

# Research on Intercultural Communication Barriers Based on the Differences Between Chinese and Western Rhetoric

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**Abstract**—There is an asymmetry between Chinese and Western discourse interactions. From the perspective of the differences between Chinese and Western rhetoric, this paper explores the communication barriers brought by the increasingly frequent intercultural communication, thus improving the rhetorical awareness of intercultural communication. Communicators can not only understand the motives behind the discourse but also make use of Western rhetorical strategies to persuade others, which may reverse the imbalance of discourse interaction.

**Keywords**—intercultural communication; Chinese and Western rhetoric; ethos; fact; audience

## I. INTRODUCTION

The multicultural collision and exchange brought about by the economic globalization have increasingly demonstrated the necessity and importance of intercultural communication. However, with more and more cross-cultural communication, communication barriers have become prominent. Dodd believed that people's different values, worldviews and ways of thinking may lead to psychological confrontation between the two sides of the communication, thus causing cross-cultural communication barriers. (Dodd, 2006) When people from different cultural backgrounds interact with each other, they will have cultural conflicts due to factors such as education level, family background, personal values, personality, and religion, which will affect the communication between the two sides.

## II. BARRIERS IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION BETWEEN CHINA AND THE WEST

At present, the study of cross-cultural communication barriers in China stays at the level of language communication, of which the comparison of English and Chinese language phenomena is dominant. (Sun Shunv, Gui Qingyang, 2014: 146) Differences in Chinese and Western values, differences in thinking styles, and different cultural backgrounds are the most common explanations of intercultural communication barriers. For example, China's mainstream values are collectivism. Chinese people attach great importance to family values, while Western people advocate individualism and freedom. This remarkable

difference can easily bring difficulties or even misunderstandings to cross-cultural communication. Another example is that Chinese people tend to euphemistically express their ideas and purposes, while Westerners prefer to communicate directly. Chinese may not be accustomed to the directness of Westerners, while Westerners may not be able to guess the euphemism of the Chinese. What's more, compared with the open Western culture, Chinese culture is introverted and conservative. Westerners emphasize rationality and rational thinking, while Chinese people are more humane and emotional. The huge differences between Chinese and Western cultures, combined with the differences in social systems and ideologies, will inevitably lead to a series of misunderstandings in discourse communication.

Therefore, most of the current research is to describe language differences from the micro level. Although the research on the comparison of English and Chinese language phenomena helps us understand the intentions and information of the communication, this is not a success in the communication. The real "communication success" should be that the listener can act according to the speaker's intention. (Lin Dajin, Xie Chaoqun, 2005) This is the focus of communication, that is, the effect of discourse. The reason why there are barriers to intercultural communication between China and the West is precisely because of the asymmetry in the interaction between Chinese and Western discourse. Therefore, it is especially necessary to explore the communication barriers from the macro level of discourse effects.

## III. WESTERN RHETORIC FOCUSES ON THE DISCOURSE EFFECTS

As an old humanities, Western rhetoric has traditionally been equated with the art of speaking or the art of persuasion. (Liu Yameng, 2008) Aristotle defined rhetoric in his Rhetoric as "an ability to persuade". Representatives of the rational and scientific eras such as Descartes and Bacon admitted that rhetoric is the art of speech and communication, that is, the effective application of language in real social living environments. (Liu Yameng, 2004: 232) Liu Yameng (Liu Yameng, 2004: 2) defined the Western rhetoric as "the practice of influencing thought, feelings, attitude and behavior through symbolic means". All these show that

Western rhetoric pays attention to the persuasiveness of discourse, that is, the effect of discourse, and this is why the paper analyzes the barriers of communication from the perspective of rhetoric.

Western rhetoric originated in Sicily in the Mediterranean in the middle of the 5th century BC. Initially, people gained political interest by enhancing their speech eloquence and argumentation and tried to achieve the discourse effect of persuading the public to vote for them. In the 4th century BC, Greek rhetorician Isocrates, Plato and Aristotle proposed a series of systematic and pluralistic rhetorical ideas. Among them, Aristotle's definition of "ethos" has had a profound impact on the subsequent rhetorical theory. The concept of rhetoric has been continuously developed, evolved, differentiated and perfected in the long historical period. Campbell defined the important rhetorical concept "audience" in his *Principles of Rhetoric*. Campbell believed that the audiences have the dual characteristics of universality and particularity. Universality means that the audience have some basic qualities shared by human beings, such as imagination, memory, emotional ability, etc. (Liu Yameng, 2008: 257). Particularity means that each audience has its own unique qualities. When persuading, the speaker should pay attention to these special qualities, and make timely adjustments to the content of the speech to adapt to the characteristics of these audience, so as to achieve the best discourse effect.

In the contemporary West, rhetoric supports either big or small discourse in everyday life, from speeches to political elections, and to everyday conversations in life. Rhetoric implicitly supports all forms of communication or propaganda. We can even say that elites from all walks of life stand out just because they know how to use rhetorical resources and rhetorical skills better than ordinary people, and they can maximize the discourse effect.

