A Glimpse of Cultural Differences through Address Terms in Chinese and English

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ABSTRACT. Culture exerts great influence on language, and language reflects essential characteristics of culture in turn. Address terms, as an inseparable component of language and the forthgoer in language communication, reveal cultural traits. Address terms in Chinese and English, which display striking dissimilarities, breed respectively in Chinese and Western cultures. A comparative study between address terms in Chinese and English is conducted in this paper, and the root cause of addressing dissimilarities—differences between Chinese and Western cultures is explored accordingly.

KEYWORDS: address terms, cultural differences, Chinese, English

1. Introduction

The behavior of addressing is common and indispensable in social communication. Research on address terms, the signal of verbal communication, has been conducted by scholars from China and Western society in different languages respectively. Chinese scholars such as Zhao Yuanren (1956) believe that the choice of address terms is governed by various social factors based on their study of Chinese address terms in aspect of classification, usages and meanings, and addressing rules, etc. Roger Brown and Marguerite Ford (1964) put forward a model of reciprocal and nonreciprocal patterns, and suggest two major measures that direct the choice of address terms: power and solidarity.

In intercultural communication between China and Western society, people may address their counterparts from the other cultural background improperly due to different addressing customs. Since English is the most commonly used language in Western society, the distinctions of address terms between Chinese and English, and the differences between Chinese and Western cultures behind such distinctions are worth exploring. Through a comparative study, this paper focuses on addressing differences between Chinese and English in an attempt to probe into the root cause —cultural differences between China and Western society, thus providing some

suggestions on intercultural communication.

1.1 Function of address terms

Addressing specifies the roles of the speakers in communication. "When people use language, they do more than just try to get another person to understand the speaker's thoughts and feelings. At the same time, both people are using language in subtle ways to define their relationship to each other, to identify themselves as part of a social group, and to establish the kind of speech event they are in." (Fasold, 2000:1) Address terms are used by people to designate the person or a group of persons they are talking to or referring to as a means of initiating conversation, although their function is not limited to that. Most verbal communications start with designating the addressee for further communication.

1.2 Links between address terms and culture

In terms of intercultural communication, culture can be defined as the shared patterns of behaviors and interactions, cognitive constructs, and affective understanding. These shared patterns identify the members of a cultural group, and at the same time, distinguish them from those of another group.

Language reflects the most fundamental characteristics of culture. "The culture of a people finds reflection in the language they employ: because they value certain things and do them in a certain way, they come to use their language in ways that reflect what they value and what they do." (Wardhaugh, 2000: 216)

Addressing is a universal feature of human communication. When addressing others, people are trying to indicate, establish, or maintain relationships with each other. The choice of address terms is determined by social norms, and such social norms vary from culture to culture. In intercultural communication, address terms reflect different cultural values.

2. Comparisons between address terms in Chinese and English

Generally speaking, the address system in Chinese is far more complicated than that in English. Chinese address terms are abounding, strict, elaborate, and precise, while English address terms are often regarded as meager in quantity, general in reference and fuzzy in meaning.

In both Chinese and English, address terms can be classified into two categories: kinship terms and social address terms. The latter can be further categorized to names, titles, pronouns, zero address terms, etc., which still can be further assorted. In order to study the cultural differences, this paper focuses on the different usages of address terms in Chinese and English.

2.1 Kinship terms

Kinship system refers to the blood and marriage relationships which distinguish different categories of kin, designate rights and obligations, and serve as the basis for the formation of kin groups. (Ferraro, 1995:179) Kinship terminology in Chinese and English exhibits remarkable differences.

In Chinese, intricate distinctions are made on generation, consanguinity, affinity, age, and gender (including paternal/maternal side, brother/sister's side, son/daughter's side, etc.). The most important distinctions lie in gender and age differentiation, indicating differences between paternal and maternal relationships, as well as the elders and youngsters. Patrilineal descent is in a dominant position, while maternal line is comparatively inferior. Relatives by the maternal side are often denoted by Chinese characters such as Wai，Biao, both meaning "of another family", which indicate a more distant relationship than from the paternal side. Positions in the family hierarchy are also highlighted. The senior are highly respected, and the junior must address them in accordance with the set rules.

