

Differences between American and Chinese Concepts of Space

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Abstract—Nonverbal behavior has unique connotations in different cultures. Space, as an important category of nonverbal communication, is interpreted differently from culture to culture. This thesis compares different concepts held by American and Chinese towards space. By the analyses of the roots causing the different concepts, which is individualism and collectivism, historic impact, low context and high context culture, it proves that concept towards space was influenced by culture. This gives clues to underlying messages, reduce misunderstandings and isolate ethnocentrism. It thus draws the conclusion that cultural learning must be laid stress on in order to achieve successful intercultural communication.

Keywords—nonverbal behavior; space; Chinese; American; intercultural communication

I. INTRODUCTION

In 1973, Charles Darwin published *The Expression of the Emotion in Man and Animals*, which started the scientific study of nonverbal communication. Study shows that when human is expressing feelings or attitudes, only 7% information is sent by spoken-language and the rest 93% by nonverbal behaviors" [1]. In addition, most people think nonverbal behaviors are much more believable than verbalized words. As a category of nonverbal communication, space language is important during communication. America and China are two influential countries all around the world. They are also respectively the representative of western and eastern culture which have different origins and differ in a variety of aspects. By comparing the conceptual differences between Americans and Chinese towards space, this thesis intends to stress how culture influences people's worldview.

II. DIFFERENT CONCEPTS TOWARD SPACE

People employ space and distance to deliver messages. The study of this message system is called "proxemics". In other words, it refers to our use of space and the way we use space to govern the personal actions and behavior of others [3]. Proxemics is concerned with categories as people's use of personal space, their regard for territoriality, how they arrange seats in various circumstance, etc.

Space communicates. This may not be so noticeable when communicators are from the same cultural background, because they are familiar with the silent messages carried by space. Nevertheless, during intercultural communication, different concepts embraced by different cultures towards space can be a very big obstacle.

A. Personal Space

As the owner of this area, we usually decide who may enter and who may not. When our personal space is invaded, we react in a variety of ways. Our response is a manifestation not only of our personality, but also our cultural background." [2]. Generally speaking, American culture demands more personal space than Chinese culture. People from western culture usually feel a bubble space around their whole body. This space could not be broken by others, especially stranger. They avoid close contact with other people in public places. Hall found out that "when two Americans are talking, they keep a distance of about 11/2 to 4 feet" [3], while the distance between Chinese is much smaller. Concerning the invasion of personal space, Americans and Chinese hold different attitudes. In America, if strangers touch others by accident, an apology is necessary. Otherwise, the other people will take an aggressive stance. However, Chinese usually hold that this kind of phenomenon is unavoidable. They are not so easy to get offended.

B. Territoriality

Territoriality is a term that comes to us from ethnology, refers to the ownership-like reaction toward a particular space or object. It is fixed space, such as a room, yard, apartment, office. Territoriality is connected with the word "ownership" which is always a psychological state.

American need for private territory is very strong. They would not tolerate other people to enter their house without their permission. They have an expression "Good fences make good neighbors". American, when asked to draw an ideal room or office, invariably drew it for themselves and no one else [4]. On the contrary, the Chinese's demand for private territory is weak. They like to share. They may share bedroom with parents or siblings when they are small. Territory violation occurs when someone's territory is used by others without asking for permission. Hall cites an example to show American women's attitude toward the violation of territory. Most American women take kitchen as their private territory. So sometimes they will be mad even their mother enters their kitchen without her invitation [4]. Comparably, Chinese is much more tolerant towards the violation of private territory. At certain circumstance, Chinese people even take territory violation as a way of expressing familiarity and intimacy.

C. Seating

Seating can transmit silent messages. For example, in China, when people step into an office, they know that the

person sitting near the door may be less prestigious than others. At Chinese dinner table, the person who seat facing the south or door is the most honorable one. Chinese people stress seating arrangement. They usually push each other to the “best” seat for a long time before getting seated. Americans also pay attention to seating arrangement but in a different way. According to Samovar, Porter, and Stefani, “Americans, when in groups, tend to talk with those opposite them rather than those seated or standing beside them. The Chinese often experience alienation and uneasiness when they face someone directly or sit on opposite side of a desk or a table from someone: it makes them feel as if they are on trial” [2].

