

Differences in Communication Between Chinese and American Cultures

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Abstract: With the development of globalization and cultural diversity, cross-cultural communication has become popular around the world. Though many scholars have formulated various principles for people to observe, to some extent people violate them in real settings. Therefore, there may exist misunderstandings and conflicts between people communication from different cultural backgrounds, which can destroy people's friendship and cooperation. This paper listed four aspects: praise and response, request and response, refusal and response and task reception, which violated the cooperative principle between Chinese and American cultures, compared them and explored reasons mainly from Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck's value-oriented model, theories of dimensions of cultural variability and high-context and low-context cultures. In cross-cultural communication, individuals tend to violate some maxims based on their social forms which are not observed by others. For appropriate communication, people should respect and learn more other cultures and social norms instead of languages only.

Keywords: cross-cultural communication, cultures differences, the cooperative principle, value-oriented model, cultural variability

1. Introduction

Since the reform and opening-up was brought up, followed by the Belt and Road, an increasing number of international visitors have gone to China, which has led to the increase in cross-cultural communication for Chinese people. Cross-cultural communication exists widely in various fields such as business and education, however, there may exist misunderstandings between participants from different cultures. For instance, the way Chinese and American people use names differently may cause conflicts. Americans use first names most of the time, even the first day they meet, which makes them seem very friendly; while Chinese people use last names and positions to show respect [1]. Though Grice has guided people with the cooperative principle, to some extent people violate it in real situations [2]. Many scholars have analyzed these violations and categorized them into different types to explore cross-cultural communication. Besides, they have come up with a variety of theories to explain misunderstandings from the perspective of cultures. For example, Hall proposed the monochronic and polychronic time uses to show different time perceptions and use from different cultures [3]. He also developed cultural iceberg theory in which one-tenth of an iceberg is visible to enlighten participants to notice more invisible things under the iceberg [4]. As China grows rapidly,

Chinese scholars have pointed that there's an urgent need to cultivate Chinese cultural awareness during intercultural communication [5]. Based on previous studies, this paper listed examples of violations of maxims of the cooperative principle between Chinese and American cultures, compared them and explained them mainly from Value-oriented Model, Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory and High-Context and Low-Context Cultures. This study can help people to enlighten and realize some misinterpretations in their cross-cultural communication and know how to correct and avoid them in certain situations.

2. Theories

2.1. The Cooperative Principle

The Cooperative Principle, formulated by Grice, includes a set of maxims that guided and constrained the conversation of people [2]. It incorporates maxims of quantity, quality, relation and manner, which indicates that participants should speak "sincerely, relevantly and clearly, while providing sufficient information" [2].

2.2. Value-oriented Model

Value-oriented Model presents a theoretical approach to understanding cross-cultural communication. It displays the surprising power in differentiating groups on core dimensions [6]. There are five basic orientations and this paper mainly talked about social orientation, meaning some countries stress authoritarianism while others value collectivism or individualism [7].

2.3. Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory

Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory provides people with an approach to understanding the range of cultural differences. Hofstede identifies six dimensions along which dominant patterns of a culture can be ordered: individualism versus collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, power distance, masculinity versus femininity, long-term versus short-term orientation to time and indulgence versus restraint [8].

2.4. High-Context and Low-context Cultures

Edward T. Hall regards cultural context as the stimuli, environment, or ambiance surrounding an event and human interaction can be divided into high-context and low-context communication systems [9]. A high-context communication is one in which most of the information is already in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicitly transmitted part of the message. A low-context communication is just the opposite; i.e., the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code [4].

3. Cultural Differences Between China and America

3.1. Praise and Response

Faced with praise, Chinese and American people have different responses based on their different cultures. Chinese people tend to be humble and depreciate themselves. While Americans accept it willingly and readily and even agree with speakers [10].

The phrase "thank you" is widely used in China even though the old have never learned English. However, when some Chinese people talk with foreigners and receive praise from them, they probably tend to respond "na li na li (哪里哪里)" or something that sounds modest though they are seemingly glad [10]. For some introverts, being praised by others can even make them feel awkward

and embarrassed. Because of this, “na li na li (哪里哪里)” has been a joke that almost English teachers will tell their Chinese students. Foreigners are usually confused why Chinese people always depreciate themselves while in fact, they are excellent. Particularly, when people get prizes, they do not overvalue their hard work and efforts. Instead, they praise other people and attribute success to joint efforts.