English kinship terminology is general and simple in comparison. Unlike Chinese, Paternal/maternal line is not an influencing factor. Age is not a criterion in addressing, either. A term may be applied for several relatives regardless of age.

In Chinese, almost every relative owns his or her unique address term, while most kinship terms in English are generalized to be suitable for many relatives. In China, people use such terms as "Yima, Guma, Shenshen, Jiuma, Bomu" etc. to address female relatives of mother's generation distinguishing paternal/maternal side and their seniorities, while in English all of them are represented by one word: aunt. The English address term "cousin" refers to the child of one's uncle or aunt without distinguishing gender and age, while in China, one may separately refer to the male child of uncle (father's brother), the female child, the male child of uncle (mother's brother) or aunt (both mother's sister and father's sister), and the female child, distinguishing both gender and age.

2.2 Names

Differences between Chinese and English names as address terms mainly lie in the use of family names. In Chinese, family names seldom appear independently in addressing, but can be prefixed by "Xiao" (young) or "Lao" (old), as in "Xiao Zhang", "Lao Wang" ("Zhang" and "Wang" are common family names.). Such usages are common among compeers and by superiors addressing their subordinates to enhance good-fellowship. "Lao" can also be affixed to people's family name to show high esteem, as in "Zhang Lao". However, "Lao" is not confined to referring to the aged, for in Chinese it implies seniority, thus indicating respect for the addressee. While in English, the word "Old" is, on many occasions, a synonym of "useless" or "weak". Family names as address terms are put behind general appellations, such as "Mr. Smith", "Mrs. Green", or sometimes appear independently, as "Smith", "Green".

3. Cultural differences between China and Western Society

3.1 Origin and nature of the two Cultures

Traditional Chinese culture originates on the fertile land of the middle and lower reaches of Yellow River, and for thousands of years it has been developing and thriving on the basis of agriculture. Such an agrarian culture is by nature a culture of stability, emphasizing the "constant being" with a lifestyle attaching to the native land and self-sufficient economy. This contributes to the formation of a culture characterized by isolation and introversion with a collective mode of production.

If ancient Chinese culture involves a top-down moralization, then Western culture is extroversive in essence, and more of a spontaneous outburst of man self with an emphasis on subjective sense. Traced back to ancient Greece, the ancient Greek civilization, or Aegean civilization, the origin and source of contemporary Western culture, is in nature a form of marine and commercial civilization characterized by the spirit of enterprise and adventurousness. An individual mode of production is in dominant position, and the sense of independence prevails. Under such circumstances, interpersonal relationship stresses impersonal respect. Furthermore, the rights of man are highly advocated. Generally speaking, addressing in English shows a more objective attitude. For example, a Chinese may call his or her elder brother "Da Ge" (elder brother), a colleague "Zhang Jie" ("Jie" means "elder sister"), while in English people may simply call by given names or family names, such as "Tony" and "Mrs. Brown".

3.2 Family structure and social hierarchical system

Chinese address terms show more patriarchy clan elements, while English terms exemplify more of humanistic and scientific notions.

Chinese people use complicated kinship terms to conform to the strictly stratified social system—the patriarchy clan system of the feudal society. Feudality dominated Chinese society for thousands of years, resulting in the principal position of patriarchal clan structure and the high value of consanguinity. On the basis of such an intricate relationship network, a rigid ranking system is established, where males are held superior to females, and kinship is determined by the patrilineal consanguineous ties. In the feudal system, a male addresses his wife in front of a third party using strongly depreciatory terms. The male or father has absolute power over the other family members. In a large extended family, old men typically wield great power as the heads. Consequently, the addressing of the aged in Chinese is most respectful. "Lao" (meaning "old") is commonly used to show respect or closeness.

