

A Brief Comparison of Differences in Communication Between Chinese, Japanese and English Cultures

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Abstract : Different nations have different cultures, which are inevitably reflected in communicative modes. Without a knowledge of these differences in cross-cultural communication, people may find it hard to pass on the desired message and misunderstandings may arise. This current paper makes a brief comparison of differences between Chinese, Japanese and English-speaking cultures. It categorizes the differences into four types : 1. verbal differences ; 2. non-verbal differences ; 3. differences in customs and habits and 4. differences in values. By making such a comparison, the author of this paper states that foreign language learning should include two aspects : language acquisition and culture acquisition, which should be equally emphasized.

Key words : comparison cultural differences cross-cultural communication

In recent years, with quick and profound development of the study of linguistics and research in foreign language teaching, differences in communication between cultures have been drawing greater and greater attention, as they play an important role in cross-cultural communication.

Due to the differences in geography, historical origin and background, different nations have formed their unique values, traditional customs, way of life, manners and behaviour, etc. All these are inevitably reflected in people's way of communication, either verbal or non-verbal. Modern linguistic theory believes that successes in cross-cultural communication does not just lie in the communicator's mastery (namely, accuracy and fluency) of language, but to a great extent, depends on whether they can flexibly use appropriate language form according to the conversation context, the counterpart's social status and cultural psychology.

In interaction with foreigners, native speakers tend to be rather tolerant of pronunciation or syntactical errors, as they take it for granted that such mistakes are unavoidable. But in contrast, violations of pragmatic rules are very often interpreted as bad manners since they are

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unaware of sociolinguistic relativity. Pragmatists believe, therefore, that the more accurate and fluent a person's foreign language is, the more likely they may produce communicative failures and even unexpected serious consequences if the speaker lacks a knowledge of the culture of the target language.

In order to avoid pragmatic failure and achieve successful cross-cultural communication, foreign language learners should get a good understanding of the differences between the target language culture and their own. This paper presents a brief comparison of the communicative differences between cultures of Chinese, Japanese and English-speaking nations, which are put into four categories and discussed with specific examples.

1. Verbal Differences

Language, as a tool for communication, is believed to be a vehicle of culture or a mirror that vividly reflects the culture of a nation, which is like blood melting itself in the language spoken by the particular social community.

Any language is formed of three components : phonetics, lexicology and syntax. Cultural differences thus exist in every one of these three levels, though in different degrees. Compared with English-speaking people, first of all, Chinese people talk in an apparently high tone. Owing to their habit of speaking their mother tongue, Chinese learners have a inclination to speak English in a higher tone than native speakers, sounding as if irritated or quarrelsome. It is, therefore, advisable for them to try lowering down their pitch when speaking English so as to sound natural.

As for syntax, cultural differences are also reflected in different forms of the three languages which play the same function in meaning. Both Chinese and Japanese, two oriental languages, seem to be direct, while English somewhat indirect or roundabout. To state a fact or make a suggestion, statements or imperative sentences are normally used in Chinese and Japanese. A request is made simply by adding “请” at the beginning (in Chinese) and “～下さい” at the end of the sentence (in Japanese), but to express the same idea in English interrogative forms are normally employed.

This can be seen even in the simplest every day greetings. The English equivalent, for instance, of “你好” in Chinese and “こんにちは” in Japanese, is such interrogatives as “How do you do?” and “How are you?” Moreover, “Will/Would/Could you…” is a sentence pattern often used to ask for a favour or a request. The roundabout expression “If I were you, I would…” is an idiomatic expression for putting forward a proposal. The neglect of such differences would result in putting the patterns of the mother tongue into English, which is likely to lead to misunderstanding in communication with English speaking people.

All the three languages have the second person pronoun -- 你/您 in Chinese, あなた/きみ in Japanese, and "you" in English, but the Japanese one is much less used than the one in the other two languages. In conversation, the Japanese normally say the other's name plus "～せんせい/さん" rather than use the pronoun. Frequent use of it would sound abrupt or impolite. But doing so in Chinese and English would be awkward since you are talking to the person face to face.