Nevertheless, the differences are best reflected in how they arrange the seat of lady and the old. In China, at the dinner table, the seat facing south or the door is considered as the most prestigious. It is always given to the old. In America, “lady first” is highly regarded. At the dinner table, the hostess usually takes the most important seats, and host sits facing her. Other male guests’ seats are arranged according to their position rather than age.

III. ROOTS OF DIFFERENT CONCEPTS TOWARD SPACE

Culture is everywhere and in everything. It hides more than it reveals and it hides most effectively from its own participants. Certainly, it hides in space. In this capture, this thesis wills exam the cultural roots behind the different concept hold by Chinese and American.

A. Individualism vs. Collectivism

According to Hofstede, individualism - collectivism is the major dimension of cultural variability used to explain intercultural differences and similarities in intercultural communication. In individualistic society, each individual is unique and is of paramount value. Collectivism, as it’s opposite, pertains to societies in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong cohesive in-groups, which throughout people’s life-time continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty [5].

Individualism comes to the core of American culture. It penetrates every aspect of their life and is regarded as important as their nation and religion. Almost all values, behaviors originate from it. They hold the value that self is more important than others. They emphasize “I”, family, privacy. Chinese are born in large family in which people is connected by blood and kinship. They value collectivism. From childhood, they are taught group interest is more important than anything. If necessary they should sacrifice personal interests to group. In such collectivistic society, people emphasize “we”, group. Therefore, this value gives people distinct concept towards space. Americans demand more personal space and accent private territory in order to stress and protect self-interest. Chinese are much more tolerant to crowded situations than people from individualistic culture. Actually, most Chinese are attracted by crowd places. They call this “jirenao”. Their attentions are always called away by places where collecting a large crowd of people, even though sometimes they have no idea what is happening there.

B. Historic Impact

English writer Edmund Burk said that “history is a pact

between the dead, the living and the yet unborn”. Indeed, it helps us develop our worldview and also helps to pass on what a culture regard worth to be inherited.

Chinese has a proverb, “consider the past and you will know the present”. It clearly shows how important history is to its people. Confucian ethnic tells people, men and women should keep certain distance. So in conversation, the personal distance between different sexes is bigger than that of the same. Confucianism values interpersonal harmony. That’s why Chinese reaction to the violation of interpersonal space or privacy is not as aggressive as Americans. China has a long agricultural history. It left a lot of values some of which affect people’s attitude toward space. For example, in agricultural society, farming experience is vital. Certainly, the older a person, the more experiences will he obtain. So in China, people respect the old. This value is obviously reflected in Chinese seating arrangement. The most important seats are always left for the old. American culture originated from a mixture of ancient Greek and Rome cultures. It stresses freedom, democracy, science, etc. Later, the seventeenth century English philosophy John Lock’s doctrine influenced the country which stresses individualism. When people first set foot on American, what faced them is a continent of wildness. In order to survive and make a living, they had to be strong, energetic and always ready to take risks. Nowadays these characteristics are still emphasized in American society. However, the old can’t embody them anymore. So Americans prefer the young than the old. That’s why when arranging seats, Americans don’t take age as a prior standard to get the most important one.

C. Low Context Culture vs. High Context Culture

Depend on the degree to which the meaning comes from the setting or from words, Edward T Hall classified culture into low context or high context culture. Context means that the information that surrounds an event. A high context (HC) communication or message is one in which most of the information is either implied in the physical setting or considered to be part of individual’s mind. A low context (LC) communication is just the opposite; i.e. the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code [2].

