

The Influence of Cultural Values on Language Communication Styles in Intercultural Communication

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ABSTRACT

Cultural values are highly regional. Eastern societies represented by China and Japan have cultural values of collectivism, high power distance index, and high context. In western society, cultural values of individualism, low power distance index, and low context are the mainstream. Differences in cultural values play a decisive role in communication styles. This paper attempts to classify language communication styles in six categories based on different cultural values, specifically spiral type — linear type, stepping stone type — paving stone type, interpersonal relationship-valued type — information-valued type, and analyzes the influence of cultural values behind it. In the end, it can be concluded that from the perspective of the broad communicative environment, that is, cultural values, the communication style of the eastern society belongs to spiral type, stepping stone type, and interpersonal relationship-valued type. The communication style of western society belongs to linear type, paving stone type, and information-valued type.

Keywords: communication style, cultural values, intercultural communication

I. INTRODUCTION

With the deepening of the process of global economic integration, China's foreign exchanges are increasingly frequent. Under different cultural backgrounds, values, ways of thinking and behaviors are not the same, which leads to different communication styles. Clancy (1986) pointed out that the difference of communication style is one of the causes of friction in intercultural communication. Therefore, it is helpful for people to avoid friction in intercultural communication by understanding different communication styles and knowing ourselves and the others.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH REVIEW

Hofstede, a Dutch intercultural communication scholar, puts forward four dimensions of cultural value in the value classification system. These four dimensions are collectivism — individualism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and male tendency — female tendency, which are used to describe the differences between different cultures and distinguish different cultural types. Hofstede also points out that each culture can find its own position in these four dimensions. Hall, a scholar of human culture, proposed that culture has context. According to different contexts, culture can be divided into "high-context culture" and "low-context culture".

According to Clancy (1986), different conversational styles formed by different cultures are called communication styles. Zhang Zhangran (1997) pointed out that communication style refers to the overall characteristics of people's consistent expression of ideas based on the choice of words and sentences, expression methods, reasoning methods and thinking patterns.

There are many studies on the relationship between cultural values and communication style, but most of them are from the perspective of high-context and low-context culture. For example, Liu Yudong (2011) pointed out that Chinese culture has high-context features, while American culture has low-context features. In Sino-American intercultural communication, the theory of high-context culture and low-context culture is not absolute, but relative, depending on the specific situation and communicative purpose of both parties. Xu Weijie (2019) summarized the differences between high-context culture and low-context culture in Sino-American intercultural communication styles as indirect euphemism and direct and explicit language communication styles, which tend to be silent and tend to talk.

From the perspective of collectivism — individualism, power distance and high-context culture and low-context culture, this paper attempts to divide communication styles into three groups with six corresponding communication styles, and analyzes the influence of cultural values on communication styles.

III. DIFFERENT COMMUNICATION STYLES AND THEIR CAUSES

A. *Spiral type — linear type*

In spiral communication, people don't put their ideas or opinions into words, but express their feelings by explaining the situation to the other party, and expect the others to be aware of their own ideas or opinions. In the linear communication, people tend to express their ideas and opinions concisely and explain the reasons clearly, so as to seek the understanding and approval of the others. Let's look at the differences between spiral and linear communication styles through examples.

A: Let's have a drink tonight.

B: (answer of spiral type): that's good. I haven't had a drink lately because I'm so busy. There are a lot of works today, so I have to work overtime. I don't know when it will be over. It's really annoying."

C: (answer of linear type): No, I can't. I will work overtime today. What a pity.

People with linear communication style usually invite people who give answers of spiral type again. "If you hate working overtime, you can put it tomorrow, and go to have a relax today." Because there is no clear rejection from the others, people with linear communication style can't understand the real intention of the spiral answer. On the contrary, if people with spiral communication style are faced with the answer of linear communication style, they are afraid that the other party will not appreciate their own requirements and will directly reject, which will be very faceless.

The two communication styles can be explained by "collectivism — individualism". "Collectivism — individualism" is a measure of the relationship between individuals and collectives. Collectivism emphasizes group harmony. The relationship between individual and collective is close, and the degree of interdependence between people is high. The answers of spiral style express a positive attitude towards the others' invitation, seeking the sympathy of the others for being unable to be invited because of overtime work, and expecting the others' emotional participation. People with this kind of communication style expect to have emotional connection with each other and have a strong sense of collectivism. However, individualism emphasizes self-centered and advocates individual freedom of action. The relationship between individual and collective is relatively loose, and the degree of interdependence between people is low. People often have the liner type of communication. For example, the linear answer in the above example only shows the attitude, but has no expectation of the others' emotional input, showing a clear personal position. Hofstede's survey of individualism shows that the United States,

Australia and the United Kingdom rank in the top three with strong individualism tendency, while Japan, Hong Kong, South Korea and Taiwan of China have strong collectivism tendency. Therefore, the western countries which are dominated by English Circle tend to use linear type of communication, while East Asia tends to use spiral communication style.

