Contrastive Analysis of Politeness Principles in Intercultural Communication

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Abstract

Politeness phenomenon is universal in language usage, which has been so long approached by people from the distinctive perspectives of cultures. With the advance of intercultural communication politeness can no longer be confined to the study of either the Chinese culture or the English culture, and the revaluation of politeness with the amendment of the principles for intercultural communication must be implemented for the sake of efficacious interaction.

Key words: Intercultural communication; Self-concept; Face

INTRODUCTION

All human languages comprise some universals, which can be labeled as politeness despite the concrete conducts to implement or characterize it in our diversified cultures. That is, politeness is common in nature yet the principles or behavior may vary from culture to culture. According to language relativity, language and culture are bound together with influence superimposed on each other, so we cannot dissociate language from culture in the study of language phenomena. Language users of various cultures more or less bear the awareness towards the culture-specific politeness norms and the study of the transparent politeness phenomena has abstracted or condensed the principles or maxims.

According to Gu (1992), politeness in the Chinese cultural system is characterized by respectfulness, modesty, attidudinal warmth and refinement. Besides, politeness (*li mao*) was termed *li* in ancient China. Moreover, in *The Analects* language was intended to uphold politeness, which was embodied by the establishment of kingly, husbandly and fatherly relationship, and thus the social framework could be maintained and sustained. In Mencius' works, *li* was accessed as the social norms for the obedience to others with modesty. After over two thousand years' regeneration of Chinese culture, politeness concerns more about the establishment of cooperative and harmonious interpersonal relationship. Furthermore, Chinese politeness principles are nourished by Chinese culture, and the negotiation across cultures must figure in the background.

In the western world, many scholars have delved into the politeness phenomena. Although they cannot cover all the politeness phenomena in different cultures, they do in a sense represent the important respects to achieve harmonious relationship. Grice proposed his cooperative principle and the corresponding maxims which account for the conversational implicature. His framework of conversational implicature has indeed kindled the study for the motives of the flouting or exploitation of his maxims in interaction. Although Leech (1983) proclaimed his politeness principle rescued cooperative principle from serious trouble, it actually specified the nature of socialization. Brown and Levinson (1987) reiterated Grice's cooperative principle with the emphasis on *face* in combination with positive politeness and negative politeness; their research, however, has left much scope to adapt for the face-to-face interaction of different cultures.

Despite the respective attainments of politeness researches on Chinese culture and English culture as yet the negotiation of them in the encounter of different cultures for the realization of politeness has not achieved its well-deserved importance in the tremendous advancement of international intercultural communication. It is undeniable that we should contrast the politeness principles rooted in different cultures to grasp the nature to facilitate intercultural communication.

1. POLITENESS DIVERGENCE IN INTERDISCOURSE COMMUNICATION

1.1 The English Politeness Principle Versus the Chinese Politeness Principle

1.1.1 The Agreement Maxim Versus the Accordance Maxim

The Agreement Maxim of the Politeness Principle functions prominently to maintain the social relationship in interpersonal interaction in the western culture, while the Accordance Maxim accounts for the question of harmony with respect to the appropriateness corresponding to one's identity and social status. When two simultaneously function in intercultural communication, they cannot contribute to mutual understanding but rather be misleading. As Robinson (2003, cited in Storti, 1994) shows, the following dialogue can account for such undercurrent under the seemingly successful conversation. E.g. (1):

Mr. Jones: It is likely that we're going to have to work on the day shift on Saturday.

Mr. Wu: I see.

Mr. Jones: Can you come in on Saturday?

Mr. Wu: Yes, I think so.

Mr. Jones: That'll be a great help.

Mr. Wu: Yes. Saturday's a special day, do you know?

Mr. Jones: What do you mean?

Mr. Wu: It's my son's birthday.

Mr. Jones: How nice. I hope you all enjoy it very much.

Mr. Wu: Thank you. I appreciate your understanding.

