

Differences of Polite Language between Chinese and English from the Viewpoint of Face

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Keywords: face; politeness; language

Abstract: Face is very important both in Chinese culture and Western culture. The maintenance of face needs the polite language's synergy which is affected by the cultural differences. The author argues that knowing the politeness principle of using language in different cultures is significant for cross-culture communication.

1. Introduction

Face plays a vital role in human communication. In different cultural backgrounds, the face has different cultural meanings. Face strategy is an important part of the politeness principle in communication. People would use different face strategies to preserve their own face or others' in different situations. This article seeks to review existing research and compare the face view and politeness principles in Chinese culture and Western culture. It is believed that the more politeness principles we use, the easier we communicate with each other, and the more face we gain. In the body part of this article, firstly, the writer discusses Chinese "face view" and Western face theory. Secondly, this paper describes the differences of the politeness principle between Chinese culture and Western culture. Thirdly, it describes different examples of polite language in Chinese and English.

2. Chinese "face view" and Western face theory

2.1 Chinese "face view"

Although face is an important concept in China, it is not easy to give a definition of face. There are many people who define the meaning of face. One of the most popular definitions is defined by the American Sinologist Fei Zhengqing. He thinks that face is a social thing that is gained from appropriate behavior and the social approval. People conflicting with the politeness principle would lose face which puts them at a disadvantage. Fei Zhengqing's definition of face includes both the social significance of face and morality of face, namely, the face in a sense is people's behavior rule. It is observed that face in China is an important principle to adjust and dominate Chinese social behavior. Face is a way to maintain harmonious social relations. Generally speaking, Chinese do not refuse others' requests easily for the sake of face, even if they cannot satisfy the request of others immediately. Afterwards Chinese would do some redeeming behavior to reestablish the interpersonal relation in a harmonious and stable way.

2.2 Western face theory

In the West, Brown, P. & Levinson, S (1987) and Scollon, R. & Scollon, S(2000) have given the most comprehensive discussion of face. Brown and Levinson believe that face is the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself. According to individual needs, they divide face into two categories: negative face and positive face. In the communicative activities, positive face refers to the individual's positive image or personality, including the wish to be praised. Negative face means people have the right to be never disturbed in any area. Every member in the communication should respect other people's face demand. However, face is a contradiction. The communicator in all communication must keep a civil tongue in his head to maintain both positive

face and negative face. Scollon, R. & Scollon, S also think face has a dual nature i.e. relevance and independence which is consistent with negative face and positive face. Their relevance of face is Brown and Levinson's positive face and independence of face is Brown, P. & Levinson, S's negative face. In addition, Scollon, R. & Scollon, S believe that in different a communicational environment, there are three kinds of face system: polite face system of respect, polite face system

2.3 Differences between Chinese and Western face view

From what has been discussed above, it is obvious that the definitions and content of face between China and Western countries are different in many ways. On the one hand, from the definitions of face, we can conclude that Chinese face is a good public image which an individual obtains in social interactions. Its establishment depends on others' evaluation in society. The Western face is a public self-image based on personal values. On the other hand, from the contents of face, face in China is an important principle to adjust and dominate Chinese social behavior. Face is a way to maintain social relation which is similar to positive face in the West. Generally speaking, Chinese do not refuse others' request easily for the sake of face, even if they cannot satisfy the request of others immediately. But there is no negative face and independence of face in China.

3. Different principles of politeness

The different understanding of two different cultures will eventually lead to the difference of its politeness principle. Firstly, there are positive and negative faces in Brown and Levinson's theory. The core content of negative face is individual freedom, in other words, maintain the speech acts of others' freedom is to maintain the negative face of others. "Freedom" is interpreted and measured as an important criterion for polite speech. Secondly, due to the sociability of face in Chinese language culture, the collaboration of positive face is different from that of Western culture. In China, we generally divide the collaboration into two categories: For one thing, it is the active collaboration of positive face. When it comes to non-self things, Chinese people would try to maintain the positive face of the other communication party. They always agree with what is said, but sometimes this agreement is insincere. For another, it is the negative collaboration of positive face. When it comes to our own things, especially for the praise and compliments given by the other communication party, Chinese people often try to belittle their own according to the principle of "Humility". However, the demeaning words and deeds have threatened the positive face of the other communication party. Finally, because of cultural differences, the Chinese often placed the communication party in a respectful system as proposed by the Scollons, while Westerners place it in the same politeness-face system.

