

The Cultural Differences Between English and Chinese Courtesy Languages*

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Due to the differences of cultural values and conventions, people from different cultures may have different understandings about the courtesy language. This paper expounds the differences between English and Chinese courtesy languages, mainly from terms of address, greetings and appreciations. It also analyzes the reasons for the differences between English and Chinese courtesy languages, i.e. different cultures and different politeness principles. Through the contrastive studies of courtesy language, people will come to a clear understanding of the relationship between language and culture, which is meaningful to English teaching and learning.

Keywords: courtesy language, culture, politeness principle

Introduction

Language coexists with culture. Learning a foreign language is more than learning its vocabulary and grammar, because culture is also an important part. It can be said that language learning is culture learning.

Due to globalization and internationalization, contact with people who are culturally and linguistically different is inevitable. Politeness, as a universal phenomenon, plays a crucial role in helping maintain social harmony and friendly interpersonal relationships. However, different nations have different ways to express politeness. If we are not clear about the differences between English and Chinese courtesy languages, opportunities for misunderstandings will abound and we will not achieve effective communication. Therefore, politeness is regarded as one of the important language behaviors and even a significant part of language, and the study of politeness phenomenon is of significance.

Theories on Politeness

Politeness Principle in English

Linguistic research into politeness in English is closely associated with the names of Lakoff (1973), Leech (1983), and Brown and Levinson (1978). Brown and Levinson's theory has been treated as the classic study on politeness since its first publication in 1978. They attempted to explain why people often choose to convey themselves indirectly by proposing politeness principles, which was later specified as six maxims by Leech. In

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Leech's view (1983), the maxims of the Politeness Principle are as follows:

(1) Tact Maxim: (a) Minimize cost to other; (b) Maximize benefit to other.

(2) Generosity Maxim: (a) Minimize benefit to self; (b) Maximize cost to self.

(3) Approbation Maxim: (a) Minimize dispraise of other; (b) Maximize praise of other.

(4) Modesty Maxim: (a) Minimize praise of self; (b) Maximize dispraise of self.

(5) Agreement Maxim: (a) Minimize disagreement between self and other; (b) Maximize agreement between self and other.

(6) Sympathy Maxim: (a) Minimize antipathy between self and other; (b) Maximize sympathy between self and other.

Politeness Principle in Chinese

In China, the most recent developments in politeness study are represented by Gu (1992), who explicitly connects politeness with social moral norms. He generalizes the essence of Chinese politeness—a tendency to denigrate the self and respect the other, which has been echoed by most Chinese scholars.

According to Gu's opinion, there are five aspects in the Politeness Principle in Chinese.

(1) The Self-denigration Maxim

The self-denigration maxim asks people to depreciate self as well as anything about self; to praise and show respect to others as well as anything about others.

(2) The Address Maxim

Term of address in Chinese represents the social relationship among people. Different addressing means different relationship. For example, a student usually addresses his teacher by "family name + 老师"; "老/小 + family name" is not allowed because it is considered impolite.

(3) The Tact Maxim

The maxim is to speak with elegant words instead of vulgar words; to speak in a mild way instead of speaking bluntly. It means that one who employs polite language looks good and educated. No one thinks a person is polite if he speaks with a mouthful of vulgar words.

(4) The Agreement Maxim

"面子 (face)" plays the most important role in social interaction. One is expected to consider both the speaker's 面子 and the hearer's in Chinese discourse. "面子" and politeness in Chinese go hand in hand.

(5) The Generosity Maxim

The generosity maxim requires one, in motive, to minimize the price of others and maximize the benefit for others; in speech, to maximize the benefit given by others and minimize the price of self.

Differences Between English and Chinese Courtesy Languages

Courtesy language, as part of language, is no doubt a reflection of culture. It refers to the verbal or non-verbal language that can reduce the negative effects caused by impolite or imposing utterances, and show the speaker's politeness to the hearer in communication. Generally, courtesy language consists of terms of address, greetings, appreciations, etc.

Terms of Address

Term of address is the title telling the interrelation between one and the other, as well as of the other's status or career. A particular way of address must take culture, society, education, belief, age, gender, etc. into consideration.

In English, most terms of headship are not generally used to address people, except a few including *premier*, *president*, *professor*, *chairman*, etc. Among those terms of occupations, only a few terms like *doctor* and *waiter* can be used for address. For acquaintances, one can call the other by name directly. For strangers, if the surname of the other is known, then one usually calls the other by Mr. + surname or Mrs. + surname. But if the other allows you to call his first name, then you should do that, even if he is above your position. The way of addressing "headship + surname/first name" is generally used on people like members of royal family, authorities in governments, people from religious circle, law circle and military. Here are some examples: *President Clinton*, *Prince Charles*, *Pope John*, *Judge Jack* etc. Some titles of technical posts like doctor and professor can be used together with surname, like *Doctor Smith*, and *Professor Green*. On formal occasions, one may either address the other side with *Mr.*, *Miss*, *Sir*, and *Madam*.