B. *Stepping stone type — paving stone type*

Stepping stone refers to the stone placed in the middle of shallow water or high and low places, which is convenient for walking or going up and down. The communication of stepping stone style refers to expressing the necessary part of the information and not expressing the part that can be understood by the scene at that time. This requires both sides to have common experiences and backgrounds. The basic premise of this kind of communication style is to be able to understand each other even if it is not explained one by one. On the contrary, it is the paving stone style of communication. In this kind of communication style, in order to avoid misunderstanding caused by not explaining clearly, the speaker uses as much language as possible to convey the correct information. The following two dialogues talk about the same thing, but the expressions of the stepping stone style and the paving stone style are quite different.

- stepping stone type

A: How was the negotiation yesterday?

B: It went well.

- paving stone type

A: Did you talk to Xiaolin Trade about the delivery date of the printer yesterday? Did you tell them what we think?

B: Yes. The final delivery will be made on September 20th according to our idea. It's in the contract.

In the stepping stone style of communication, A does not clearly state who to talk with and what to discuss, but B understands what A wants to express and makes corresponding answers. And the third party can't understand what A and B are saying. In the paving stone style, A explains the details of the event before asking about the result, while B answers in detail. Even if the third party does not know the specific situation, they can understand the content of their communication through dialogue.

The difference between the two communication styles is caused by the different context culture.¹ Hall (1976) first proposed the concept of high-context and low-context culture. The characteristics of high-context

¹ Hall, E.T. *Beyond Culture*. New York: Doubleday. 1976

culture are implicit and euphemistic, and the amount of language used is less. People's communication is highly dependent on factors other than language information such as interpersonal relationship and social habits, which is also known as "observing culture". It is stepping stone style of communication. Both sides can understand each other without too many words. In this communication style, the word "we" is used to maintain interpersonal harmony, interpersonal communication is formal and pays attention to interpersonal identity information, and indirect hints such as silence are often used to avoid conflicts. The low-context culture is characterized by its direct expression and response. In the low-context culture, people pay attention to the independence and autonomy of individuals. Their interpersonal communication is casual and equal. They mainly rely on language expression to communicate, forming a paving stone style of communication. Countries with high-context culture are mainly Japan, China and other East Asian countries and Arab countries. The countries with low-context culture are mainly Switzerland, Germany, the United States, France and other European and American countries. In addition to the regional differences, these two communication styles are also influenced by the proximity of relationships. For example, in the United States with a low-context culture, compared with companies, family members are more familiar with each other, have more common experiences and backgrounds, and show the high-context characteristics. The communication between members is more of a stepping-stone communicative style. Even in the company, when communicating with members of this department, the stepping stone style of communication is more used, and when communicating with people in other departments who are not familiar with, they often use language to express everything in detail, which is in paving stone style of communication. Therefore, the paving stone style of communication is more effective if the two parties have no common experience and background.

C. Interpersonal relationship-valued type — information-valued type

As the name suggests, in the interpersonal relationship-valued type of communication, people consider interpersonal relationship in language communication and then choose appropriate language. On the other hand, the information-valued type of communication emphasizes the transmission of information itself. People basically don't change the expression way because of the relationship with the other party.

In classes at Japanese universities, foreign students often bow to the Japanese professor and say "先生, ご苦勞様でした" (Thank you)". Japanese professors often laugh, because the expression "ご苦勞様" in Japanese is

used by people with high status to people with low status. In university classrooms, students should use "先生, ありがとうございます (Thank you)".

In English, "ご苦勞様" and "ありがとう" are all translated as "Thank you". But in Japanese, "ご苦勞様" is usually used to express gratitude to people who have fulfilled their obligations, such as subordinates and nanny. Therefore, it is not appropriate to use when students express gratitude to the teacher. There are many expressions in Japanese that contain interpersonal considerations like this. For example, "give" corresponds to "差し上げる (used by people with low status to people with high status)", "あげる (used between peers)", "やる (used by people with high status to people with low status)", and "receive" corresponds to "いただく (used by people with low status to people with high status)", "もらう (used between peers)". These Japanese expressions need to be used according to their status. At this point, there is no consideration of interpersonal relationships in English expression. In addition, the honorific expressions and appellations in Japanese also contain interpersonal relationships. In English, there are also honorific expressions and different appellations to express the superior and subordinate, far and near, and psychological distances between the speaker and the listener, but it is far less frequently used in Japanese.

