



Different Communication Rules between the English and Chinese Greetings

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Abstract

Communication is rule governed; so are greetings which serve as a polite way of communication. The rules vary depending on the cultural context or the cultural context helps to define the rules and so communication rules are culturally diverse. It is important for foreign language learners to learn that communication rules are both culturally and contextually bound to achieve effective and efficient communication.

Keywords: Greeting, Politeness maxim, Communication rule

Politeness has been a focus of interest in pragmatics for decades. A considerable amount of literature has been accumulating and there seems no sign of receding interest.

Greetings as a significant aspect of politeness phenomenon exist globally. As Brown and Levinson (1978) claim, greetings occur in all languages. They provide the means for opening conversations appropriately and for establishing and maintaining social relationships (Goffman, 1971). For example, such greetings as 'Hello!', 'How are you!', 'I am pleased to meet you.' frequently occur in English. Chinese on the other hand are quite used to greetings like 'Have you eaten?', 'Where are you going?' or 'What are you busy with?', etc. Obviously, people in English culture as well as in Chinese culture attach great importance to 'speaking politely'. Yet some people in English culture may find Chinese greetings unacceptable or even offensive for these greetings seem to be concerned about personal matters although they are quite appropriate and friendly in Chinese culture. Another example is that a Chinese can greet a longtime departed friend: 'You still remain the same and do not look older than before'. This will surely offend a native speaker of English by implicating that he/she is lack of change or should have been very old.

The above examples reflect the differing communication rules between the two cultures.

Communication rule, according to Samovar and Porter (1991:232), is 'a principle or regulation that governs conduct and procedure. In communication, rules act as a system of expected behavior patterns that organize interaction between individuals'. Communication rules include both verbal and nonverbal components. Hymes (1972) uses 'rules of speaking' (the patterns of sociolinguistic behavior of the target language) for verbal communication. Nessa Wolfson points out the characteristics of communication rules: communication is rule governed; the rules vary depending on the context or the context helps to define the rules and so rules are culturally diverse (quoted in Bi jiwang, 1999:347). It is important to remember that communication rules are both culturally and contextually bound. What is most difficult in intercultural communication is that communication rules are not only cultural specific but also largely unconscious. What is worse is that people may transfer the rules of their own culture to the intercultural context which may cause misunderstandings on both sides (Samovar et al., 1991:233). Some scholars claim that Leech's Politeness Principle cannot govern the communicative acts of all cultures including Chinese culture.

As far as Chinese politeness is concerned, Gu's two papers, one in English and the other in Chinese prove to be most cited both at home and abroad. He argues against Brown and Levinson's face approach. Based on modern Chinese data, he modifies some of Leech's assumptions and puts forward some maxims that are claimed to be unique features of Chinese politeness. For the sake of clarity, it is necessary to recapture these scholars' main findings here in order to make a comparison of these theories.

1. Leech's Politeness Principle in English Culture

Leech's view of politeness involves a set of politeness maxims. Among these are (Leech, 1983: 132):

Tact maxim: minimize cost to other, maximize benefit to other.

Generosity maxim: minimize benefit to self, maximize cost to self.

Approbation maxim: minimize dispraise of other, maximize praise of other.

Modesty maxim: minimize praise of self, maximize dispraise of self.

Obviously, 'modesty' is emphasized in English culture. We may find that in Chinese culture, modesty is even more important. The core of Chinese politeness is shown by denigrating self and respecting other. However, the cultural connotations of Chinese 'modesty' are different from that of Leech's 'modesty' in his 'Modesty Maxim' in many ways: Chinese is to put down self and to build up other whereas 'modesty' in the PP is avoiding self-praise; Chinese 'modesty' is a core of Chinese politeness while the 'Modesty Maxim' is not so important as the other maxims of Leech's PP; Chinese 'modesty' is a virtue of self-cultivation that is the foundation on which politeness is built whereas English modesty is a strategy of minimizing praise of self. That is why it tends to be hard for native speakers of English to understand many negative expressions in Chinese which are expressed out of modesty. For example, Chinese may respond to an English greeting 'You look so pretty today!' as 'No, I'm not pretty at all.' or to 'You speak English quite well!' as 'No, my English is poor.' In fact these comments are clear indications of sincere feelings of self-denigration in accordance with Chinese modesty.