4. Difference of Chinese and English Expressions on Politeness

4.1 The meaning of hospitality

In the West, people think much of "freedom" and "individualism". They emphasize individual right and self-behavior right, and oppose the interference in others' affairs; they respect personal privacy, and tolerate personal idiosyncrasy and characteristics. Influenced by this idea, the British-American culture lays particular stress on the "independent" polite face tactics, which is "negative face". In the use of words, people may regard the speech acts, such as invitation or suggestion, as those which probably hurt others' negative face. Once this kind of words and deeds are declined, the speaker will stop immediately to ensure their politeness. Scholars proposed that the Anglo-Americans usually divide their conversational modes of speech acts, such as invitation or suggestions. The modes are shown as follows:

Speaker: proposal or invitation, etc.

Listener: proposal decline or invitation decline, etc.

Speaker: proposal stop or invitation stop, etc.

The conversational mode is not only suitable in British and American culture, but also appropriate between speakers and listeners. However, it is not commonly suitable in Chinese culture.

Most Chinese people will not immediately give up after the proposal and invitations declined by listeners, but try to convince them by their words and deeds. In China, the sincerity of entertaining the guests is to request guests to eat more or drink more. Therefore, the well-mannered matter is seen as a person who doesn't care for the negative face of guests.

4.2 What is appropriate appellation?

In China, people enjoy using “title” and “honorific”. Jia Yuxin once pointed out, although people often use respectful, honorific, or modest name in various cultures of the world, it is especially prominent and unique in Chinese culture. The appellation in Chinese has formed its own system, no matter how many changes and updates in the society, the expression of “other-proclaimed”, “mutual-proclaime” and “self-proclaimed” still vary widely. The complicated social-relationships can be shown incisively and vividly in appellation. Gu Yueguo proposed that the appellation, involving courtesy, is the Chinese cultural characteristic. People often communicate by the principle of “superior and inferior, gentle and simple, old and young” to show their interpersonal relationships. However, some appellation manners are considered appropriate in Chinese culture, but abruptness in other cultures and vice versa. In China, for example, “title + surname” or “honorific” is very appropriate in most cases, but very limited in the west, especially in Anglo-American countries. In the west, people usually put the communicating parties in a same politeness-face-system. If they think that the use of same politeness-face-system is suitable and polite, then the use of “title + surname” or “honorific” is actually put in a same-level system, which goes against “consistent” face or the maintenance of active face. Similarly, the “equality” and “tenderness” of Anglo-Americans, shown in their directly calling each other's name (students to professor, daughter-in-law to father-in-law) regardless of superiority and inferiority, old and young, are considered as demeaning words by people of Han nationality.

4.3 What is proper humility?

Humility is a virtue. But there are different understandings and the expressions of humility between Chinese and Anglo-Americans. For example, on the matter of how to treat compliment and praise, the Anglo-American often thanks, adopts a way of catering to the speaker and seldom disproves. They may be afraid of showing the inconsistencies and the damage of positive face, while Chinese people mostly prefer to deny the compliment and praise. As Gu Yueguo mentioned in Chinese polite characteristics, “humility” is to actually demote self and respect others in China. When it comes to something related to themselves, they should “demote” themselves and be “modest”. In many cases, the Chinese-style attitude will threaten the face of Westerners. For instance, a British female teacher praised a Chinese student's handwriting, “Oh, your handwriting is beautiful”, but the Chinese student's answer was “No, No, not at all. You're joking”. Consequently the British teacher felt very unhappy. The answer of this student, although scrupulously abiding by China's “humility” principle, may suggest that the hearer does not understand calligraphy, lack of aesthetics and taste from the female teacher's point of view. In addition, many Anglo-Americans believe it is insincere and rude for Chinese people to reject the praise of others absolutely, or disprove of their achievements, and even devalue themselves. Therefore, the polite words may have different meanings in different countries.

5. Conclusion

Politeness is a symbol of human civilization, an important criterion of human social activities. Whether we use politeness or not mainly depend on the coordination of speech acts to the communicating parties' face. People will take much count of face in daily life, take all kinds of ways to avoid demeaning face for the sake of saving face. However, due to the difference of definition, content and cultural background of face between Chinese culture and Western culture, there are differences of how to define the polite speech act and impolite speech act. In cross-cultural communication, if we pay much attention to the coordination of face and different politeness in different cultures, we can promote mutual understanding of different cultures.

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