The difference in answering a general question like "Don't you like it?" serves another example of difference in this respect. In English, if the answer is positive, one says, "Yes, I do"; if negative, he says, "No, I don't". But in both Chinese and Japanese, the response "是的/不" or "はい/いいえ" (Yes/No) is first given to state whether the question is right or wrong. This difference shows the different cultural psychology: the English speaker answers from his own stand, while the Chinese and Japanese respond from the inquirer's. Such a simple difference often brings about confusion and difficulty to beginners in their foreign language learning.

Being one of the components of language system, vocabulary makes existence of language possible. As a result of a nation's long use since their coming into being, words of a language accumulated on themselves a lot of implication of the culture of the nation. Cultural differences therefore are most reflected on this level of language.

Any language is characterized by its lexical polysemy. Geoffrey Leech classifies semantics into seven types: 1. conceptual; 2. social; 3. connotative; 4. affective; 5. reflected; 6. collocative and 7. thematic. Among these, cultural implication of words is mainly embodied in their connotative and reflected meanings. The seeming equivalents of two languages may have quite different or even opposite connotative or reflected meanings. Lacking knowledge of these two types of meaning of culture-loaded words in the target language may mean a barrier or failure in cross-cultural communication.

The translation of the brand of a kind of battery from China "White Elephant" is a typical example. In the oriental culture, a white elephant may produce a pleasant animal image, but to English speaking people, the reflected meaning of "White Elephant" is "a big, but costly and useless object given as a present". It is thus not strange for the Westerners seeing such a brand to hesitate to make their choice on the Chinese battery among so many. In addition, it seems correct to translate the brand of a Chinese alarm clock "金鸡" into "Golden Cock", but as the word "cock" is likely to be associated with penis in western culture, how can you expect this kind of clock to sell well on the international market? Again, the story "半夜鸡叫", well-known to every household in China, was originally translated into English "Cocks Crow At Mid-Night". The translator would not have expected that a mere glance at the title of the story would make western readers burst into laughter. If he had substituted "roosters" for

“cocks” at the very beginning, such an “international joke” would have been avoided.

Different nations’ understanding of things and their feelings caused by it often differ greatly due to their different cultural tradition, which is also naturally reflected in words. Take the animal “dog” for example. Being one of the most popular pets, the dog is treated as a friend or even a family member in the West. In Chinese culture, however, it was traditionally treated as an unwelcome animal, though, due to western influence, it also has recently become a pet in some Chinese families. This difference can be seen in the two languages. In Chinese, there are many idiomatic expressions with “狗” in them, such as 走狗/狗腿子 (a person loyal to somebody wicked), 狼心狗肺 (as evil as with a wolf heart and a dog lung), 狐朋狗友 (fox-and-dog like friends or conspirators), 挂羊头卖狗肉 (selling dog meat with a sheep’s head hung as the store sign), etc, all derogatory in meaning.

In English, however, dog-expressions present an entirely different picture: a lucky dog, a top dog, a gay dog, dog-tired, dog-poor, Every dog has his day, Love me, love my dog, etc., all positive in meaning. Dogs are loved so tenderly. No wonder that the seemingly right translation “running dogs” from 走狗, which used to frequently appear in Chinese media in the 1960’s, did never rouse any antipathy among Westerners as was expected. Instead, it produced a lovely image of the animal in their minds.

In Japanese culture, the dog seems to be treated in a moderate way, neither so tiresome as in Chinese culture nor so lovely as in English culture. This can be proved by Japanese phrases and proverbs related to “犬”, among which there are both positive and negative ones, such as : 犬死に (a stupid sacrifice of life). 犬の遠吠え (He can only criticize people behind their backs), 犬の逃げ吠え (A waking dog barks from afar at a sleeping lion), 犬は三日の恩を三年忘れぬ (Keep a dog for three days, and he will not forget you for three years). It is interesting that the same proverb 犬も歩けば棒にあたる may mean positively (Every dog has his day) or negatively (If you are too forward, you are likely to meet with disaster) in different contexts. With such cultural differences, it would be disgusting to talk to foreigners about the delicious taste and nutrition of dog meat, which is popularly enjoyed on the Chinese table.