Americans are more willing to receive praise and respond with “thank you”. In a European culture course, the professor always praised himself in class. “I know I’m beautiful and you like my class, right?” These are some typical sentences he said during class and he repeated until all students nodded. This teacher is very confident and doesn’t care about others’ opinions too much, which can be seen by his green hair. In fact, students take it for granted because they think it’s typical of Americans to praise themselves in public. While in China, people seldom do this.

As can be seen from the examples above, Chinese people seldom praise themselves in public and act modestly even though they are happy inside. Chinese people say something that they believe to be false, which is a violation of the maxim of quality. On the contrary, American people are confident and receive compliments readily. They say what they think and observe this maxim.

From the perspectives of the model of human relationships and the cultural dimensions, Chinese people are group-oriented and value collectivism while Americans stress individualism. In China, Confucianism has a tremendous impact on people’s thoughts and deeds. Confucianism stresses modesty and advises individuals to act modestly, free from arrogance and impetuosity [11]. Besides, Chinese people believe groups’ interests are top priority and personal interests are subordinated to the interests of collectives. That’s why they depreciate themselves subconsciously and attribute honor to the whole’s contribution. On the other hand, Americans speak highly of individualism so they care more about themselves rather than collective benefits [12]. Two different models of human relationships: collectivism and individualism are partly the reason for Chinese and American different responses to praise.

3.2. Request and Response

When asking for a request, Chinese people tend to beat around the bush and let hearers guess what they really mean. On the contrary, Americans usually get to the point and make their requests clearly understood. [13].

When Chinese people want others to help them, they usually send a message “Are you free now?” And they continue to chat and ask for their request until the receivers reply. If two individuals haven’t contacted each other for too long, they usually spend time caring about recent lives and health to make their relationship closer at first.

However, Americans often ask for a request directly and clearly. There is a dispute between two European American neighbors [14]. At night, Jane wanted to sleep but her neighbor, Diane, still sang. She knocked on Diane’s open window and said, “Your high-pitched opera singing is disturbing my sleep. Please stop your noise immediately! I have an important job interview tomorrow morning.” Diane responded resentfully, “This is the only time I can rehearse! I have an important audition coming up tomorrow. Stop being so self-centered!” Two people argued with each other and didn’t make a compromise.

Chinese people often beat around the bush and let others offer to help them. They speak implicitly and indirectly without providing enough information, which violates maxims of manner, quantity and relation. In contrast, Americans ask for their request directly and definitely so they sometimes feel confused or annoyed in communicating with Chinese people [13].

As power distance Hofstede noted, some people in China are regarded as superior to others on account of wealth, age, education, birth order, occupation or a range of other characteristics [8]. When superiors talk about something secret, they tend to say something else to imply their real meanings.

In addition, some superiors like to let inferiors guess their real meanings in order to show their authority or status. As for Americans, they hate being oppressed by others. They believe in freedom and equality so they can say whatever they want directly.

From the perspective of High-Context and Low-Context Cultures, Chinese culture is a high-context culture while American culture is low-context [11]. A high-context culture is one in which people are deeply involved with each other. Due to the intimate relationship among people, a structure of social hierarchy exists and individual inner emotions are kept under strong self-control. As a result, information is widely shared through simple messages with deep meaning [4]. When communicating with others, Chinese people not only listen but think about something beyond words and guess the true meanings. Therefore, Chinese people's interaction focuses on hearers' meaning. Namely, speakers' saying is less important than hearers' guessing. Conversely, in a low-context culture people are highly individualized, and there is relatively little involvement with others, resulting in very little social hierarchy or society imposing on the individuals' lives [4]. American interaction is low-context, which indicates that everything needed should be clear and enough. What they say is what they mean. As said before, Americans are individualistic so they focus more on their own interests. Consequently, people may have a dispute in daily communication and fail to requests from time to time. The three aspects enlighten people that the Chinese should be aware of the conciseness of words and Americans need to speak in a more roundabout and implicit way in cross-cultural communication.

3.3. Refusal and Response

When refusing a request, Chinese people tend to use excuses to show their regret while Americans just say "sorry" directly [15].

A Chinese student, Rosie, refused her friend's invitation to a party with an excuse. She replied, "I have had the flu these days. I am tortured by a fever. It is completely awful!" Then her friend understood her refusal and showed care for her. There's another situation. To maintain people's relationships, Chinese individuals tend to make up an excuse to reject others politely. Rosie's father has some friends and they have a get-together from time to time. One day, the father was unwilling to go so he said he was on a business trip. In fact, he just stayed at home. On the contrary, when Americans reject others, they usually reply "sorry" which is quite simple and clear.