#### IV. CHINESE RHETORIC IS DIFFERENT FROM WESTERN RHETORIC

*The Book of Changes* has the following words: "Talented people strengthen their moral cultivation and study hard. They are loyal, selfless and trustworthy, thus enhancing the morality. They practice and develop the ability of rhetoric to reveal their honest quality, so they accumulate knowledge." This is the earliest remarks about "rhetoric" in China. Xu Shen also mentioned "xiu ci" (rhetoric) in his *Shuo Wen Jie Zi*. (Feng Zhiying, 2015: 6) Therefore, China has long had a record of "rhetoric", but it has not established a relevant theoretical system.

During the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period, Chinese rhetoric was based on political lobbying. The rhetoric, which was based on argumentation, was brilliant. However, the long feudal autocracy system killed all rhetorical activities based on lobbying. Since then, Chinese rhetoric has focused on the polish of written language, that is, the study of words. It was not until the Southern Song Dynasty that the first true rhetoric monograph *The Book of Literature* appeared, which opened the era of Chinese rhetoric. Nowadays, in China, when people refer to

rhetoric, most of them mean figures of speech, that is, using different rhetorical devices to get the best expression.

#### V. COMMUNICATIVE BARRIERS FROM THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN CHINESE AND WESTERN RHETORIC

Rhetoric plays a role in all kinds of practices in Western society. If you want to be good at dealing with Westerners, you must master Western rhetoric and know how to communicate with Westerners using rhetorical skills. There are differences in rhetorical concepts between China and the West. So it is necessary to break the mindset of Chinese rhetorical concepts in the process of intercultural communication, and to interpret the discourse from the perspective of Western rhetoric, thus overcoming communication barriers.

##### A. *Ethos vs. Integrity of Rhetorician*

Ethos is a core concept of Western rhetoric. Aristotle proposed three methods of persuasion — ethos, pathos and logos, of which ethos is the dominant factor of persuasion. Ethos is not the real personality of the rhetorician, instead, it is a kind of "construction" different from the individual personality of the rhetorician. Faced with different rhetorical situations and target audiences and for various rhetorical purposes, the rhetorician will strive to shape and project the personality that best suits the current discourse, and when this personality is consistent with the image of the rhetorician expected by a particular audience, this discourse will achieve the biggest rhetorical effect. In Campbell's view, ethos is a combination of "identity/personality". The status that the rhetorician obtains in society is "identity", such as occupation. "Personality" refers to the quality that this "identity" should have. The reason why the "identity/personality" combination will get the most convincing ethos is because the quality of each "identity" has the inherent authority. (Liu Yameng, 2008: 261) When "identity" and "personality" match, for example, the identity of the lawyer matches the quality of fairness and integrity that the lawyer should have, ethos will have the best effect, and this rhetorical construction will gain the trust from the target audience. At the same time, in the Western discourse, the prominent social status of the rhetorician can be transformed into useful rhetorical resources. The precondition for convincing the audience is to attract the audience's attention to the rhetorician's words. Under normal circumstances, the rhetorician needs to spend energy, time and even financial resources to attract the attention of the audience. But if the social status of the rhetorician is eminent, his speech can attract the attention from the very beginning. In the process of persuasion, rhetorician with high social status is more likely to convince the audience than ordinary rhetorician. From the perspective of Western rhetoric, the prestige of the rhetorician helps to win the audience and achieve the purpose of persuasion.

Chinese rhetoric advocates "integrity of rhetorician", which means that the rhetorician should be honest and the rhetorical content should conform to the facts. This is consistent with China's values. Chinese stress that "people should be true in word". The polish of words cannot be

separated from the sincere mind, and language and morality become inseparable. This also shows that Chinese rhetoric is not concerned with the expression, but the morality of rhetorician and rhetorical content.

Chinese and Western rhetoric have obvious differences in the concept of "ethos". Therefore, in intercultural communication, Chinese must understand that in the Western discourse, the personal image that they see is not necessarily the true personality of the rhetorician. In most cases, it is a rhetorical construction that the rhetorician casts in order to win the trust of the audience.

### *B. Fact vs. Eloquence*

Chinese often say that "Fact speaks louder than eloquence", which seems to be a tacit recognition. However, this is not true in the West. Western rhetoric believes that the establishment of "fact" is inseparable from "eloquence".

Where the term "Fact speaks louder than eloquence" is popular, fact and eloquence are seen as separate things that are self-contained and unrelated, and fact is considered as a situation that is completely independent of words and rhetoric. (Liu Yameng, 2004: 59) The "fact" that Western rhetoric believes is not static. It is a discourse construction. Since the "fact" itself does not speak, the relevant facts are only established when the relevant "factual statements" are accepted by the general audience. (Foss, 2002: 87) In other words, the establishment of any fact is a result of a widely accepted representation. (Liu Yameng, 2004: 59) The "fact" in Western discourse is actually factual claim or factual representation. Its establishment is inseparable from eloquence and depends on eloquence.