How to address others also shows great diversity in different cultures. Chinese and Japanese cultures pay much attention to people’s age and social status, while English culture does not. In both China and Japan, strangers may be called in the way relatives are addressed (as a middle-aged Chinese, though, I was still surprised to be called “お父さん” (father) by Japanese saleswomen). Students never directly call their teacher by the given name however young they are, but even senior western teachers hope their students will use their first or given name. It often happens that, in order to show friendliness and respect, Chinese counterparts put Mr./Ms ahead of foreigners’ given name, like Mr. Peter, Ms Mary, and tell their children to call

them uncle, aunt, grandpa/ma. Doing so, however, would never please the Westerners. Instead, they would feel uneasy or unhappy. That is because, unlike elderly Chinese, who take pride in their own old age, Westerners are very sensitive to their age. When respectfully called "Grandpa/ma", they would instinctively say to themselves, "Do I really look so old?"

2. Non-verbal Differences

Some western linguists believe that 75% of human information is communicated through non-verbal or silent language : the speaker's postures, gestures, eye and facial expressions, etc. Different cultures have created different non-verbal communicative behaviours, which are an important field for research in cross-cultural communication.

Each of the three cultures has its own unique silent language. Shrugging is a western expression of doubt or disdain, indifference, impatience. The Japanese are well-known for their deep bow. When they meet for the first time, they are likely to bow to each other several times, one deeper than the other. During my one year's stay in Japan, I seldom saw people shake hands except on TV, where a host of a program or a singer may do so with the audience. "Da Gong" (holding hands upward with the fingers crossed and closed) is a typical Chinese traditional gesture to express congratulations or good wishes.

Eyes are said to be the window of a person's soul. Westerners pay so much attention to eye contact that there is a saying : Do not trust those who dare not look at your eyes. While talking to others, Chinese people have less eye contact, and the Japanese still less, which may puzzle Westerners.

The study of kinesics has found that some nations have a stronger sense of body contact than others. As nations being both featured by their gregarious living and accustomed to living in an indensely inhabited environment, the Chinese and the Japanese on the whole have a stronger sense of body contact than Westerners. So if they talk to English native speakers within their usual distance, they would make the other uncomfortable. However, to express friendship or affectionate feelings, what the Chinese normally do is merely shake hands or pat the other's shoulder. But this does not seem to satisfactorily express Westerners' feelings. In similar situations, they tend to warmly hug and kiss, even in public, which is awful in the eyes of both Chinese and Japanese people. It is not uncommon that Chinese young men are seen walking hand in hand, which brings about no gossip in China. In the West, however, that is likely to be misunderstood as a sign of homosexuality.

Anthropologists have noticed the different implication of the smile of the Japanese and Westerners. To the latter, the former's smile is often hard to understand or even absurd. It is said that Americans are surprised to notice Japanese women smile when they mention their

husband's death. In fact, the Japanese women resort to smiling to cover their grief. Here is a story that also shows difference in the implication of the laughter of the Chinese and Westerners.

One day, I was greatly surprised to see a foreign teacher who was working at my college bitterly sobbing on her way to her flat, thinking that she must have received some bad news from home. But it turned out that this foreign teacher was upset by nothing but laughter of some Chinese people. It happened that she slipped and fell over while walking along a slippery road after rain. A group of people saw and laughed. Among them were her Chinese students. To this foreign lady, their laughter was cruel, but to the Chinese, laughing in this situation does not mean anything bad. It is simply employed to reduce embarrassment. Very often, the person "laughed at" joins in and laughs it off. But this foreign friend considered it unbearable, which seems to be fussy to the Chinese, as she was obviously not hurt. How different the interpretations were because of different cultures !

