



A Cross-cultural Study of Daily Communication between Chinese and American -- From the Perspective of High Context and Low Context

Jianeng Wang

Foreign Languages College, Zhejiang Gongshang University, Hangzhou 310018, China

E-mail: jianeng101@163.com

Abstract

In cross-cultural communication, ignorance of contexts usually leads to misunderstanding and conflicts. Based on Edward. T. Hall's notion of high-context and low-context, this paper aims to generalize the basic distinctive characteristics of the two contexts by analyzing the actual cases in daily communication between American and Chinese. This paper also tries to conclude some tips for communication crossing the two contexts in accordance with the case analysis.

Keywords: High-context, Low-context, Communicatio, Culture

1. About Hall's high-context and low-context

Context is important in all communication, but it is relatively more important in some situations than in others. There are also significant differences across cultures in the ways and the extent to which people communicate through context. One of the main distinctions between cultures has been the notion of high and low context cultures, proposed by the American anthropologies Edward. T. Hall in his 1976 classic, *Beyond Culture* (Hall, 2000).

1.1 What is high/low-context?

Edward T. Hall has described cultural differences in the use of language and context in communication. He calls communication that occurs mostly through language **low context** and communication that occurs in ways other than through languages as **high context**.

A high-context (HC) communication or message is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. A low-context (LC) communication is just the opposite; i.e., the mass of information is vested in the explicit code.

Any transaction can be characterized as high, low or middle context. HC transactions feature preprogrammed information that is in the receiver and in the setting, with only minimal information in the transmitted message. LC transactions are the reverse. Most of the information must be in the transmitted message in order to make up for what is missing in the context.

Although no culture exists exclusively at one end of the scale, some are high while others are low. American culture, while not on the bottom, is toward the lower end of the scale. And Chinese culture, while not on the top, is toward the higher start point of the scale.

1.2 Distinctive characteristics between high-context and low context

Hall observed that "meaning and context are inextricably bound up with each other" (Hall, 2000, p. 36), and suggested that to understand communication one should look at meaning and context together with the code (i.e., the words themselves). By context, we refer to the situation, background, or environment connected to an event, a situation, or an individual. When communication is HC, it is not only the non-verbal and para-verbal communication that comes into play. HC communication draws on physical aspects as well as the time and situation in which the communication takes place, not to mention the relationship between the interlocutors. The closer the relationship, the more HC the communication tends to be, drawing on the shared knowledge of the communicating parties.

By using scales meant to conceptualize the difference between High-and Low-Context communications, Gudykunst et al. (1996) identified HC communication to be indirect, ambiguous, maintaining of harmony, reserved and understated. In contrast, LC communication was identified as direct, precise, dramatic, open, and based on feelings or true intentions.

Thus basic distinctive characteristics within the two contexts can be generalized into the way by which people express the meaning and think as well as the media through which people communicate i.e. **directness or indirectness; liner or circular; verbal or nonverbal**.

Detailed analysis about these three distinctive characteristics will be given in the following part, using the actual cases in daily communication between Chinese and America, to illustrate the importance of recognizing the differences of context in cross-cultural communication.

2. Cases analysis based on Hall's views

A. directness vs. indirectness

Hall adds that those who use LC communication style are "expected to communicate in ways that are consistent with their feelings," whereas a person from a HC culture will set the context and the setting and let the message evolve without referring to the problem directly. In the event of a conflict arising, HC cultures tend to use indirect, non-confrontational, and vague language, relying on the listener's or reader's ability to grasp the meaning from the context. LC cultures tend to use a more direct, confrontational, and explicit approach to ensure that the listener receives the message exactly as it was sent. The following dialog is a typical communicating failure happening between people from the two contexts.

Case 1

Mr. Jones: It looks like we're going to have to keep the production line running on Saturday.

Mr. Wu: I see.

Mr. Jones: **Can you come in on Saturday?**

Mr. Wu: **Yes.** I think so. (with a hesitant tone)

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

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

Mr. Jones: How 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.