Chinese culture is high context culture. Because China has a long history and tradition which changed very little over time, a lot of information is taken for granted and assumed to be shared. In communication, a great deal of information is provided by nonverbal communication instead of verbalizing everything. American culture belongs to the category of low context culture. As an immigrant country, people are less homogeneous. The lack of a large pool of common experience means that each time they interact with each other they need detailed background information [2].

IV. SIGNIFICANCE OF ACKNOWLEDGING THE CONCEPTUAL DIFFERENCES

With globalization accelerating and China’s influence broadening worldwide, we obtain more opportunities to contact people from various cultures. In order to have a successful intercultural communication, trying to know more about the people you are talking to is a necessary. Attitude

towards space differs from culture to culture. It's important to grasp the conceptual differences in intercultural communication, because it will give clues to underlying messages, reduce misunderstandings, isolate ethnocentrism, etc.

A. Giving Clues to Underlying Messages

Space itself can't speak but it transmits a silent message. Acknowledging how people of a certain culture views space will help us get the underlying message and facilitate the process of intercultural communication. Americans value privacy. If they want to be alone, they go into their own room and shut the door. Hall observed, "The closed door underlies 'leave me alone'. An American is available if his door is open at home or at his office. He is expected not to shut himself off but to maintain himself in a state of constant readiness to answer the demands of others." [4]. Realizing the message the "door" transmit, people from other cultures get the clue when it's the appropriate time to enter an American's room.

B. Reducing Misunderstandings

Henry David Thoreau said: "In human intercourse, the tragedy begins not when there is misunderstanding about words, but when silence is not understood." Truly, during intercultural communication, it is very easy to cause misunderstandings considering people's attitudes towards space because of the unfamiliarity of the other people's culture.

Americans value private territory. Their concept of private territory even extends to the objects they possess. So they will not touch other's object without the owner's permission, while in China, people don't think touching other's object without permission is a serious problem. Americans will easily misunderstand that Chinese are insulting their privacy and get angry. If Americans know Chinese value, misunderstandings can be eliminated.

C. Isolating Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism refers to "the belief that one's own culture is primary to all explanations of reality" [2]. Every culture is, to a certain degree, ethnocentrism and people learn it since they were born. Obviously, during intercultural communication this belief is a potential problem, because it will become a big obstacle for people to appreciate other cultures and lead to degrading and stereotyping. Acknowledging the conceptual differences between Americans and Chinese and the cultural roots behind them will help people isolate their ethnocentrism. For example, during conversation, the personal distance of Chinese is comparable small than that kept by Americans. Chinese think their distance is the most comfortable. However, when talking with Americans who keep farther personal distance, they feel uncomfortable. They may think Americans are cold and Chinese culture is much more friendly than

American. This is ethnocentrism. As long as they know that Americans value individualism, they realize that their idea is not true.

V. CONCLUSION

Nonverbal communication is an indispensable part in daily communication. However, in communication people pay more attention to words being exchanged than nonverbal signs. It probably won't affect the course of communication, when communicators are from the same cultural background. Nevertheless, when doing intercultural communication, people's attitude toward space should be taken seriously, because the consequence of cultural misunderstanding is even worse than language mistake.

This thesis takes Chinese as a representative of eastern culture and America as a typical example of western culture. By comparing the different concept of Chinese and Americans towards personal space, territoriality and seating, it proves that space has a pervasive influence on intercultural communication which is largely determined by culture including value system, history, high context and low context culture. An acknowledgement of this will help people get clues about underlying messages, reduce misunderstandings and isolate their ethnocentrism. From this, we can safely draw the conclusion that in order to achieve a successful intercultural communication, a good acknowledgment of the other people's culture is very important.

In modern society, new technology, and growth in the world's population, and shifts in the global economic arena have contributed to increased international contacts [2]. In order to reduce conflicts and facilitate cooperation, communication is vital. Successful intercultural communication depends on a full acknowledge of the dimensions along which cultures differ. Attitude toward space is only one part. There are still many important elements that are deserved to be mentioned and explored in this field. So people specialized in this field still have a long way to go.

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