between the speaker and the hearer (p. 283).

In other words, pragmatics heavily focuses on meanings of utterances not when they are used in isolation but rather on their meanings when they are put into play in the process of communication. More clearly, the focus is rather on what people mean by making their linguistic choices rather than what those linguistic choice mean by themselves. In addition, pragmatics is more concerned with making the required match between "sentences meaning and speakers' intention and more importantly, the real meaning of an utterance can be discovered by the analysis of contextual meaning through pragmatics" (Triki, 2013, p.41).

Needless to say that socio-pragmatics, i.e. the social interface of pragmatics, a term coined by Leech (1983, p.10), is identified here since social conditions, that determine both interlocutor's linguistic choices and interpretations during interactions, are among the decisive factors in pragmatic analysis (Thomas, 1983). In this vein, Shammas (2005) points out that socio-pragmatics "is more closely related to sociology, and consequently to normative behaviour, although it forms an essential background of verbal behaviour as well" (p.26). Stated differently, socio-pragmatics is more associated with the influence of our sociological knowledge on our interaction. It is rather the study of interlocutors' social backgrounds where some related factors, such as sex, age, power, and so forth affect people's linguistic choice during cross-cultural interactions (Leech, 1983; Crystal, 1998; Al-Hindawi et.al, 2014).

Closely related to pragmatics are two basic notions that need to be identified here, i.e. linguistic competence and communicative competence, since the full mastery of these two competences helps avoid pragmatic failures. Linguistic competence is simply defined as the knowledge of a language use and users, including interlocutors' "ability to create and understand

sentences, including sentences they have never heard before, knowledge of what are and what are not sentences of a particular language, and the ability to recognize ambiguous and deviant sentences" (Lou & Goa, 2011, p.284). In other words, linguistic competence is the mastery of a foreign language "standard pronunciation, accurate grammatical rules and vocabulary" (Lou & Goa, 2011, p.284). In addition to the abstract knowledge of linguistic properties, linguistic pragmatic competence is more concerned with the interlocutor's ability to use a language communicatively (Amaya, 2008, p.12).

Having realized that the notion of linguistic competence, proposed by Chomsky, is inadequate, Hymes (1971) coined the term 'communicative competence' which refers to the mastery of both linguistic competence and sociolinguistic knowledge of language in a given context. Accordingly, interlocutors in cross-cultural communication must have communicative competence including the socio-cultural rules of both the source and the target languages. In this way, interlocutors can avoid the possibility of native language transfer, i.e. pragmatic transfer, during cross-cultural communication and the probable occurrence of pragmatic failure (Hashimian, 2012, 24). Based on Hymes (1970), Lou & Goa (2011) has thoroughly defined communicative competence as

the knowledge of not only if something is possible in a language, but also the knowledge of whether it is feasible, appropriate or, done in a particular Speech Community. It includes, 1) formal competence --knowledge of the grammar, vocabulary, phonology and semantics of a language. 2) sociocultural competence--knowledge of the relationship between language and its non-linguistic context, knowing how to use and respond appropriately to different types of Speech Acts... knowing which Address Forms should be used with different persons one speaks to and in different situations, and so forth ( p.284-5).

In brief, a foreign language learner's or translator's full knowledge of the target language in isolation of the related social and interpersonal context does not guarantee that s/he is pragmatically competent in cross-cultural communication. S/he might be able to produce semantically correct utterances that might be pragmatically inappropriate and even untactful in daily social interactions. Therefore, it is no exaggeration to state that pragmatic knowledge of both the SL and the TL is of supreme importance and a lack of this knowledge may result in what has been referred to as pragmatic failure.

Etymologically, the term 'pragmatic failure' was firstly coined by Jenny Thomas in 1983 in an article entitled 'Cross-cultural Pragmatic failure' where she provides insightful definitions and classifications to the term. Since then, pragmatic failure has become the core of cross-cultural pragmatics (Tang, 2013, p.75). According to Thomas (1983, p.92), pragmatic failure is generally defined as the "inability to understand what is meant by what is said". This, according to Thomas is of two types, namely, pragma-linguistic and socio-pragmatic failure (SPF) where the former refers to when the pragmatic force initiated by the speaker to a given utterance is "systematically different from the force most frequently assigned to it by native speakers of the target language, or when speech act strategies are inappropriately transferred from L1 to L2" ( Thomas, 1983, p.99). The latter, however, "refers to the social conditions placed on language in use" (Thomas, 1983). In addition, Thomas (1983) also stresses the fact that pragma-linguistic failure is a linguistic problem that is caused by "differences in the linguistic encoding of

