

## Comparison Between Chinese Address Terms and English Address Terms

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### Abstract

Addressing plays a prominent role in daily communication, it is closely related to culture. This paper reveals the different hidden cultural connotations between China and Western countries by analyzing three aspects of addressing, thus making cross cultural communication running smoothly.

**Key words:** Addressing forms; Reflect; Cultural connotation

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### INTRODUCTION

Language, as a social phenomenon, is closely tied up with the social structure and value systems of society. It is not simply a means of communicating information, it is also a very important means of establishing and maintaining relationships with other people,

Address terms are the words speakers use to designate the person they are talking to while they are talking to them. In most languages, there are two main kinds of address terms: names and second-person pronouns (Fasold, 2000). As one important part in speech communication, address form is considered as the first message conveyed from speakers to hearers in many situations. Address forms play a very important role in the

social life. It is not only a grammatical unit, but also has distinct social traits, which can strongly reflect people's social attributes, interpersonal values, and is closely related to the cultural and political backgrounds and traditional habits of the whole society. Braun (1988, p.66) found that "there appears to be few universals in address behavior". In addition, factors governing address behavior differ from culture to culture, from society to society, from language to language. Studies have shown that address forms can vividly reflect the relationship between language and culture, and it can also reflect the distinctive national cultural features behind salutation. This paper tries to discuss their respective cultural connotations of salutation from three aspects.

### 1. KINSHIP ADDRESS

Language mirrors social life, it is the carrier of culture and manifestation of a nation's culture. There are close links between language, culture and thought.

Kinship address terms are employed to call those who are blood relatives or relatives by affinity. Due to different cultures and social structures, Chinese kinship address terms are quite different from English ones. Since ancient times, the Chinese kinship address system has been quite complicated. The relationship among family members is rather complex. Generally speaking, the Chinese people value close family relationship and attach great importance to the sex, seniority, patriarchal clans, and consanguinity and affinity. Thus, inclusive kinship addresses terms come into being.

In Chinese, address forms between relatives have strict rules. Age, generation, relatives by blood or by marriage all play important roles. For example, grandpa (爷爷), grandma (奶奶), nephew (侄子), grandson (孙子) are salutations according to the relationship of patriarchal clan. According to the blood relationship, the above-mentioned should be addressed as grandpa (外

公), grandma (外婆), nephew (外甥), grandson (外孙). Many address forms are to be carried out in accordance with the age or ranking segmentation. For example, the elder brother of one's father is addressed as uncle (伯伯), the younger brother of one's father is called uncle (叔叔). But if his father has three younger brothers, additional morphemes should be added respectively in front of the address forms in order to tell the differences of their ranking.

There is a phenomenon in Chinese address forms, that is, child of father's brother and mother's brother should be addressed respectively. The concept of the kinship term "cousin" in Chinese can be both brothers and sisters according to the sex and the relative ego. But these brothers or sisters are divided into two categories and have the different labels. Child from father's brother or sister is called "堂", which means living in the same house, thus having the same root. While child from mother's brother or sister is called "表", which means not the people of this family. This phenomenon reflected the thought of "differentiated relationship".

Salutation of relatives by marriage in Chinese are classified clearly, such as elder brother-in-law (大舅子), younger brother-in-law (小舅子), elder sister-in-law (大姑子), younger sister-in-law (小姑子) and so on. Judging from the literal meaning of a generation, they seem of two generations, but in fact they are of the same generation. This is an interesting phenomenon in Chinese address forms.

English address forms are much simpler and fuzzier than Chinese address forms. It is not affected by blood or marriage, which mainly highlight gender and don't take seniority into consideration. They pay little attention to the differences between consanguineal relations and affinal relations in its kinship terms. English address forms include grandfather, grandmother, father, mother, uncle, aunt, brother, sister, son, daughter, cousin, niece, nephew, etc.. Such vague titles often make Chinese people do not understand the specific relationship in Chinese culture. When they say, "This is my brother", the Chinese will further ask "elder brother or younger brother?" until they get the exact answer. Because "brother" in English means both elder one and younger one. In Chinese brother has two concepts, either elder or younger. Another example illustrates the point well. "Mary's uncle married John's aunt yesterday." This sentence makes Chinese people difficult to understand in Chinese culture. Is Mary's father's brother or mother's brother? Elder brother or Younger brother? John's mother's sister or father's sister? Elder sister or younger sister?