The conversation comes about when the two speakers are negotiating the presence or absence of Mr. Wu on Saturday. Mr. Wu apparently observes the Accordance Maxim which fits in to the identity of Mr. Jones as the workmate or the superior. "I see," and "yes, I think so," both the conversational cues signal he responds in accordance with Mr. Jones. Nevertheless, he must be appalled at Mr. Jones unconsciousness to his will. "Most North Americans learn to say *yes* and *no* as a means of expressing their individual views. Being a collective culture, the Chinese usually use yes or no to express respect for the feeling of others" (Samovar et al., 1998). On the other hand, Mr. Jones seems to possess more power to actively perform the speech event, and he finally appreciates Saturday as an important occasion to Mr. Wu. We, however, do not think the seemingly agreement or accordance will bring out the goals for communication, because Mr. Jones may be surprised and confused at Mr. Wu' absence on Saturday while Mr. Wu still bears full gratitude for his permission to leave work that day.

From the foregoing example, we can see that the two maxims fail in the encounter of the discourse systems of Chinese and Westerners. Both of them adhere to their politeness maxims in the respective cultures, but their implied meanings are different so the projected illocutionary effects need to be differentiated. On the one hand, Chinese speakers often pursue harmony with each other to realize the will of the other party, which is one of the goals of politeness maintenance descended from the concept of *li*. Meanwhile, they suggest their intentionality in the reserved but positive correspondence to others questioning, so they rarely deny explicitly others' opinions, and the hearers must carefully process the received information, which always bears some implicit clues. On the other hand, the English people often maximize their agreement on such occasion to send wishes or celebrate an important day. Briefly, what matters is that they lack awareness of cultural divergence in discourse processing and still take side with their own culture-specific discourse systems.

1.1.2 The Modesty Maxim Versus the Self-Depreciation Maxim

The Politeness Principle highlights that we should minimize praise of self and maximize dispraise of self, while the Chinese Politeness Principle preaches that we should depreciate self and praise other. Gu (1992) asserts that the Modesty Maxim is equivalent to part of the Self-depreciation Maxim, but in fact the reaction of Chinese and English-speaking people are quite different. E.g. (2):

A: Oh, what a beautiful house you have!

B: No, no, not at all. You must be kidding!

A as an English speaker observes the quality maxim of the Cooperative Principle to genuinely compliment B's handwriting only to meet B's denial for the sake of the maxim of self-depreciation. The negation of A's compliment and the denigration of himself is surely not the expected response to A from B. The two maxims need to be differentiated because it is situation-based. Leech (1983) suggests that people make such claims as "How stupid of you," but it also demonstrates how self-praise is regarded as quite benign, even when it is exaggerated for comic effect. Moreover, in the face of other's praise, Leech argues that the explicitly positive response as "yes" is not very appropriate, either. Accordingly, English speakers more often turn to the Agreement Maxim by "thank you" to imply their appreciation of others.

In a sense, the Modesty Maxim does not take so much importance in the politeness framework postulated by Leech as the Self-depreciation Maxim does in the

Chinese politeness theory, and other maxims like the Agreement Maxim may take precedence over it under some circumstances. In contrast, the Self-depreciation Maxim reflects the predominant characteristic of Chinese politeness system (Chen et al., 2005), which is extended to other maxims, in that collectivism ranks high while individuality is not advocated in Chinese culture. The different implications of the maxims as well as their disparate importance toward praise in the politeness systems may need to be further specified so as to avoid the misunderstanding.

1.2 Face Systems

Goffman (1967, cited in Brown and Levinson, 1987) extended "face" to describe the social presentation of self—how we want to be seen by others, and Brown and Levinson formulate the FTA model and the strategies based on the interpretation of face. Their politeness theory recognizes the politeness universality in cultures, but they cannot cover all the politeness phenomena without necessary adjustment for politeness is in a sense inherently born within culture.

1.2.1 The Concept of Self

Chen et al. (2005) points out that face in Brown and Levinson's theory only concerns the individual's wants and desires, but the concept of Chinese culture "emphasizes the harmony of individual conduct with the views and judgment of community." Individualism and collectivism emphasized in different ideologies circumscribe the understanding of face in social interaction. As is suggested by Scollon and Scollon (2005), from the individualistic perspective face relationships are very much a matter of individual face, while from the collectivistic perspective, one's face is really the face of one's group, whether the group is one's family, one's cultural group or one's corporation. Therefore, in intercultural communication the Chinese tend to be more conscious of the connections arising out of the membership and hence they are more concerned about the consequences of their actions on other members of their groups. In contrast, westerners and especially Americans are inclined to focus on their independence and their personal needs to maintain their own freedom other than the connections with other members of their group. According to Markus and Kitayama (1999), the former is called the "interdependent construal of the self", while the latter the "independent construal of the self". Besides, westerners as self-contained or autonomous entities comprise the unique configuration of internal attributes and behave primarily as a consequence of these internal attributes, while the self-in-relation-to-other is the focal in individual experience in Chinese.