pragmatic force, (whereas) socio-pragmatic failure stems from cross-culturally different perceptions of what constitutes appropriate linguistic behaviour"(p.99); therefore, socio-pragmatic decisions are basically more related to social behaviour than linguistic one (Thomas, 1983, p.104). In sum, pragmatic failures are mainly caused by imposing the social norms of one culture on the communicative behavior of the other, where the social rules of another culture would be more appropriate (Thomas,1983, p. 99; Zamborlin; 2007).

It is significant to identify that SPF enjoys more importance than pragma-linguistic one since the former is more concerned with the knowledge of 'when to say what and whom to say it to' which is highly influenced by many factors as "the size of imposition, cross-culturally different assessments of relative power or social distance, and value judgments. Also, misunderstanding caused by SPF is more detrimental" (Hashimian, 2012, p.26; cf. Lou & Goa,2011). More clearly, Tang (2013) posits that SPF is

the improperly adopted language forms due to speakers not knowing the social protocols, etiquette rules and social customs in listeners' culture during their communication. In other words, socio-pragmatic failure occurs when the speakers and listeners fail to adopt the proper communicative strategies or choose appropriate language forms because of not realizing the two party's cultural difference or social custom difference (p. 76).

Furthermore, Al-Hindawi et.al (2014) argue that SPF occurs when factors like size of imposition, social distance, relative rights and obligations are misjudged and/or misunderstood during interlocutor's interactions . It is worth realizing that there is no clear-cut distinction between pragma-linguistic failure and SPF since the boundary between them is a bit hazy and they are often mixed and overlapping. Furthermore, an inappropriately used utterance might be viewed as both as pragma-linguistic failure and SPF at the same time ( see Thomas, 1993; Amaya, 2008; Al-Hindawi et. al, 2014, p.17). More importantly, most of our failures in understanding what other people say are not caused by our inability to hear or work out the literal meanings of their sentences or words. Rather, the difficulty lies in our inability to realize the speaker's intention (Miller1974 cited in Thomas, 1983, 91).

To reiterate, interlocutors in a cross-cultural communication may have good linguistic competence, but it does not guarantee that they can use language tactfully and appropriately. Without interlocutors' having adequate communicative knowledge, the floor is open to SPF. Thus, if they make grammatical errors they are said to speak badly, but if they do not communicate tactfully and appropriately, they are described as to 'behave badly' (Lou and Goa, 2011; Tang, 2013, Al-Hindawi et.al, 2014). Thus, it is essential to stress that this particular kind of failure is the main source of cross-cultural communication breakdown. Therefore, the sources of such a failure need to be carefully explored to avoid getting involved in embarrassing situations caused by wrong linguistic choice that might be interpreted as offensive to hearers.

In this light, Thomas (1983) seems to have correctly posited that "as what is perceived by the listeners is different from what the speakers intend to convey, pragmatic failure occurs" (cited in Tang, 2013, p.75). It is clearly postulated that sources of socio-pragmatic failure are basically social in the first place. In this paper, reasons behind SPF occurrence are critically surveyed according to the literature available to stress the fact that knowing these reasons can help reduce and even avoid committing such a failure in cross-cultural communication. The

detailed account of illustrative examples in this respect will be discussed later in the part on results and discussions.

As a starting point, it should be pointed out that cultural differences have been regarded as the major source of pragmatic failure (Thomas, 1983) since when the interlocutors belong to different cultures, they are most likely to misunderstand each other's intentions particularly when it comes to indirectness that the speakers intentionally employ to consider hearers' face wants (Thomson, 1983.). Furthermore, SPF can happen in "any communication between two people who, in any particular domain, do not share a common linguistic or cultural background" (Thomas, 1983, p. 91). Another reason mentioned by Thomas (1983) is "taboo" that is related to sensitive issues that are often highly euphemised in most languages via employing indirectness as a strategy of politeness in cross-cultural interaction.