In Chinese, people use headship terms to address others in order to show respect. Almost all the titles of technical posts can be used as terms of address. The structure of "surname + 老" is often used as the respectful address to those famous figures in educational, cultural, military and political circles, such as 王老, 赵老, etc. Sometimes the Chinese people add headship to surname to show respect. For instance, 张市长, 刘教授. But when the higher authorities talk to their subordinates, they often call them by their names directly to show consideration. In order to make addressing more convenient, people sometimes even simplify those addressing terms. For instance, "冯导演" can be shortened to "冯导", "孙工程师"—"孙工". In addition, "老师" was used to address those people who engaged in teaching, but now it can be used to address those people who have prominent achievements in every occupation.

Greetings

The contents of greetings of the Westerners and the Chinese are different. The British and Americans prefer to talk about weather when meeting, for example, "It is a nice day, isn't it?" The reason is mainly that the English are reluctant to converse about personal matters with people who are not friends, and mentioning the weather can be a useful and inoffensive way of starting a conversation with a stranger.

Greeting in Chinese is just opposite to that in English. The more trifling, the better. There is a Chinese saying "民以食为天 (Food is the first necessity of man)", so the Chinese people used to stress eating. They always greet first "吃了没?", but do not really care about whether you have eaten. However, in foreign countries, it means you want to invite someone to dinner. Another is "去哪?" which is considered an interference by the foreigners. Even if they use the same sentence, it is not regarded as a greeting. Another way to greet is saying what anyone else is doing, such as "出去啊?" when others are going outside.

Appreciations

The British and Americans often say "thank you" to the other no matter what he did for them. For example: 1) "Did you sleep well?" "Not bad, thank you." 2) "You are a pretty girl." "Thank you." "Thank you" can be used between father and son, the senior and the junior, as long as one does something for the other.

The Chinese usually say “谢谢/感谢/多谢” to express appreciation, which is in accordance with “Thank you” in English, but they do not think it necessary to say “谢谢” if what the other did for them belongs to a common job. “谢谢” in Chinese is mainly used to strangers or unfamiliar friends, and it is seldom used among the family, relatives or those who are considered to be one’s pals. However, Chinese people also express their gratitude to their closer friends or relatives, but this is in different ways. “By recognizing the cost and apologizing for it, Chinese people find a balance for the benefits” (Yang, 2011, p. 98).

Reasons for Differences Between English and Chinese Courtesy Languages

Two Different Cultures

Different courtesy languages result from different cultural backgrounds. English culture is mainly affected by Christianity, whereas Chinese culture by Confucianism.

Christianity, based on the teaching of Jesus Christ, is the most primary religion in the West. It advocates that people are equal, and that everyone has a common father—Jesus Christ. They emphasize personal effect, egoism and privacy, calling for equality and fraternity. People in English-speaking countries seldom use the term of respect and they do not stress hierarchical relationships in actual interactions, which influences their language.

Confucianism is a philosophical system originally developed from the teachings of Confucius. It is a philosophy or attitude that is connected with human beings. It is also a complex system of morality, society, politics and religion, which has been deep-rooted in the minds of the Chinese. According to Confucianism, man cannot live alone, but with other human beings. Under the education of Confucianism, Chinese politeness principle came into being gradually.

Two Politeness Principles

Both English and Chinese politeness principles have the tact maxim, but the meaning of the tact maxim is different. English tact maxim focuses on relationship between self and other while Chinese tact maxim refers to decency of language. In addition, the biggest difference between the two politeness principles is that Chinese one has the address maxim but English does not. The address maxim is caused by the hierarchical relationship in the minds of the Chinese, while the Westerners pursue the equality in interaction, so they do not stress the terms of address as much as the Chinese.

English culture centers on individualism and Chinese culture is collectivism, so Chinese people are more careful in trying not to offend others and sometimes may echo others’ opinions more frequently. Apart from expressing agreement, they may also praise others and show their appreciation of others’ views. When one is praised by others, the English usually accept it by saying “thank you”, which follows the agreement maxim in English politeness principle. However, the Chinese often deny or have self-humbling /self-abasement responses to praise by saying “不行, 不行/哪里, 哪里/过奖了” etc., because they are following the self-denigration maxim in Chinese politeness principle. However, this does not mean that Chinese people do not think positively of themselves. By not accepting the compliment, they show modesty, which is important for the Chinese people, because modesty is one of the most critical constituents of their self-image.

Conclusion

Different cultural backgrounds result in different courtesy languages. The Chinese culture has been greatly influenced by Confucianism, hence the Chinese people are probably more dependent on the family and the society, respecting the old and emphasizing interpersonal relationship and collectivity. But the English culture is influenced by Christianity, so people emphasize law, egoism and individual effort. Therefore, what is regarded as an act of politeness in the Chinese culture might simply be considered as impolite in English culture.

Nowadays, China has developed the relationship with English-speaking countries in many aspects. If we cannot understand the differences between English and Chinese courtesy languages, it is difficult for us to achieve a successful cross-cultural communication, and may even cause serious misunderstandings. Therefore, it is necessary to study this topic, which is meaningful to English teaching and learning.

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