For example, greetings in English such as 'A nice day, isn't it?', 'How do you do?' are used to maintain the hearer's positive face. In another English greeting 'Excuse me. Are you Professor Jones?', the expression 'excuse me' can be considered to be a greeting expression directed towards the hearer's negative face, i.e., the want to be free from intrusion. Similarly, 'How are you!' and 'Good morning!' as greeting expressions in Chinese seem to be directed towards the hearer's positive face. Another Chinese greeting 'Excuse me. What is your noble name?' is a greeting expression directed towards the hearer's negative face for ' ' here is used by the speaker as an apology for the interruption of the hearer. However, unlike Brown and Levinson's theory of avoiding FTAs (avoiding intrusion on individual freedom), Chinese also attach great importance to mutual care, which is equally important as modesty. Chinese often greet others 'Have you eaten?' or 'What are you doing?' or 'Where are you going?' to show concern for others' welfare and at the same time maintain the hearer's positive face. So Chinese politeness has its own characteristics. Thus Gu's studies concerning politeness will be examined next.

2. Brown and Levinson's Face Theory

Within their everyday social interactions, people generally behave as if their expectations concerning their public self-image, or their face wants will be respected. Brown and Levinson (1978) analyze politeness as showing awareness of the need to preserve face(public self-image). The general idea of Brown and Levinson's model of politeness is to understand various strategies for interactional behavior to achieve satisfaction of certain wants. The wants related to politeness are the wants of face, 'something that is emotionally invested, and that can be lost, maintained, and enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction (Brown and Levinson, 1978:66)'. The concept is directly related to the folk-expression 'lose face', which is about being embarrassed or humiliated. If a speaker says something that represents a threat to another individual's expectations, it is described as a Face Threatening Act. Alternatively, given the possibilities that some action might be interpreted as a threat to another's face, the speaker can say something to lessen the possible threat. This is called a Face Saving Act. It is generally expected that each participant involved in interactions will attempt to respect the face wants of others and there are different ways of performing face saving acts. When we attempt to save another's face, we pay attention to their negative face wants or their positive face wants.

According to Brown and Levinson (1978), there are two aspects of face. One is 'negative face', or the right to territories, freedom of action and freedom from imposition; essentially the want that your actions are not impeded by others. The other is 'positive face', the positive consistent self-image that people have and want to be appreciated and approved of by at least some other people. In simple terms, negative face is the need to be independent and positive face is the need to be connected.

So, a face saving act which is oriented to the person's negative face will tend to show deference, emphasize the importance of the other's time or concerns, and even include an apology for the imposition or interruption. This is also called negative politeness. A face saving act which is concerned with the person's positive face will tend to show solidarity, emphasize that both speakers want the same thing, and that they have a common goal. This is also called positive politeness (Yule, 2000:61-62).

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individual freedom), Chinese also attach great importance to mutual care, which is equally important as modesty. Chinese often greet others ‘Have you eaten?’ or ‘What are you doing?’ or ‘Where are you going?’ to show concern for others’ welfare and at the same time maintain the hearer’s positive face. So Chinese politeness has its own characteristics. Thus Gu’s studies concerning politeness will be examined next.

3. Gu’s Theory in Chinese Culture

According to Gu Yueguo (1990), there are basically four notions underlying the Chinese concept of politeness: respect for other (respectfulness), denigration of self (modesty), warmth toward other (attitudinal warmth) and refinement in language use. Respect for other is self’s positive appreciation or admiration of other concerning the latter’s face, social status, and so on. Denigration of self is self’s way of showing modesty. Warmth toward other is self’s demonstration of kindness, consideration, and hospitality to other. Refinement in language use refers to self’s behavior to other which meets certain standards (Gu Yueguo, 1990: 239). On the basis of these four essential notions, Gu (1994) has formulated five politeness maxims, namely the self-denigration maxim, the address maxim, the refinement maxim, the agreement maxim, and the virtues-words-deeds maxim. Here the author will concentrate on two of them, i.e. the self-denigration maxim and the address maxim.

The self-denigration maxim consists of two clauses or submaxims: (a) denigrate self, and (b) elevate other. This maxim absorbs the notions of respectfulness and modesty.

As mentioned above, some negative responses like ‘No. I’m not pretty at all.’ and ‘My English is poor.’ are expressed out of modesty instead of being insincere or even hypocritical in the opinion of native speakers of English.

The address term maxim requires that one should address his/her interlocutor with an appropriate address term. This maxim is based on the notions of respectfulness and warmth toward other. This can be reflected through Chinese greeting expressions, such as ‘Professor Wang, where are you going?’ or ‘Aunt Lee, what are you busy with?’. These greetings express the speaker’s respect and care towards the hearer in Chinese culture yet may sound impolite in English culture.

The above discussion indicates that intercultural communication is rule governed. The essence lies in the cultural difference between these linguistic routines of politeness such as greetings. In this world with a diversity of cultures, no culture may necessarily be better or worse than another. By the same token, no culture may necessarily be superior or inferior to another. Yet there are real differences between groups and cultures. It can be learned to perceive those differences, appreciate them, and above of all to respect, value and prize the personhood of every human being, and meanwhile achieve successful communication.

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