Things are quite different in Western society. Many families adopt the nuclear structure. The tie between one nuclear family and another is loose, and the status of paternal and maternal line is equal. When addressing family members, there are only some highly generalized terms such as "uncle" or "aunt". The differences between

paternal and maternal side are quite limited, for both sides are outside the nuclear family, thus deserving no effort to distinguish. In English, one will not address another as "Old Brown" in social communication, for it is considered an offense or even insult to describe a person with the term "old".

3.3 Ethical conception

Chinese Confucian ethical codes and Western belief in freedom and democracy result in varied rules that breed the two different addressing systems.

Under long period of the edification by Confucianism, China has forged a unique set of ethical codes and weaved it into the addressing system. The core of Confucianism is the rectification of names. "When terms are not properly defined, then words will not have consistent meaning. When words do not have consistent meaning, then affairs will not be accomplished." (The Analects of Confucius, Chapter 13) "Let the ruler be ruler, the minister minister, the father father and the son son" (The Analects of Confucius, Chapter 12) According to such set of rules, all citizens are required to act with a pre-established pattern of behaviors. The ruler gets the privilege and saves the labor to rule, while his subjects get the obligation to be ruled. Furthermore, the three cardinal guides (ruler guides subject, father guides son and husband guides wife) and the five constant virtues (benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and fidelity), the three obediences (obey her father before marriage, her husband when married, and her sons in widowhood) and the four virtues (morality, proper speech, modest manner and diligent work) demonstrate in detail every aspect of feudal ethical codes, resulting in the complexity of addressing rules. The typical example is the rigid differentiation in addressing male and female, the senior and the junior, the superior and the subordinate (generally speaking, dignifying the former while degrading the latter), no matter among family members or in social communication.

Comparatively, human rights and equality are the basics of Western ethical conception. During the early 14th to the late 16th century, the Renaissance swept the European Continent. The old feudal ranking system was overthrown, while humanistic spirit was advocated. The idea that "human rights are endowed by heaven" was propagated. Then the French Revolution in the 18th century put forward the slogan of freedom and equality. "All men are created equal" and "all men will be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness" as in the American Constitution and the Declaration of Independence was the shared belief. Furthermore, the Industrial Revolution in the latter half of the 18th century highly urbanized Western society. Diversity and the spirit of freedom burgeoned, as people came from various places to work together in cities, bringing with them their own traditions, lifestyles, and views of value. Consequently, English address system is simpler, as the addressing of others is much less confined by age, gender, or status etc. One can even call the elder generation directly by the given name; women are not specially addressed as inferior; and intentional enhancement of superiors or self-depreciation may cause antipathy and contempt.

3.4 Cultural value orientation

Chinese wholism and Western individualism serve respectively as the important subconscious guideline on addressing in Chinese and English.

The emphasis on the whole and the disregard of the self, or wholism, is the basic orientation of traditional Chinese cultural values. The ancient philosophical concept of harmony between heaven and human holds that man is part of nature and humanity represents the order of the universe, while Confucianism and patriarchal clan system further consolidates such thinking. Various human relations place an individual as a node in the intricate relationship network, a dependent, tiny component that left little room for the self. Sometimes an individual needs to follow the general trend for a sense of belonging. The value of an individual is realized by the realization of the interest of the group. The purpose of a complicated and precise address system is therefore to locate for every individual a suitable position that can be accepted not only by him/herself, but by all the members in society.

The advocacy of the self is at the core of Western cultural values. Individualistic values put the individuals above the society, and social values are individual-centered. The full development of the individual is considered to be beneficial to the well-being of the whole society. Such philosophy makes it unnecessary to take the trouble to design a complicated addressing system, and a few general address terms suffice in English.

4. Conclusion

On the usage of address terms, there are great dissimilarities between Chinese and English. These differences are with all the earmarks of their respective cultures.

Culture proceeds with the age, so do address terms. Some traditional values in the two cultures have weakened in modern society, and many usages (especially in Chinese), are now regarded as outmoded. Nevertheless, cultural accumulation over long period of time cannot be eliminated easily. Moreover, although the two cultures have, to some extent, mixed and integrated, their divergence is still enormous. In intercultural communication between China and Western society, attention should be drawn to differences such as in addressing for successful mutual understanding.

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