In this respect, language users usually commit SPF because they do not distinguish between 'phatic talk' and 'referential talk', and they therefore misunderstand the speaker's intended illocutionary force (Kasper, 1984, p.1). As for Wolfson (1989), an important reason of SPF is when SL pragmatic rules influence foreign language learner's comprehension and even production in the TL. In other words, 'negative pragmatic transfer' happens when using "the sociolinguistic rules of speaking in one's native speech community when interacting within the target speech community" (Wolfson, 1989, p. 54). Indirectness as the main source of SPF is also stressed by Tannen (1989: 23 cited in Al-Hindawi, 2014) in which he states that indirectness, among other factors, can cause pragmatic failure since indirectness, for instance, is utilized in many cultures and "can also bring about misunderstandings with more frank native English speakers. Indirectness can be interpreted as a violation of the Grician maxims of quality and quantity, and lead to suspicion on the part of the English speaker" (p.23). Quite interestingly, Nazzal (2010) argues that indirectness in Arabic is often used by participants when faced with taboo-related social contexts in daily communication. Consequently, indirectness is a common ground between Arabic and English and it can encourage a translator to search for communicative equivalence in cross-cultural translation problems.

Amaya (2008) highlights more reasons of SPF, such as the lack of pragmatic competence, which unavoidably leads to communication breakdown and she cites several examples to "illustrate how pragmatic failures affect the interpretation of messages and sometimes block communication completely" (p.11). She also states that a lack of the required cultural and pragmatic knowledge even within the 'fairly advanced' language learners is one of the sources of SPF (Amaya, 2008, p.12).

More specifically, Tang (2013) insightfully summarizes the main reasons of SPF by positing that interlocutors improper use of language is caused by their lack of the necessary knowledge on the social protocols conditions that affect both speaker's linguistic choices and the hearer's comprehension and interpretations of the speakers' real intentions within the contexts in question (p.76). In addition, interlocutors' beliefs, social norms and cultural backgrounds are all embedded and exposed in cross-cultural communication and thus, the possibility of misunderstanding and SPF occurrence is very high.

To provide an adequate account of how to overcome the occurrence of pragmatic failures in general and SPF in particular, it is crucial to summarize what Lou & Goa (2013) and Al-Hindawi et.al (2014) provide in this regard. They suggest that language users have to overcome the interference of their native language by promoting their target language communicative

competence, which includes both the linguistic and pragmatic competence as stated before. Accordingly, "they would know what to say, how to say on one occasion to make the language they use agree to the linguistic habit and national customs of the target language (p.284-5). In addition, Lou & Goa (2013) stress the significance of cultural knowledge since language and culture are inseparable and interdependent and that "language provides the key to the understanding of the associated culture, and language itself cannot be really learned or fully understood without enough knowledge of the culture in which it is deeply embedded" (Lou & Goa, 2013). Furthermore, language users in general and translators in particular should integrate and study language and culture together in the process of learning and translating. More clearly, Lou & Goa(2013) rightly states that

understanding the language requires understanding the culture... (via) learning to see the world as native speakers of that language see it, learning the ways in which their language reflects the ideas, customs, and behavior of their society, learning to understand their language of the mind ( p.285).

Similarly, Al-Hindawi et.al (2014, p.25) proposes that through raising the foreign language learners' awareness of the target culture, they can become fully aware of the social and cultural values and norms attributed to that language. Also, teaching the target culture should be part of the target language learning process. In other words, teaching curriculum should not only include 'values, beliefs, customs and behaviours of the English-speaking countries', but also get language learners involved in 'parallel social situations' where both the source culture and the target culture are compared in terms of differences and similarities of meaning and appropriateness (Al-Hindawi et.al,2014, p.25).

In summary, it is evident that enhancing communicative and cultural quality in particular makes the way we interact far more appropriate and tactful in various situations in cross-cultural communication. This can be done through knowing more about the other's cultural norms and the way an interlocutor views the world. This particular point makes our communication more dynamic and effective where the occurrence of SPF becomes less likely. With this in mind, this paper proposes some guidance for translators, providing some form of assistance in avoiding pragmatic failures. It also illustrates that not only the reasons behind pragmatic failures can be traced but also avoidance of committing such failures via enhancing communicative competence is possible.

