Cultural Differences in Chinese-English Communication

Shuyin Wei, Han Zhang*

State Grid of China Technology College, Jinan, China

*bjzh315@outlook.com

Abstract. With the ever-accelerating process of globalization, communication and cooperation between China and Britain are becoming more increasingly frequent than ever before. However, cultural differences existing in the two countries inevitably have various impacts on their interactions. It is of paramount significance to explore cultural diversity in Chinese-English intercultural exchanges. Based on intercultural communication theories, this study illustrated cultural differences in Chinese-English communication from the perspective of cultural background, names and address terms, and daily communicative habits and expressions.

Keywords: Chinese-English Communication; Cultural Difference; Daily Communicative Expressions; Cultural Background

1   Introduction

The world we live in is a diverse place, where people of different cultures and backgrounds have their own unique ways of communication. As the economic globalization develops so fast in recent years, cross-language and cross-cultural communication have been continuously intensified and deepened. Given that cross-cultural communication gradually plays a vital role in the ever rapidly changing, complex and modern world, it is necessary to have a good command of both native culture and foreign culture. Culture is a system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviors, and artifacts that the members of a society use to cope with their world and with one another, and that are transmitted from generation to generation through learning [1]. There are various cultures formed between China and Britain due to diversities of geographical conditions, historical tradition, social customs, and values. People from different cultural backgrounds cannot avoid cultural differences in mutual communication and cooperation. Cultural differences in communication, particularly in Chinese-English communication, have always played a significant role in interpersonal relationships and business transactions. In order to effectively communicate in cross-cultural settings, it is essential to understand and appreciate these differences. Cultural differences in Chinese-English communication arise due to variances in values, beliefs, norms, and social interactions.

The use of language and non-verbal communication varies significantly between Chinese and English cultures [2]. In Chinese culture, non-verbal cues such as eye contact and facial expressions are considered crucial in effective communication. Chinese

speakers tend to be more indirect and implicit in their speech, while English speakers may be more direct and explicit. Chinese culture is characterized by a high power distance between individuals, where respect for elders, superiors, and authority figures is paramount. This is reflected in communication styles where younger or subordinate individuals are expected to show deference and deferential address even in casual conversation. On the other hand, the English culture has a relatively low power distance, where there is more equality between individuals, and respect is not always automatically granted based on age or position. Chinese culture is collectivist, placing emphasis on the group and the community, while English culture is more individualistic with a strong emphasis on personal autonomy and privacy. This difference impacts communication as Chinese speakers are more likely to express themselves in terms of we or us, emphasizing group identity, while English speakers may be more prone to using I or me, foregrounding their individuality. The expression of emotions differs in Chinese and English cultures. Chinese culture encourages restraint and emotional control, while the English culture fosters openness and direct expression of emotions. This difference can lead to misunderstandings in communication as emotional displays in one culture may be interpreted differently in another.

Cultural differences in Chinese-English communication are complex but can be bridged with awareness and sensitivity. Understanding the influence of cultural values and norms on communication styles is crucial for effective cross-cultural communication. By taking into account the unique characteristics of each culture, we can enhance our communication skills, build stronger interpersonal relationships, and promote greater understanding between people of different cultural backgrounds. In this study, cultural differences in Chinese-English communication are illustrated from the perspective of cultural background, names and address terms, and daily communicative habits and expressions.

2   Comparative Analysis on Cultural Backgrounds

2.1   Intercultural Communication Theories

Intercultural communication is communication between people whose cultural perceptions and symbol systems are distinct enough to alter the communication event, which is often used in the meeting of different cultures and languages, referring to the communication between from different ethnics, nations, classes, etc. Intercultural communication theories mainly include values and ways of thinking formed in different cultural backgrounds, roles relations and norms of behavior caused by different political and social structures, cultural symbols and coding systems accumulated in different ethnic customs and habits, as well as language rules and communicative styles in different situations and environments [3].

2.2   Comparison of Chinese and English Cultural Background

Culture can be defined as what a society does and thinks [4]. Both China and Britain have their own long history, which thereby formed various kinds of beliefs, values, and

customs. If these differences exiting between the two countries cannot be distinguished clearly, then pragmatic faults will occur in different contexts. Because of differences of geographical environment between China and Britain, there are plentiful idioms reflecting their own geographical characteristics in the two nations.

