

# A Study on Politeness Principle of Intercultural Communication of HCC and LCC

Chunyan Zhang

Dalian University of Information, Dalian, Liaoning, China

Email: zhangchunyan@neusoft.edu.cn

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**Abstract.** The low-context culture and high-context culture theory posed by Hall casts a light for people who work in intercultural communication. In different contexts of cultures, people will apply different language to show their politeness, politeness criteria are distinct from each other as well. In the process of intercultural communication, appropriate language and behavior of showing politeness is a key element to success. Being fully aware of the difference and applying proper and effective strategies of showing politeness can contribute enormously to getting rid of possible misunderstandings and achieving success in intercultural communication eventually.

## 1. Introduction

Intercultural communication is a demand for the development of globalization. It exists in social communication activities at different levels. In the process of communication, the communicators from different regions, countries, nationalities and cultures will convey their own cultural information through language and non-language communication elements [1]. If we don't understand each other's culture, it will inevitably lead to misunderstanding in intercultural communication, even to the failure of intercultural communication, which will abort the mutually beneficial goal sought by both sides.

The high context culture (HCC) and low context culture (LCC) proposed by American sociologist Hall provide some guidance for our intercultural communication. According to Hall's theory, in order to keep harmony in the process of communication, speakers of high-context culture often hide the information they want to express in objective factors, such as environment, identity, occupation, mood and so on. The information they express is more dependent on context, and their intention need to be decoded and understood by the other side. In contrast, in the low-context culture, where people advocate individualism, they tend to communicate with the information expressed which is more direct, and the content of information depends more on the language itself rather than on objective factors [2].

## 2. Politeness Principle in Intercultural Communication

Politeness principle is a social norm that which is an unwritten rule by which people's speech acts in a culture. Under different cultures, people's behaving habits, behaving patterns and politeness principle have significant differences. China is a country of etiquette, according to the politeness principle of Chinese people, which is summarized by Mr. Gu Yueguo, that is "Politeness, Pragmatics and Culture", including the criteria of "inferiority and respect for others" and "belittling oneself and respect for others"; "sense of superiority and inferiority, distinction between elders and children" and the criteria of "addressing", "courtesy and politeness" and "face" [3].

By contrast, according to the characteristics of British culture, British linguist Leech classifies British politeness principles into six aspects: Tact Maxim, Generosity Maxim, Approbation Maxim, Modesty Maxim, Agreement Maxim and Sympathy Maxim. These six principles can represent the politeness principle of English-speaking countries.

By comparison, we can see that the politeness principles of both China and English-speaking countries emphasize the aspect of cooperation in communication. According to the politeness

principles of English-speaking culture summarized by Leech, interpersonal relations are equal, and people are directly addressed by their names. On the other hand, in China people need to distinguish the superiority and inferiority of the elder and the younger, and peers should use the way of degrading themselves and respecting others in order to be polite. From the perspective of “harmony”, in the culture of English-speaking countries, “harmony” is reflected in the approval of the other side, that is, typically it will follow the other side’s meaning. People would not directly deny or refuse others, otherwise it will appear impolite. In China, “harmony” not only conforms to the meaning of the other side’s speech, but also includes compliments and praises to the other side. People would properly depreciate himself and gives the other side positive face. Thus, in different contexts and cultures, people choose different polite language and different ways of expressing politeness.

### **3. Comparison of Politeness Principle Between High and Low Context Culture**

In intercultural communication in high and low contexts, according to the characteristics of the communicative language, adopting reasonable and effective politeness principle is the beginning of successful intercultural communication. Compared with other English-speaking countries with low-context culture, China, which is at the end of high-context culture, follows different politeness principles in communication. According to Tang (2007), she divided the pragmatic failures in intercultural communication into four categories, i.e. pragmalinguistic failure, social pragmatic failure, and non-verbal pragmatic failure [4]. The author tries to make an analysis by comparing politeness principle between high and low context culture from the following aspects:

#### **3.1 Appellation Differences**

It is commonly known that in English-speaking countries which are with low context culture people directly address each other with their first name, such as “Jason”, “Kathy” and etc. Since equality is emphasized in these cultures, social appellations in English-speaking countries also embody the principle of social equality and the most common one is to address each other directly. it it a polite way to address others by their first name even though the other side might be a senior. However, in China, which is at the other end of high context culture, people consider that appellation can reflect their social status or their relationship. Therefore, “Li jingli” (Manager Li), “Zhang jiaoshou” (Professor Zhang), “Wang yisheng” (Doctor Wang), these appellations show their social status or their profession. Besides, within a family people who are in young generations address seniors by showing their relationship, like “shu”, “bo”, “jiu”, (all mean “uncle” in English), “gu”, “yi”, (both mean “aunt” in English).

For the addressing of strangers, Chinese culture embodies the distinct characteristics of circle boundaries in high context. In addressing strangers, there are gender and age differences, such as “shushu” (means “uncle”) or “ayi” (means “aunt”), which show respect for the elderly. And “jie” “mei” (means “sister”), “ge” “di” (means brother) are the names of younger generation or people of similar age. In English-speaking countries, people who don’t know each other will address others only with gender difference, for example, “sir”, “madam” or “miss”.

#### **3.2 Differences in Greetings**

Greetings are the first part of conversation between people in different contexts and cultures. Appropriate greetings can break the embarrassing atmosphere in communication and bring a good beginning for the following communication topics. In English-speaking countries, greetings are typically known as small talks, which can be understood as the warm-up part before talking about formal topics. Weather is a reasonable greeting topic which is widely known to people. In English-speaking countries, “age”, “marital status”, “income”, “address” and other personal information are regarded as taboos in communication. Generally speaking, it is a basic principle for English-speaking countries to talk about objective things and not about the main characters. In China, with the dynamic development of context culture, “age”, “marriage” and “economic income” can be

discussed, but for many young people, these have become more embarrassing topics, but compared with low-context countries, China's greeting topics still contain more private topics.

### **3.3 Differences in Compliments and Answers**

In intercultural communication, timely and appropriate compliments are lubricants to make the communication go smoothly and achieve the desired goals of communication. Because of the cultural differences between high and low contexts, people compliment and respond quite differently. In China, people advocate modesty and restraint, and they seldom express their personal feelings directly. Therefore, compliments seldom appear among close relatives, such as the relationship of "father and son" and "husband and wife". In English-speaking countries, compliments are very common, and such expressions exist in various kinds of relationships. In high context culture, the Chinese way of thinking is spiraling upward, so compliments in Chinese are also expressed as logical reasoning. While in low context culture, the thinking pattern is more of a linear way and their compliments are simple and direct. For example, people of both the low and high context culture intend to praise for a child's cleverness. It is quite an acceptable way for Chinese people to say: "This child is very clever, he will certainly go to Tsinghua University!" In English-speaking countries, there are great chances that people just make comment like "That kid is smart." As for being praised, Chinese people tend to be modest in denying or avoiding it, which is regarded as hypocrisy by people in English-speaking countries. This is because in low context culture, there is a great emphasis on individuality, accepting others praise or compliment is a great source of building self-confidence and developing personality. So people in English-speaking countries will be very happy to accept compliments and compliments.

### **3.4 Differences in "Face" Behavior**

Brown and Levinson divide face into two categories, they are positive face and negative face. Positive face implies the desire to be approved, loved, appreciated and respected by others. Negative face means that people do not want to be imposed on themselves, their actions are not interfered or hindered by others, and they have the freedom to make their own choice [5]. Compared with Chinese, in English-speaking countries, people tend to maintain their negative face because they are more independent and pay more attention to their individual needs and development. Chinese people are accustomed to the value orientation of collectivism and value "harmony" in their daily norms. Therefore, they express more recognition, love, appreciation and respect for others and adopt the behavior of maintaining positive face.

## **4. Conclusion**

In the process of intercultural communication, both Chinese from high context culture and Americans from low context culture need to show polite language and behavior to each other. In intercultural communication in high and low contexts, it is wise to improve our self-awareness of cultural differences of politeness principles. Using different politeness words in different contexts is of significant importance to avoid the failure of intercultural communication caused by the lack of understanding of the politeness principle of the other culture.

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