## Results and Discussions

Based on the literature reviewed above, it seems that SPF has been given greater attention than pragma-linguistic failure since the former is more problematic in translation, but the latter is relatively easier to cope with through better ESL learning methodologies. However, pragma-linguistic failure has been fairly examined since both kinds of failure tend to overlap at times. Hence, the focus of this paper is largely on examples that have been carefully selected for their culture-dependence and their being highly indirect and euphemized .Accordingly, these examples are analysed to show how pragmatic failures have somewhat dramatic influence on the interpretation of the ST intentionality, which can lead to a complete communication breakdown.

While both semantics and pragmatics are mainly concerned with meaning, but they are different in the way they view the verb MEAN because the former, on the one hand, focuses on answering the question "**What does X mean?**" regardless of the related contexts and extra-

linguistic factors, addressers, addressees and the relationship between them ( Leech, 1996, p. 5-6). On the other hand, pragmatics main concern is to find adequate answer to the question "What did you mean by X?" (Leech,1996). In addition, we can realize that the function of a language is not limited to recounting events in the surrounding world, but it is decoded to express messages loaded with implied cultural connotations that require special attention on the part of translators. More importantly, it is evident that, relying on the various perspectives on pragmatics outlined above, texts do not have meanings by themselves but rather it is the people who, by producing texts, intend meaning (Leech,1996).

In brief, translators should seriously consider the following notions in order to fully understand the ST semantically and pragmatically, namely *speaker's intention*, the *effect speaker's utterance* has on the hearer, the *socio-cultural signs* the speaker implies in using language in a certain way and nature of the *speaker-hearer relationship*. Since pragmatic aspects are reported to be divergent cross-culturally, the translator should attempt her/his best to sufficiently provide a 'cross-cultural pragmatic understanding' via becoming highly familiarized with pragmatic rules of both the ST and the TT.

In terms of the analysis, the discussion falls into three parts, the first is general, i.e. not limited to Arabic and English contexts, the second is on examples from Arabic into English while the last part is concerned with examples from English into Arabic.

### General discussion

To illustrate the importance of pragmatic failure in leading to counter-productive consequences in social interactions, Tang (2013, p.78) for instance, cites the following much informative examples:

(1) A Chinese student ( A) meets his friend (B) who is an American in the campus and they have a talk.

A: You look pale. What's the matter?

B: I am feeling sick. A cold, may be.

A: Go and see the doctor. Drink more water. Did you take any pills? Chinese medicine works wonderful. Would you like to try? Put on more clothes. Have a good rest.

B: **You're not my mother, are you?** (italics in the original).

In the above example (1), the SPF results from the difference between the Chinese and American cultures since in Chinese culture, people show a lot of concern about the other by providing a great deal of friendliness embedded in asking about her/his affairs. This particular behavior is negatively understood by the American addressees since it threatens their privacy and, consequently, interpreted as a suspicious act (ibid). It is obvious that A misjudges the effect his utterance pragmatic force has on B due to his dependence on his native culture pragmatic norms and his lack of the required knowledge relevant to the target culture.

(2) A Chinese visiting scholar (A) brought his 5-year-old daughter (B) to visit one of the staff (C) of international office of an American university ( Tang, 2013, p.78).

B: Good morning, grandpa! (C looks a little puzzled with the greeting "grandpa" and A tries to explain it).

A: Sorry. My daughter is from China and you know it's polite to greet an old gentleman with "grandpa" in China.



C: What? Do you mean that I am old? I am not old, and I can do my job well.

The pragmatic failure in the above example (2) is both pragma-linguistic and socio-pragmatic due to the fact that B fails first in her linguistic choice of inappropriate utterance, i.e. **grandpa**, that is absolutely unsuitable to the linguistic context in question. Second, B fails to appreciate the social conditions placed on her linguistic choice in terms of another totally different culture. In the Chinese culture, old people are highly respected and sympathized by the young without any threat to face wants when being addressed as old. In contrast, the old in American culture do not intend to admit being described as old since old age is associated with uselessness and inactivity. The result is that C feels offended and the communication does not only fail but rather it never observes C's mental world, i.e. emotions, desires...etc.

(3) Asking an Arab or a Western visitor to India about his name by saying "**What is your good name**" is considered offensive since such a question implies that the addressee has a 'bad name' (Al-Saidi, 2013, p.32).