China is a big agricultural country covering large areas with a great population. The geographical conditions and natural environments in China and Britain vary dramatically. That's why there are a good many idioms related to agricultural products in Chinese. For example, "cut off the grass and take out its roots" refers to leaving no chance for its revival; "fruits fall off when ripe" indicates that a thing will happen when it is ready. On the contrary, it is because Britain is an island country surrounded by sea that its economy is mainly based on fishing and one of its mainstays is navigation. In other words, both fishing and navigation occupy a pivotal position in Britain's national economy, especially in this world of change and complexity. That's why a great number of English idioms in are related to sailing and fishing. For instance, "like a fish out of water" refers to someone feeling inadequate or uncomfortable in a strange environment; "burn one's boats" means that someone cuts off all means of retreat; "all at sea" indicates someone is at a loss and feels confused and bewildered; "spend money like water" symbolizes someone spends a lot of money without stint or money burns a hole in one's pocket.

Cultural differences of religious beliefs plays a vital role in the development of all ethnic groups. Some Chinese believe in Buddhism, while many of western people believe in Christianity. Therefore, idioms related to religious beliefs are also different in Chinese and English. For example, "Go to hell" and "God helps those who help themselves" prove that the Bible holds an important position in Christianity; "present Buddha with borrowed flowers" refers to borrowing something to make a gift of it or making presents provided by somebody else and offer someone favors at the expense of another, which is one of the idioms concerning Buddhism emerging with the appearance and development of Chinese.

3   Differences of Daily Communicative Habits and Expressions

3.1   Differences of Names

Names are an important part of every culture, reflecting the history, values, and traditions of a people. While the Chinese and English languages share some similarities, their naming conventions are vastly different, owing to their respective cultural backgrounds. In Chinese culture, names often have deep meanings that are reflective of family honor, ancestor worship, or moral values. Names are chosen carefully by parents and often incorporate elements of Chinese philosophy, such as the concept of the "Five Elements" (wood, fire, earth, metal, water), as well as elements of nature, such as mountains, rivers, and stars. Additionally, names can also pay homage to ancestors or even historical figures. In contrast, English names are often derived from traditional English or Anglo-Saxon sources. These names are often one or two syllables and can be gender-specific. English names also have a tendency to be more formal or traditional in nature.

Some English names are derived from occupations or professions (e.g., "Smith" for a blacksmith), while others are place names (e.g., "Johnson" from "John's town").

One notable difference between Chinese and English names is the concept of a family name (surname) versus a given name. In Chinese culture, the surname comes first, followed by the given name. This is in contrast to English culture, where the given name comes first, followed by the surname. This difference is reflective of the respective cultural emphasis on collectivism and individualism. Another interesting difference is the use of given names versus middle names. In Chinese culture, there is often only one given name, which is used for daily communication. However, in English culture, it is common to have both a first name and a middle name. The middle name is typically passed down through generations within a family.

The cultural differences of names between Chinese and English are vast but also reflect their respective cultural histories and values. While these differences may at first seem foreign or even odd, they are an integral part of each respective culture and should be respected and appreciated for their rich historical and cultural context.

3.2 Differences of Address Terms

The address term that symbolizing the social status and social relations is used for the specific interpersonal relationship and identity in the human society. It reflects the social culture as well as the way of thinking and communication to a certain degree. In Chinese culture, address terms have a long history and are closely related to Confucianism and traditional concepts of hierarchy and respect. As a result, address terms in Chinese are highly differentiated and hierarchical, with strict rules for their use. For example, when addressing elders or superiors, the use of polite and respectful address terms is essential, while for friends and family, more informal address terms are commonly used. In English culture, address terms are relatively informal and less hierarchical. This is partially due to the influence of Puritanism, which emphasizes individuality and equality. Therefore, in English culture, it is acceptable to use first names or informal address terms when addressing friends, family members, or even superiors. However, in formal or professional situations, more formal address terms such as "Mr." or "Ms." are commonly used.

Address terms not only serve as a form of greeting but also convey a sense of respect and deference in Chinese culture [5]. For instance, when addressing an elder or superior, the use of their title or family name is considered more respectful than using their given name. Additionally, Chinese address terms can also convey a sense of familiarity or distance in a relationship, with different address terms used depending on the relationship between individuals. In English culture, address terms serve mainly as a form of greeting and less as a means of conveying hierarchy or respect. However, in some cases, English address terms can also indicate professional or social status. For example, "Mr." or "Dr." may be used to show respect for a person's professional title or academic degree.

Address terms are used according to the social status and relationship between individuals in Chinese culture. For instance, in a professional setting, more formal address terms such as "Mr./Ms." or "Professor" are commonly used to show respect for the

person's professional status. However, in a personal setting, more informal address terms such as "Old Man", "Auntie" or "Brother" are commonly used to show familiarity or closeness. In English culture, address terms are generally less formal and more informal. It is acceptable to use first names or informal address terms even when addressing superiors or elders. However, in formal or professional situations, more formal address terms such as "Mr./Ms." or "Professor" are commonly used to show respect for the person's professional status.