From the examples above, Chinese people speak more than needed or tell a white lie in an indirect way for refusal, which violates maxims of quantity, quality and manner. On the opposite, Americans refuse directly and simply. From the perspective of time orientation, Chinese people prefer long-term orientation to time while Americans are short-term oriented. When Chinese people do something, they often think it over in the long run rather than focus on the thing itself. They probably take into consideration the outcomes of this thing and the benefits from it. Influenced deeply by Confucianism, Chinese people always think ahead and comprehensively to maintain their present benefits and find opportunities to obtain future interests [15]. Nevertheless, Americans are short-term oriented so they prefer to focus on their present situations and take into account present feelings.

3.4. Task and Response

In China, when people are asked to finish some tasks, they probably tend to receive them and find ways to finish them even though they are unwilling to do such tasks. While Americans may query them and reject their bosses once they hold different views.

Phil was a young American executive who cooperated with a Chinese company [14]. He got along well with the Chinese chairman and they had decided on some working policies that would bring new directions for development. However, the young chairman's grandfather, the ex-chairman, happened to drop in. He commented on how the company had been formed and developed by the traditional

practices that they had recently discarded. Phil expected the new chairman to explain but he said nothing and agreed with his grandfather. Phil tried to protest but in vain.

Likewise, Chinese students tend to be quiet in class and listen to teachers. Seldom do students come up with their own questions and ideas. They just follow their teachers and do what teachers assign to them [16]. Therefore, foreign teachers aren't accustomed to such situations when they first teach in China.

From the perspective of power distance, Chinese people who are older, stronger, wealthier, more experienced and educated have a higher rank in society and are admired and respected by others. Children raised in China are expected to obey their elderly family members without challenging or questioning them and to abide by the wishes and requests of their teachers [17]. While in workplaces, American employers and managers are more likely to ask employees for input; in fact, those at the lower ends of the hierarchy expect to be asked for their input [8].

Meanwhile, Chinese people worship collectivism as said before so they don't confuse others in public. Although they disagree with each other, they don't blame others in front of the mass, which might make all of them feel humiliated [18]. However, Americans are individualistic so they are free to speak whatever they want though others may feel embarrassed or ashamed. Therefore, the young chairman obeyed his grandfather on account of the power and authority of the senior as well as face saving though he disagreed with his grandfather [18]. Conversely, Phil protested directly in public.

According to uncertainty avoidance, Chinese people don't like changes. They have a low tolerance for uncertainty, ambiguity, and risk-taking. They seek to minimize the unknown through strict rules, regulations, and so on [8]. During covid-19, numerous workers were discharged and lived a hard life. But staff of public institutions like civil servants got paid regularly and were still able to support their families. Therefore, some senior citizens advise juniors to find more secure and steady jobs like being staff of public institutions. Nevertheless, Americans feel more comfortable in changeable environments and try to face them readily [8]. As a result, they are more imaginative and adventurous, such as enjoying extreme sports and expeditions. In the story above, the grandfather preferred traditional methods based on his practices and experiences. On the contrary, Phil was ambitious and adventurous. Therefore, he was fond of pursuing new strategies and applying them to practice for the development of companies. That's why their cooperative relationship was broken up. Obeying superiors, worshiping collectivism and avoiding uncertainty make most Chinese people receive tasks without questioning, which is quite different from Americans.

4. Conclusion

This paper listed four different aspects of cross-cultural communication: praise and response, request and response, refusal and response and task and response. Some violations of the cooperative principle in real situations were explained from three main theories: Value-oriented Model, Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory and High-Context and Low-Context Cultures. For better cross-cultural communication, people need to learn both languages and cultures and apply theories to practice. It doesn't mean people have to be different individuals. Rather, people should arouse self-identified cultural consciousness so that they can adapt to different environments and fully express themselves. Though Chinese and American mainstream cultures are different, people should pay attention to individuals' characteristics and speak appropriately.

However, there are still some limitations in this paper. The paper merely analyzed these differences from the cultural dimension and lacked more theories and data. Besides, it leaves out social environments, family background and psychological factors. Therefore, people can collect more examples in real situations and consider more comprehensive factors to analyze, which can give individuals guidance in cross-cultural communication.

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