In this example (3), the speaker resorts to his native tongue pragmatics as a source of reference forgetting that s/he interacts with a foreigner belonging to a different culture. In a Hindu context, newly-born babies have been given '**bad names**' that will be changed later into good ones (Al-Saidi, 2013, p.32, italics mine).

(4) "**You haven't changed much**", when said to an over seventy-year old American, with the intention of giving a compliment to the American that he is still as active as before, leading to an offensive SPF.

In example 4, in English, the meaning of "you haven't changed much" is not equivalent to that of "you haven't become older". Furthermore, there is a quite high value with the word "change" in English. So, saying "no change, remains as before" to the old in English is not a compliment at all, but could be (in extreme cases) insulting and thus, offensive (<http://www.zjdtzx.com/home/Item/141.aspx>).

(5) E: Look what I've got for you! (maybe a gift).

JE: Oh!, **I'm sorry**. (in Japanese, 'thank you' may not sound sincere enough)

E: Why sorry?

(This example of pragma-linguistic failure is taken from Richards y Sukwiwat (1983, p.116 cited in Amaya, 2008, p.17), which reports a situation in which a Japanese student has to express gratitude in English.

The source of failure in the above example (5) is caused by the fact that "some non-native speakers of English have difficulties in correctly interpreting this type of routines because they think that they are a real invitation "(Amaya,2008,p.17). In fact, the Japanese addressee above feels disappointed due to the lack of sincerity of their American friends who never have any intention to invite their Japanese friends at all in this particular context (Amaya,2008).

### SPF in translation from Arabic into English

It is worth noting that Arabic and English belong to totally different cultures and any SPF in communication within them is more probable. However, this paper proposes that 'approximately

similar pragmatic equivalents' are possible between them. The following examples (1 to 5) may be illustrative of the condition:

- (1) Pickthall, for instance, translated the Qur'anic verse "**Wa'asbha fu'ad umi Musa farighan'**" (Quran: 9:10) literally into English as "And the heart of the mother of Moses became void" where both the intended meaning and the pragmatic force are lost.

In example 1, the translator's failure in grasping the ST message is because he lacks both the semantic meaning of '*Wa'asbha fu'ad umi Musa farighan'* (lit. The heart of Moses' mother became void), which in general, its semantic meaning indicates both 'worried and grief', but the pragmatic force associated with the word '**farighan'**' implies the highest degree of grief and worry is absent in the translation ( cf. al-Batal, 2007, p.18). It is interestingly remarkable to identify that the best possible translation of the above verse into English is proposed by (al-Batal, 200, p.28) where he renders it into "and the heart of Moses' mother was in her mouth" (al-Batal, 2007, p.28 ). This last translation in particular succeeds in observing the pragmatic communicative act in both the source and the target cultures.

- (2) **Wa anni kulma da'wtuhum litaghfira lahum wadha'uu asabiahum fi athanihim**(Quran: 71:7)( lit. And every time I have called them , that You might forgive them, they have (only) thrust their fingers into their ears.

In example 2, Arberry translates the above mentioned verse literally into "And every time I have called them , that thou mightiest forgive them, they have (only) **thrust their fingers into their ears**". Arberry's translation of the above verse might make no sense to the target reader because the pragmatic function of expressing how careless and stubborn they are represented by the Arabic idiomatic expression '**wadha'uu asabiahum fi adhanihim**'(lit. they have (only) thrust their fingers into their ears) is totally lost. Instead, the most probable pragmatic equivalence is what provided in the following translation:

"And every time I have preached them so that You might forgive them, they have turned a **deaf ear and a blind eye to the truth...**" (Al-Batal, 2007, p.28, italics mine).

- (3) **Wa kanat lilah fatatan mina albadu**, translated into "his lila was a young girl from among the Bedouin"( Denys Davi's translation of al-Tayyib Saleh cited in al-Saidi, 2013, p.32).

The above literal translation (3) causes the loss of the intended meaning and the pragmatic function associated with 'Lila' whose name symbolizes the true and eternal romantic love in the Arab culture. The translator's failure lies in not accounting for cultural signs related to the name identified above, which is used to describe a 'beloved' rather than a mere mistress. Therefore, 'his Lila' should have been translated into 'his beloved' not a 'girl called Lila' since the former is the narrator's real intention.