In English, one salutation often covers several salutations in Chinese. The most representative is "cousin" in English, which can represent eight relatives of different sexes in Chinese. This also shows the versatility of address forms in English. English relatives formed by marriage are expressed "...in-law", such as "mother-in-

law" "father-in-law". But they call each other name when facing directly.

The differences between Chinese and western relative salutation reflect the different cultural origins. Chinese relatives salutation fully reflects a feudal patriarchal society. The so-called "patriarchal" means "to the family as the center, according to the distance difference descent closeness of law" (*Modern Chinese Dictionary*, 1979, p.125). Patriarchal clan system emphasizes family values. Chinese families are often multi-generational families with seniority, and junior has to maintain the feudal ethics. One's personal honor is closed related to the family.

Confucianism which has ruled Chinese for two thousand years also had a profound impact on Chinese culture. It emphasizes on "men and women are different, equal and orderly," believes "seniority", "the young should respect the elder." So Chinese kinship address is various, careful. In the sense of the relationship between man and society, the Chinese concept holds that man lives in the society and he can not be called a man outside the society he is in. Therefore unlike the western definition of individual, Chinese defines human being as the configuration of social relations rather than an independent existence.

With more nuclear families, dink families and fewer big family like Chinese, western culture advocate individualism. In family life, there isn't many obligations of members to each other. Once children grow up, they move out and become independent, thus making them indifferent to the concept of family as compared with Chinese family concept. And strong liquidity in the western nation because of the changes in the work makes family members scattered around. therefore, there are no close contacts between the family members and relatives like Chinese people, so the relatives salutation is not so complicated as Chinese.

## 2. THE FICTIVE KINSHIP ADDRESS

Fictive kinship address, also known as the generalization of kinship words, which are often used between non-relatives. In Chinese, kinship terms can be used to address people who have no kin-relation with the addresser. These are called fictive kinship terms. Social address terms, which are employed frequently in our daily communications, are an essential and indispensable part of social life. Language, culture and traditional ethic differences between English and Chinese lead to dissimilar use of social address terms. The direct transformation of address terms from one language into the other will often invite unexpected response and even shock. For example, in our Chinese addressing system, some kinship address terms are often used for non-relatives. For instance, in Chinese the man who is older than father or mother is called "伯伯", and the man younger "叔叔" In China this phenomenon is very popular. By using kin terms in

social communication, intimate and harmonious feelings are created between people and good communicative effects are achieved. According to the concrete use, fictive kin terms can be divided into two categories. One is the kinship terms indicating real generation differentiations, while the other is not.

“铁哥们” refers to close male friends, members of the non-kinship friends, colleagues and other brotherhood to show intimacy and friendliness. According to the gender and age, one can address other non-relatives as “grandpa” “grandma” “uncle” “aunt” “aunt” “uncle” “aunt” “eldest brother” “big sister”. Sometimes with “family name”, such as “Uncle Zhang” and “Aunt Wang”. Sometimes with given name or full name, such as “Uncle Lei Feng”, “Sister Chunling”.

However, there are few imitated relative address in English, including father, uncle, aunt, sister and son. Uncle and aunt are used to address the close friends of one’s parents, and often used in conjunction with the name. Such as Uncle John, Aunt Maria. Father and sister are more often used in the Catholic Church or other religious groups. Such as “Father Smith”, “Sister Blank” etc.. The elderly uses son to show intimate, without the slightest insult. But in Chinese, being called “son” is absolutely unacceptable and a great insult. Western people address their friends and colleagues with communicative appellations such as Mr., Mrs., Miss. This differs greatly from Chinese language and custom.

Chinese imitated kinship address is a kind of social relation to relatives, a product of the blood as the link of the patriarchal family, reflects the collective ideology which puts emphasis on family relations since ancient times. Family is more important than everything, blood is thicker than water. So people tend to extend this relationship to a non-relatives. Through this kind of address of relatives, they will be incorporated into each other to their relatives circle, so that they generate a sense of belonging, thus shortening the distance of each other and deepening the emotion. The bigger the family circle, the greater the power of the collectivism.

Hofstede said that Culture is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one category of people from another (Hofstede, 1991). Chinese culture and English culture display sharp contrasts in many aspects. Chinese cultural orientation is the idea of Confucianism and clanism. However, English cultural orientation is the concept of individualism and equality. Westerners believe in individualism, which is the most basic cultural features. Individualism emphasizes individuality, personal value, pays attention to individual innovative spirit. They do not seek feeling of attachment and belonging like Chinese, so the generalization of kinship terms are fewer, and more are used in religious groups, for only the Christians will be brothers and sisters in the western society. And in the family, they use their names instead of salutation.