1.2.2 Face Evaluation

Goffman himself acknowledges the Chinese sources of the concept "face"; however, while this individualistic emphasis has been elaborated by Brown and Levinson

into a cognitive model, it is also magnified based on Western ethnocentric assumptions (Bargiela-Chiappini, 2003). Brown and Levinson conceive of face as consisting of negative face and positive face. The former emphasizes the autonomy of self, i.e. freedom of action and freedom from imposition, while the latter emphasizes the connection, i.e. the desire of self-image to be appreciated and approved of. They posit that so far as communicative event is concerned, both negative face and positive face are threatened, and Scollon and Scollon (2000, p.38) concluded that involvement and independence must be projected in any communication. English culture upholds the egalitarian values in social interaction integrated with individuality, while Chinese culture is typically hierarchical and what the politeness norms concern is to inspire them to behave themselves corresponding to their respective statuses and identities. The former is more dynamic while the latter is more stable relative to others in the social identity hierarchy.

Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey (1988, cited in Mey, 2001) states that both negative framework and positive framework exist in all cultures, but the attitudes of cultural members towards the frameworks may be influenced by the value orientation of a culture. Both Gu (1992) and Jia (1997) expound the inappropriateness to propagate the persuasive force of the face theory in the Chinese discourse system in that Chinese culture somewhat obscures the negative face. Chinese culture is also called other-oriented culture, and people tend to view the world from the holistic perspective, so the freedom from imposition does not figure much in interpersonal interaction. As to the first example, Mr. Wu values Mr. Jones' positive face by the indirect speech, while he is seemingly hesitant to defend his negative face in the conversation, when he is imposed by the request to work on Saturday.

2. CULTURAL ADAPTATION OF THE POLITENESS THEORIES

Cultural awareness is foremost in intercultural communication, that is, intercultural communicators should not only know the mother culture but also other cultures to gain insights into the similarities and the difference which may impede the communication. Classical politeness theories of Chinese culture and English culture can be better specified and integrated after the analysis and the dialogue of distinctive discourse systems. The culture-specific politeness principles cannot meet the needs to maximize communicative efficiency and avoid miscommunication triggered by the cultural ignorance.

Intercultural communication has been flourishing, and conversation participants must seek to understand diverse message systems. Empathy should be developed

in the message processing. Broome (1991, cited in Samovar, 1998) asserts, it is also a central characteristic of competent and effective intercultural communication. The dialogue of different discourse systems needs continuous feedback in the turn-taking conversation and hence the judgment and adjustment of our verbal behavior. The use of the inquiring expressions can reinforce the validity of the information transmission. Besides, non-verbal behaviors, or paralanguage, especially the kinesics as well as the proxemics possibly suggest the attitudes or the true intentions of the speakers. As regards the first example, Mr. Jones could have understood Mr. Wu's dilemma, if he had been losely watched Mr. Wu's facial expressions and the silence for negotiation. Furthermore, politeness theories should be closely combined with paralanguage because of its simultaneity and significance as an integral part of interdiscourse communication.

Context composed of the three elements of culture, situation and discourse, which also contribute to intercultural communication. For example, when an American host asks a Chinese guest, "What would you like?", it should not be taken as a question about one's hobby but something to drink or eat. Given the context of discussion of potential plans or solutions, the western conversationist may claim "Why don't you …?", as is possibly approached by the Chinese partner as a question for further explanation rather than an offer of advice. In other words, the contextual information must be attached to the due importance to specify the choice.

CONCLUSION

Politeness is of universality in cultures, but the polite verbal behaviors arise out of diverse cultures. The classical politeness theories on the Chinese and English discourse systems respectively reveal their cultural significance, and by virtue of the contrastive analysis of them we can delve into the essence to eliminate the vagueness and vindicate their differences rooted in culture. With the tremendous advancement of intercultural communication, the theories should be adapted to account for the verbal behavior in the more complex communicative environment.

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