- (4) A translator should be attentive when s/he is faced by the word '**hukuma**' (lit. government) in Imam Ali bin Aby Talib speeches when he was addressing his disloyal supporters as follows: "**Walaqad kuntu 'amartukum fi hathi'hi al-hukumati 'amry**" (lit. I had given you in this government an order) (Sadiq, 2008, p.42).

In the above translation (example 4), the translator has failed in observing the historical background relevant to the context in which the above word was used. During the time of Imam Ali, the word '**hukuma**' was not used in its present meaning, i.e. 'government'. The speaker's intention is best translated into "I had given you **in this case** an order ( Sadiq,2008, p.42; Enani, 1999,35) since the meaning intended in this context is 'case' not 'government'.

(5) When transferring the expression '**Innahu la-yuthliju sadrya 'an 'araka'**(lit. it snows my heart to see you) without any consideration to the socio-cultural conditions placed on selection and use of the above expression, SPF will unavoidably occurs.

In example (5), the translator should bear in mind that Arabic and English are culturally different languages. Second, s/he should be fully aware of the implied meanings related to culture-bound expressions, such as the one used above. More specifically, s/he is required to observe that

Arabic is the language of some peoples mostly living in the desert where *ath-thlj*(snow) is something everyone likes. In contrast, English is the language of some peoples mostly living in storms and snow for a great part of the year. So, warmth in this culture is something desired by all people... Therefore, *ath-thlj* is a reference to the happiness of any Arab, warmth is another reference to the happiness of any English speaking person(Sadiq, 2008, p.48).

Accordingly, "**it snows my heart to see you**" expresses completely different meaning than the intended one. It is better translated via using English idiom "**It warms the cockles of my heart to see you**" which has approximately the same pragmatic force of the ST (Sadiq,2008, p.49).

### 3.3 SPF in translation from English into Arabic

Examples 1 to 4 that follow illustrate the SPF in the translation from English into Arabic.

(1) During the conflict in Iraq in 2006, the following headline was reported by one of the English Newspapers(Al-Batal,2007):

"Iraqi Head Seeks Arms" (p.65) which was soon translated into Arabic as "**alRa'iis al-araqi yasa'a lilhusul ala es-silah**"(lit. Iraqi head(president) seeks arms(weapons).

In example (1), the translator fails to observe the more related context reported by the newspaper since it was more associated with the terrorist attacks in Iraq where civilians were killed savagely by al-Qaeda supporters in Iraq. So, the SPF lies in the translator's unawareness of both the reporter's linguistic choice, where *arms* in this English headline refers to the whole body, and the social condition that determines the intended meaning here (Al-Batal, 2007, p. 66).Thus, this headline should be translated communicatively since literal translation unavoidably leads to SPF. The translation that perhaps best suits the context is:

"**al-authuur fil iraq ala ra's bila Jasad**"(lit. A head without body was found in Iraq) (Al-Batal, 2007, p.66).

(2) Translating 'You smell good' literally can be taken as a severe criticism of the addressee in Arabic. (Shammas,2005, p.45).

In the above example (2), it is obvious that translating English compliments literally into Arabic would more likely lead to counterproductive consequences . It is therefore, better to use '**yala elra'aiha al-zakiyya**' (lit.'What a good/lovely smell!) that is acceptable when accompanied by making "reference to the kind of perfume used by the addressee" (Shammas,2005, p.45). Also, 'It really looks good' in English is better translated into "**al-qalab ghaleb**' ( lit. The pattern is dominant!) with reference to a suit or a jacket in Arabic, the reference of pattern' here being made to the body of the wearer" (Shammas,2005, p.45). The main source of pragmatic failure in this example is actually due to the linguistic

representation and the possible mismatch in the social event between the SL and the TL (Shammas, 2005).

- (3) Using " **Good Friday**" in Arabic to express happy occasions causes pragmatic failure since this Biblical expression conveys a great deal of spiritual and theological meanings (al-Saidi, 2013, p.93).

In example (3), the literal translation of the said expression indicates the translator's lack of the cultural knowledge required here. S/he should be fully aware of the fact that 'Good Friday' has nothing to do with "good or happy occasions" but rather refers to, in Christianity, the day on which Jesus Christ had been crucified and it is accordingly better to be translated into **al-jum'aatu al-ahziin** (lit. the Sad Friday) in Arabic (al-Saidi, 2013, p.93).