The difference between these two communication styles can be analyzed from the power distance in Hofstede's value classification system. Power distance refers to the inequality of social status between people, which is a common phenomenon in various social and cultural groups. Hofstede's survey shows that the power distance between China, Japan and other Asian countries is higher than that of the United States, Britain and other countries. It can be seen that there is a big gap in the distribution of power between the East and the West. The Chinese and Japanese culture belongs to the social structure of differential order pattern, and the hierarchical system is more obvious. Specifically, children should obey their elders, students should respect their teachers, subordinates should obey their superiors, and their behavior and language communication must conform to their own identities, thus forming the interpersonal relationship-valued style. However, English culture belongs to a parallel social structure, which advocates freedom and equality between family members, teachers and students, superiors and subordinates. In language communication, more attention is paid to information itself, and little consideration is given to interpersonal relationship, which is manifested as information-valued communication style.

IV. THE DIFFERENCES OF COMMUNICATION STYLES BETWEEN THE EAST AND THE WEST

The above six different communication styles show obvious differences between the East and the West, which is actually caused by the different cultural values. The eastern society represented by China and Japan is characterized by collectivist values, high-context culture and relatively high power distance index. There are often differences between in-groups (relatives, organizations, etc.) and out-groups. The interests of the group are put in the first place, and the sense of collective belonging is very strong. It is difficult for the out-groups to enter the in-groups. In the process of communication, people attach importance to "context" rather than "content", pay attention to the establishment of social trust, highly evaluate the relationship and friendship, and maintain the relationship for a long time. Communication is implicit. People are very sensitive to implicit information. Individuals have learned to

interpret this implicit information accurately from the early stage. It emphasizes the obedience and respect to authority. Language use is often different due to different status and roles of both sides. Therefore, communication is in spiral type, stepping stone type and interpersonal relationship-valued type. In sharp contrast to the eastern society, the western society led by the United States and Britain advocates low-context culture. Individualism is the mainstream value, and the power distance index is relatively low. Individual's identity, independence and autonomy are respected. It advocates freedom and equality and individual liberation. Therefore, in order to avoid misunderstanding, it is necessary to use language as much as possible. It is almost impossible to choose different expressions according to the status and identity of both parties. Therefore, the communication is in linear type, paving stone type and information-valued type.

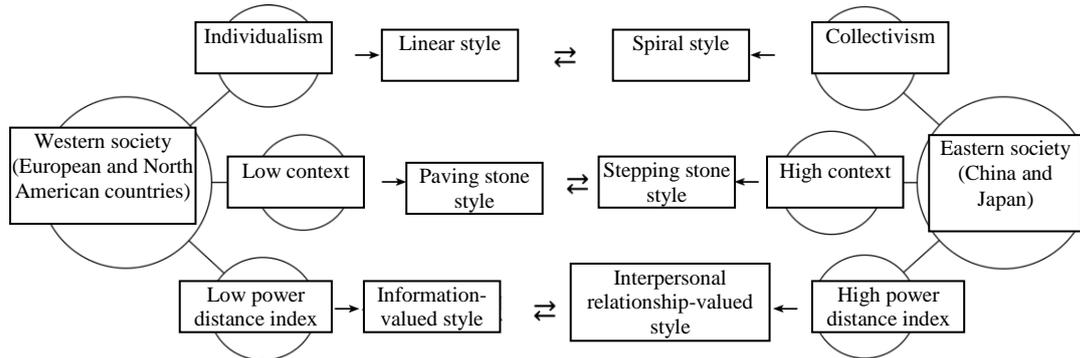


Fig. 1. Cultural values and communication styles in different regions.

V. CONCLUSION

To sum up, different cultural values create different communication styles. Therefore, in intercultural communication, only language communication without considering the differences in cultural values behind it will also lead to misunderstanding. Choosing the right communication style according to the purpose is an important ability in intercultural communication. This paper analyzes different communication styles from the perspective of broad communication environment, that is, cultural values. In fact, the specific communication environment, such as the occasion (time and space), the relationship between the two sides (power distance, role relationship, social distance between individuals), gender differences, etc., will also affect the communication style. Further research will be carried out in this regard.

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