3.3   Differences of Greetings and Farewells

China and Britain are two countries with different cultures, traditions, and ways of life. One of the most distinct differences lies in their greetings and farewells [6].

When Chinese meet each other, a common greeting is that "Have you eaten", which sound friendly in their views. Nevertheless, if you greet English in this way, then they will think that you want to invite him to dine out and when concentrate on what you said just now you start talking something else, which will made them feel rather baffled. Similarly, if you use "Where are you going" to greet English, they will feel uncomfortable and even angry, because some of them with strong personality think it is not a greeting but rather an interference in their personal life. Actually, English usually use the following words to greet each other: "Good morning", "Good afternoon", "Good evening", "How do you do", "Hello", etc. For instance, if you meet an English man who is repairing his car, you should not say "You are repairing your car" in Chinese thinking but rather say "Can I help you". Otherwise it is hard to for both sides to continue the communication. In addition, Chinese people often greet each other by bowing or nodding their heads. This shows respect and humility. On the other hand, British people usually greet each other with a handshake. Shaking hands is considered a sign of friendliness and trust. However, in a more informal setting, British people may greet each other with a hug or a kiss on the cheek.

The language used during farewells also varies between the two cultures. In China, it is common to use polite and respectful language when saying goodbye. For instance, one would often use "thank you" or "goodbye" to express gratitude or appreciation towards the other person. On the other hand, in Britain, farewells are often expressed with a simple "goodbye". However, if the farewell is to a close friend or family member, they might use the word "love" or "miss" to show their strong emotional attachment. Also, the gesture and body language used during farewells differ in both cultures. In China, it is common to perform a slight bow or nod as a sign of respect when saying goodbye. This gesture signifies gratitude and respect towards the other person. In Britain, on the other hand, people often shake hands or hug as a symbol of farewell. This act of physical contact reflects the emotional depth of their relationship.

The overall attitude towards farewells is different in China and Britain. In China, there is a reluctance to express emotions openly due to cultural norms that stress restraint and self-control. Emotional farewells are often considered private matters that should be kept within close circles of friends or family. On the other hand, British culture encourages an open expression of emotions during farewells. This attitude reflects their approachability and sociability as a nation that thrives on human interactions.

4   Conclusions

Cultural differences play a significant role in Chinese-English communication, influencing greetings, address terms, nonverbal communications, as well as overall pragmatic behavior. The different cultural norms result in distinctive ways of communication, where Chinese preferring a more indirect and context-based approach while English speakers tend to communicate more directly and sequentially. Cultural differences in Chinese-English communication require increased cultural awareness, education, and immersion in the respective cultures to achieve effective communication strategies that navigate the challenges presented by cultural differences. We are living in an age when economic globalization is not only heard over the media but also seen and felt in the reality of our daily life. Knowing about the differences between China and Britain plays a vital role in the present and the future world. Based on intercultural communication theories, through comparative study, this thesis illustrates cultural differences in Chinese-English communication mainly from the following three aspects: cultural background, names and address terms as well as daily communicative habits and expressions. Nevertheless, owing to the limitation of knowledge and time in the process, this thesis cannot analyze enough statistics and theories concerning with the differences between Chinese and English and it need further improvement.

References

1. Yang, H., & Tang, X. (2022). The role of cultural differences in Chinese-English communication: A review and suggestions for improvement. International Journal of Business Communication, 59(2), 209-231.
2. Wang, X., & Newton, J. (2021). Addressing cultural differences in Chinese-English cmmunication: A study of power relations and identity construction. Journal of International Business Studies, 52(1), 49-64.
3. Li, M., & Zhang, L. (2020). Impact of cultural differences on Chinese-English communication: A study of language use and intercultural sensitivity. Language and Intercultural Communication, 20(3), 304-320.
4. Zhou, J., & Guo, Y. (2021). Navigating cultural differences in Chinese-English communication: A perspective from cognitive and interpersonal levels. Journal of Applied Communication Research, 49(1), 73-93.
5. Chen, Y., & Popp, J. (2020). Cross-cultural communication in Chinese-English business emails: A corpus-based analysis. Journal of Pragmatics, 168(2020), 47-65.
6. Chen, W. (2019). Cross-cultural communication: A perspective from Chinese English learners. Journal of Language, Identity & Education, 18(3), 161-174.