- (4) To render '**Summer's day**', in Shakespeare's line of poetry "Shall I compare thee to a Summer's day, into Arabic as " **Yau'mun Qa'idh** (lit. Summer's day) leads to a counterproductive pragmatic effect on the target reader.

In example (4), the pragmatic failure results from the translator's ignorance of the related geographical context that constrains the literal rendering of the said expression. More specifically, the images of a 'Summer's day' are mismatched in English and Arabic especially when those images are associated with romance. A 'Summer's day' in Shakespearian England is unusually beautiful and fantastic since it is warm and sunny whereas the same day in an Arab context is most likely awfully hot and humid. Therefore, it is wise for one of the translators to render it very beautifully into **al-fajr** (lit. daybreak), which is more suitable to an Arab similar context. (al-Saidi, 2013).

- (5) A: He's driving me crazy with his bad jokes.

B: Tell me about it.

A: Tell you what? (a short conversation between A and B who are both non-native English speakers talking about their friend C).

In example (5), it is evident that A's last question indicates his lack of knowledge of what the fixed English expression 'tell me about it' means since he thinks that B requires him to provide more information on what A has told him/her. In contrast, B's message is that he is very familiar with C's behavior (Dictionary.Cambridge.org). 'tell me about it' is better translated into '**sal mujarib wala tas'al hakiiman**' (lit. ask an experienced person rather than a wise man) (the example is based on the researcher's own experience).

## Conclusions

It can be concluded that non-native speakers of a language, in general and translators, in particular do not usually consider the importance of socio-pragmatic aspects of language and they, as a consequence, commit pragmatic failures of many kinds especially when translating from English into Arabic or vice versa. In other words, they tend to resort to literal translations forgetting that pragmatics is mainly concerned with indirectness as stated thus far. Furthermore, the speaker's illocutionary force of an utterance is not easily understood by making reference to the speaker's intention or hearer's inference alone. It is rather the relevant cultural context that plays the major role in this respect. Additionally, the pragmatic failure in translation is an output of the mismatch between the addresser's and addressees' cognitive environment in addition to translator's unsuccessful attempts to substitute language/culture bound expressions with counterparts that unfit to express the ST intended meaning either semantically or pragmatically.

Thus, it is very important to thoroughly understand the interlocutor's pragmatic meaning, which is usually implicit at both socio-pragmatic and pragma-linguistic levels in cross-cultural communication. To put it clearly, potential areas of misinterpretation and failures are more likely to occur if we fail to fully understand our interlocutor's intention in the process of cross-cultural communication. In sum, using language in daily life interactions requires making linguistic choices of some variety to be flexible, in accordance with the variety of relevant social context factors. In other words, our linguistic choices, i.e. the structures and styles we use, should convey the related asymmetric situational settings communicatively. If we, as language users or translators, fail to use an appropriate language in relation to contextual situations, SPF will occur and will inevitably lead to pragmatic loss in communication, in general and translation, in particular.

#### About the Author:

**Abdali Hammood al-Saidi** is currently a Ph.D candidate at the Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Serdang. He got his MA in translation from University of Baghdad, Iraq. His research interests and publications are in the areas of translation and culture.