Christians believe that all are children of god, there is a relationship of “spirit”, and this kind of relationship is more sacred than “blood” or “family”.

### 3. THE HONORIFIC ADDRESSING AND SELF-ABASING ADDRESSING

There are two aspects in Chinese polite terms which are closed linked to each other, the honorific addressing and self-abasing addressing. Chinese people are famous for their courtesy in the world. Courtesy is required in any situation. People should employ proper addressing terms to match different situation and different person. Generally speaking, the juniors should respect the seniors, the seniors should love the juniors. People should show their modesty by behaving and speaking politely in public. Austin (1970) claims that all utterances are “performative” in the sense of constituting a form of action, rather than simply a matter of saying something about the word. Austin describes the social function of speech as follows:

Beside the question that has been very much studied in the past as to what a certain utterance means, there is a further question distinct from this as to what was the force, as we call it, of the utterance. We may be quite clear what ‘shut the door’ means, but not get at all clear on the further point as to whether as uttered at a certain time it was an order, an entreaty or what not. What we need besides the old doctrine about meaning is a new doctrine about all the possible forces of utterances, towards the discovery of which our proposed list of explicit performative verbs would be a very great help. (Austin, 1970)

According to Austin, speech act is divided into three parts, the locutionary act, which refers to the speaker to express literal meaning; illocutionary act, which refers to the literal meaning of the speaker by the true expression of intent; perlocutionary act refers to the results of the speaker brought by verbal expression. Such illocutionary acts are also reflected in respectful salutation and modest salutation.

There is complex honorific term in Chinese language. Honorific terms are the terms used to show one’s respect to the addressees. The difference of power and social positions between interlocutors is of great importance in communication. The honorific terms are often used to express addresser’s attitude of respect toward the addressee by employing such terms as “足下” “阁下” or plus some Chinese characters such as “尊” “贤” “仁” “令” “大” “贵” “高” “华” before the formal addressing terms. For example, “尊夫人” “贤妻” “仁兄” “令郎” “大人” “贵公子” “高亲” “华居”

Self-abasing terms are the terms used to express the modest attitude of addressers. There are several kinds of such terms in Chinese language. For exam “I” can be addressed as “鄙人” “晚生” “下官” “小人” “愚兄”, his father or mother should be addressed as “家父” “家母”, his wife should be addressed as “内人” “贱内” “拙荆”, his child should be addressed as “犬子” “小儿” “小女”.

These self-abasing words are used when referring to the speaker's parents, wife or child.

There are no such English expressions as respectful and the modest salutation in English. The English use "Excellency/Respected" to show their respect to such people with high official identity and status as the President, Prime Minister, the secretary and ambassador. "Your Excellency/Respected" is used when facing them. "His/Her Excellency/Respected" is used when they are not present. The king or queen with "Your Majesty King/Queen"; for Prince, Princess with "Your Highness Prince/Princess"; for the crown prince and the royal family members "Your Royal Highness Prince / Princess".

These differences in salutation are determined by the different values. The core of the Chinese culture is clanism (a literally translated term from Chinese equivalent). It is the realization of the Lunli doctrine in Chinese families and societies. In China's feudal society, clan had been an economic as well as political institution. It was made up of several or many related extended families.

In China, thousands of years of feudal autocratic monarchy and the ritual of Confucian order have been dominant in interpersonal interactions, thus forming a kind of custom, using respectful salutation to praise others and modesty salutation to deliberately belittle oneself. While there is no such modesty salutation in English at all.

Gu (1990) put forward the five politeness norms of Chinese culture according to the origin of Chinese culture, the most important is the "derogatory self respect" and guidelines, when referring to themselves or their related person or thing, they "derogatory" to be "modest"; when referring to the listener or the person or thing, they praise to "lift" to "respect." This "derogatory oneself and respect others" guideline is a politeness phenomenon rich in

Chinese characteristics, reflected by various respectful salutation and modesty salutations in China.

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## CONCLUSION

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With China's increasingly close communication with the world, an increasing number of foreign exchanges, the English language is placed in a more important position. To get along with people, we need to understand their way of thinking, acting and their cultural rules in communications. Salutation is the most widely and frequently used word in the language communication and is the very first step to speak. Language is a mirror of the society, which has such close relation to culture that it truly reflects all aspects of the society. As an indispensable unit of language, address forms just like the barometer which can measure people's thoughts, and relationship. Understanding the different cultures behind the different salutations can avoid many of the culture shock phenomena in cross-cultural communication and make the communication smoothly.

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