Different from the unchanging "fact" identified by Chinese rhetoric, in the Western discourse, the rhetorician will strategically deal with the "fact" for their own interests or rhetorical purposes, and will try to avoid and weaken the "fact" that is not conducive to shaping their own rhetorical personality, or to the purpose of persuasion, but strengthen the positive "fact" that is helpful to the purpose of persuasion and rhetorician. Once these "facts" are recognized by the audience, we can say that the facts are established and the discourse effect is achieved. However, why are the audiences convinced of such a "factual claim (representation)" or discourse construction? Since it is only a statement of relevant "fact", in order to be convincing, this "factual claim" should be accomplished by the ethos that is constructed by the rhetorician himself, and the choice of "fact" and the rhetorical means. And another important point is what we call as self-effacement or sprezzatura, which means the tendency to try not to manifest its own operations and power. (Liu Yameng, 2004: 23)

Why is the rhetorical art that plays a pivotal role in Western society not propagating its own skills but trying to cover itself as much as possible? From a psychological point of view, the "self-deprecating" of the rhetorician helps to increase the effectiveness of rhetoric. People resent those who are arrogant, and have a natural preference for those who are humble and hard-working. In addition, Aristotle believed that the rhetorician should construct the discourse

and hide its ingenuity. The discourse should sound natural and not artificial, and only in this way will it be persuasive, otherwise it will not make the audience move. If the words are an affectation, it will inevitably arouse the audience's resentment. (Kennedy, 1991) Therefore, in the process of constructing "fact", when rhetoric is not regarded as rhetoric, the effect of discourse can be truly maximized.

In cross-cultural communication, we must jump out of the Chinese people's mindset that "Fact speaks louder than eloquence" and have a correct understanding of the "fact" of Western discourse.

### *C. Adapting to the Audience*

There is a saying in China — when you see people, you say people's words, and when you see ghosts, you use ghosts' words. This sentence means that people play a double game when they speak to different persons. It divides different speech objects into "human" and "ghost", and the words according to different objects are divided into "human words" and "ghost words". However, what this sentence implies is the speaker should be consistent when facing different people. But this does not mean that the speaker cannot adjust his style or wording according to the specific circumstances. What the speaker needs to pay attention to is he must guarantee the bottom line of the speech, that is, the "human words" should be said regardless of the circumstances. "Human words" refer to legitimate words that conform to mainstream values. Chinese rhetoric requires discourse and morality to be inseparable and emphasizes that the rhetorician must use "human words" in any case, in accordance with the ethical norms. Chinese rhetoric does not encourage the rhetorician to adjust discourse according to different audiences, and this is quite different from the relationship of rhetorician and audience advocated by Western rhetoric.

In the Western rhetoric, the status of the audience is no less than that of the rhetorician. This is because the attitude of the audience and whether the audiences agree that the rhetorician are the key to the discourse effect. According to Aristotle, among the three major elements of speech — speaker, topic, and audience, the audience is the purpose of rhetoric. (Liu Yameng, 2008: 55) Perlman pointed out that the audience is "those who the speaker wants to influence through arguments" (Perelman, 1982: 14), that is, the audience determines the speaker's discourse and behavior. Campbell believed that in addition to the basic qualities shared by human beings, the audiences also have special characteristics, which means that in the face of different audiences, the rhetorician needs to adopt different persuasive means and expressions. For different rhetorical purposes, the rhetorician uses rhetorical resources and appropriate rhetorical means to adapt to the audience and strive to produce "identity" and "resonance" among the audience in order to achieve their own discourse effects.

In this way, the rhetorician seems to adjust his own words according to the specific circumstances and audience. However, this is what we've mentioned above — self-effacement or sprezzatura. On the surface, rhetorician must

speak different words to different audiences to resonate and bring identity. At the beginning of persuasion, the audiences are indeed in a strong position, but the "identity" of the audience sought by the rhetorician is a non-violent means to cause the audience to change their original thoughts or behaviors and act according to the rhetorician's intentions — this is the true purpose of the rhetorician. In addition, we should also note that in addition to the rhetorical skills of the rhetorician, the different cultural levels of the audience, the audience's original values or ability to understand will be the factors that influence the persuasive effect. Therefore, it is difficult for the rhetorician to grasp the audience and win the recognition of them. The rhetorician can only use the non-mandatory rhetorical means to adapt to and win the audience as much as possible.

Chinese rhetoric pays attention to mainstream values, stresses the harmony of discourse, and the moral ethic runs through it. Chinese rhetoric is different from Western rhetoric, which strategically deals with "fact" and strives to create a fair and prestigious ethos in order to adapt to the audience. This is what we should pay attention to in intercultural communication.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Today, with the increasingly frequent interaction between China and the West, we should raise the rhetorical awareness about the asymmetry between Chinese and Western discourse, grasp the basic theories of Western rhetoric, and learn to use rhetorical consciousness and perspectives to deal with the cross-cultural communication. Qualified intercultural communicators should understand the motives behind different discourses, recognize the "facts" constructed by the rhetorician, and adopt effective measures. At the same time, we should learn to think from the perspective of Western rhetoric and use it in Chinese discourse. We should also know how to adapt to the characteristics of the audience and shape appropriate rhetorical personality, so that the target audience can act according to our rhetorical intentions. In this way, we can establish a powerful persuasive image, gain an advantage in the discourse, and finally reverse the imbalance of discourse interaction between China and the West.

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