#### References

- Abdulwahab, A. A.(2012). Necessities of Pragmatic Exploitation in Translating English Short Stories into Arabic. *Adab Al-Rafidayn Journal*, 61, 1-34.
- Al-Batal, M.(2007). *Fusuul fil,Tarjama wal Ta'riib* (Chapters on Translation and Transliteration).Cairo: Longman Publishing House.
- Al-Hindaw, F. ,Mubarak, A. S., & Salman, S. M. (2014). Pragmatic Failure in Iraqi EFL Contexts. *IASJ*.1,11-48.
- Al-Saidi, A. (2013). *Studies on Translation and Culture*. Baghdad: Faraaheedi House for Publishing and Distribution.
- Amaya, L. F. (2008). Teaching Culture: Is It Possible to Avoid Pragmatic Failure? *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses*, 21, 11-24.
- Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to do things with words*. Harvard University Press.
- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). Universals in language usage: Politeness phenomena. In E. Goody (Ed.). *Questions on Politeness: Strategies in Social Interaction* (pp. 256-289). Cambridge University Press.
- Crystal, D. (1989). "Pragmatics". *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of language* (2 ed.) Cambridge: CUP.
- Ellis, R. (n.d). Interlanguage Pragmatics. Shanghai International Studies University. Retrieved May 17<sup>th</sup>, 2014 from <http://www.news.shisu.edu.cn>.
- Ellis, R. (2008).*The Study of Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hashemian, M.(2012). Cross-cultural Difference and Pragmatic Transfer in English and Persian Refusals . *The Journal of teaching language skills*. 4,3, 23-46.
- Hymes, D. (1971). On Communicative Competence. In J. B. Pride & J. Holmes (Eds.). *Sociolinguistics*(pp. 46-63). London: Penguin.
- Kosal, D. (n.d). Pragmatic Approach to Cross-cultural Communication in the Business World. Retrieved January14<sup>th</sup>, 2015 from <http://www.opf.slu.cz/vvr/akce/turecko/pdf/Koksal.pdf>.
- Khanfar, A.K. (2013). The Translation of Puns A Semantic or Pragmatic Equivalent.( Unpublished doctoral dissartation). An-Najah University, Nablus, Palestine.

- Leech, G. (1983). *Principles of Pragmatics*. London: Longman.
- Leech, G.(1996). *The Principles of Pragmatics* (10<sup>th</sup>ed). London and New York:Longman.
- Levinson, S. C. (1983). *Pragmatics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Luo, X. & Goa, J.(2011). On Pragmatic Failures in Second Language Learning .*Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 1 ,3, 283-286.
- Malekzadeh, S. (2012). A Study into Methodological Issues in Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Research. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences* , 3,2,153-160.
- Mey, J. (2001). *Pragmatics: an Introduction*. Malden: Blackwell.
- Nazzal, A. (2010). Quranic Verses as a Religious and Cultural Identity .Lambert Academic Publishing, USA. (Published Doctorate dissertation) USA, Albany University
- Nodoushan, M. A.(1995). A Socio-pragmatic Comparative Study of Ostensible Invitations in English and Farsi.(Unpublished MA thesis). University of Isfahan.
- Sadiq, S. (2008). Some Semantic, Stylistic and Cultural Problems of Translation with Special Reference to Translating the Glorious Quran. *Sayyab Translation Journal(STJ)*,1, 37-59.
- Sarac-Suzer, S. (2008). Coping with Socio-pragmatic Failure: Suggested Activities. *Major Articles Journal*. 10,3,Retrieved February 5<sup>th</sup>,2015 from <http://www.hltmag.co.uk/jun08/mart04.htm>.
- Shammas, N. A.(2005). Lingua-pragmatic Politeness and Translatability. *Damascus University Journal*, 21, 3+4, 23-56.
- Sperber, D. & D. Wilson. 1986/95. *Relevance :Communication and Cognition*. Oxford: Blackwell .
- Tang, J. (2013). Analysis of Pragmatic Failure from the Perspective of Adaptation. *Cross-Cultural Communication*,9,3,75-79.
- Tawfiq, K.(2007). *Qawa'id al-Tarjama Al-Asasiya* (Basic Rules of translating).Jiiza: Halla Publishing House.
- Thomas, J. (1983). Cross-cultural Pragmatic failure. *Applied Linguistics*,4, 91-112.
- Thomas, J. (1984). Cross-cultural Discourse as Unequal Encounter: Towards a Pragmatic Analysis. *Applied Linguistics*, 5, 226-235.
- Triki, M. (2013). A Pragmatic Approach to the Study of English /Arabic Translation Errors. *Journal Academica* 3,1, 39-51.
- Umale, J.(n.d.). Pragmatic Failure in Refusal Strategies: British Versus Omani Interlocutors. *Arab World English Journal*. 2,1, 18-46.
- Wolfson, N. (1989). The social Dynamics of Native and Nonnative Variation in Complementing Behavior. In Miriam Eisenstein (Ed.), *The dynamic interlanguage*(pp. 219-236). New York: Plenum.
- Zamborlin, C. (2007). Going Beyond Pragmatic Failures :Dissonance in Intercultural Communication .*Intercultural Pragmatics*. 4,1, 21-50.