3. Differences in Customs and Habits

As an important part of culture, customs and habits are diverse from one nation to another. People's communicative behaviour is also greatly influenced by them. When receiving a gift, for example, the Japanese and Chinese normally put it aside and do not open it until after the guest has left. Opening it in the guest's presence is embarrassing and may be interpreted as being greedy. But treating the gift this way would puzzle Westerners, who may think that the carefully chosen gift is too worthless to be noticed. When they are given a gift, they open it at once and say something to express their appreciation and gratitude. When Chinese people meet, especially the opposite sex, they seldom comment on the other's dressing and appearance. Doing so would be also embarrassing and even be misunderstood as being provocative. Nevertheless, hearing someone say, "You look beautiful today." or "What a nice dress you've got !" a western lady would be pleased, replying, "Thank you" or "It's very nice of you to say so".

When inviting guests to a meal at home, the Chinese or Japanese host often modestly say something like : Just a humble family meal, there is nothing good. Please make do with what we've casually prepared. But English speaking people would say, "This is specially cooked for you" or "This is my favourite dish. I hope you like it." At the table, all the western host need to do is say "Help yourself" and guests start eating without modesty and formality. But different manners are expected for Chinese host and guest : the former should appear generous and hospitable, while the latter modest and reserved. The host thus would kindly try over and over again to put food into the guest's bowl and pour wine into his glass. The Chinese host's

generosity, however, would puzzle or even bother western guests. When talking about how she felt when seeing guests being “forced” to drink until drunk, a foreign friend angrily said to me, “That’s simply against human rights !”

4. Differences in Values

Anthropologists believe that values are the core of a nation’s culture. In fact, the differences discussed above are all caused by different values of the different nations. English culture places emphasis on individualism, independence, encouragement to be creative and a do-it-yourself spirit. The values of Chinese and Japanese cultures are similar in that they both emphasize harmony, modesty, reciprocal assistance and a spirit of selflessness.

These differences could be seen from the following facts. When Chinese and Japanese people meet, they are likely to ask each other personal questions, such as about age, wages, marital status, etc. Particularly, “Where are you going ?” “Going downtown ?” “Have you had your lunch ?” are often greeting expressions between Chinese acquaintances. By doing so, they show each other concern and consideration. But greeting and talking this way may annoy English-speaking people, because to them, these are private questions. Their unspoken line to such greetings may be “None of your business !”

The following incident that once happened at a college in China also shows differences of this kind. A young foreign couple teaching at the college adopted a newly-born Chinese baby. To show concern, the college chief leader went to visit with his wife. They arrived earlier than the appointed time, which made the foreign couple unhappy. What displeased them more was that the Chinese couple warm-heartedly and patiently gave them advice as to how to look after a baby -- of course, in their Chinese way : A baby can easily catch cold, so you should dress her warmly and should not bathe her every day. You’d better have her sleep with you during the night, etc. In the presence of the guests, politeness suppressed the foreign couple’s unhappiness and impatience. But afterwards they said privately, “If our parents were like this couple ordering us about, we would have driven them out !”

Why wasn’t the well-meaning Chinese couple’s advice appreciated by the foreign couple ? It is because of the effect of different values. On the Chinese couple’s side, being hosts and senior to the foreigners, they felt a necessity to care about them. On the foreign couple’s side, however, they felt humiliated for being given such detailed advice as though they were children or idiots. In fact, different ways to take care of babies in the East and West also show these two different cultures’ diverse values. Babies always sleep with their mother in China, but babies in the west normally sleep separately from their parents. So it may be quite safe to say that Westerners are brought up to be independent from the moment they are born.

Every nation's culture is colourful and cultural differences in communication are very complicated. The discussion above about the differences in Chinese, Japanese and English cultures is by no means comprehensive, but is enough to show how important it is to pay attention to such issues. Without understanding the differences, it is hard to ensure successful communication among people from the different cultures. Without enough attention being paid to the diversity, it is impossible to guarantee satisfactory effect of foreign language teaching, in which, in my view, emphasis should be placed upon the two equally important aspects : language acquisition and culture acquisition. The culture of the target language should be introduced and compared with the native culture so as to develop the learners' culture awareness and their communicative competence.

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