Analysis and Discussion:

One of the problems in this case study is that Mr. Jones is being direct in his question while Mr. Wu is being indirect in his refusal. Firstly, a Chinese people will choose to ask indirectly as a kind of suppose: "you don't have any arrangement in Saturday?" instead of asking: "Can you come in on Saturday?" since Saturday is not a work day and ask someone directly makes it as a kind of force. Mr. Li on the other hand wants to refuse the requirement at the very beginning, and supposes his boss just offers a kind of euphemistic requirement. And to a Chinese, he will never refuse a boss's requirement directly. So when the boss asks whether he can come on Saturday, Mr. Li haven't answered no directly. Considering the "face" of the boss, Mr. Li tells him Saturday is the birthday of his son as a hint of refusing. However, as one comes from a low-context culture who expresses meaning in a direct way doesn't catch Mr. Li's indication. That's reason why the communication fails eventually.

B. liner vs. circular

Thought pattern is another distinctive characteristic within the two contexts. LC cultures tend to emphasize logic and rationality, based on the belief that there is always an objective truth that can be reached through linear processes of discovery. HC cultures, on the other hand, believe that truth will manifest itself through non-linear discovery processes and without having to employ rationality. In conversations, people in LC cultures will shift from information already stated to information about to be given, while HC communication will jump back and forth and leave out detail, assuming this to be implicit between the two interlocutors. Also case analysis will be given in the following part to exemplify the two thought patterns. The following case would be a good example to illustrate how the two contexts distinguish each other on the aspect of thought patterns.

Case 2

George Hall was attending a trade fair and looking for an opportunity to do business in China. He had been very successful in US and prided himself on his ability "to get things moving". Finally he approached Mr. Li's company which he thought would be most responsive to his products. Since he had read that Chinese find getting down to business immediately too abrupt and rude, he began a casual conversation, eventually leading up to the topic of his products and suggesting how Mr. Li's company might benefit from using them. George then suggested that he could

arrange to get together with Mr. Li and provide more specifics and documentation on his products.

Mr. Li responded in fairly good English, **“That would be interesting.”**

Knowing that he had only a few days left in Beijing, George wanted to nail down a time. “When can we **meet**?”

“Ah. This week is very busy,” replied Mr. Li.

“It sure is,” said George, “How about 10 o’clock? Meet you here.”

“Tomorrow at 10 o’clock?” asked Mr. Li thoughtfully.

“Right,” said George, “I’ll see you then?”

“Hmm, yes; why don’t you come by tomorrow,” was the reply.

“OK,” responded George, “It was nice meeting you.”

The next day at 10 o’clock he approached Mr. Li’s company’s exhibit only to find that Mr. Li had some important business and was not able to meet with George. He called back later in the day and was told that Mr. Li was not available.

Analysis and Discussion:

In this case, besides the difference of directness and indirectness, the failure also results from people’s pattern of thought from the two different contexts. George Hall, coming from a culture of low-context has set his purpose at the very beginning of their communication. Thus all the words he used to convey his meaning goes to the object directly, and in his context, the purpose of communication or what the two talking about is involved in the situation that they may have a cooperation in the future. So when hearing: “That would be interesting.” “Why don’t you come by tomorrow.” He takes it as an indication of allowance. However, for Mr. Li, who comes from a low-context, he didn’t take their talking seriously. For him one time communication doesn’t mean they will have a future cooperation. And he supposes George will not take his words directly when he uses a indirect refusing way.

C. verbal vs. nonverbal

HC communication was identified by Hall as involving "more of the information in the physical context or internalized in the person" (Hall, 1976, p. 79); greater confidence is placed in the non-verbal aspects of communication than the verbal aspects. Communication in LC cultures was identified by Hall as "just the opposite [of HC communication]; i.e. the mass of information is vested in the explicit code" (Hall, 1976, p. 79).

Face-to-face communication in HC cultures is thus characterized by an extensive use of non-verbal strategies for conveying meanings. These strategies usually take the shape of behavioral language, such as gestures, body language, silence, proximity and symbolic behavior, while conversation in LC cultures tends to be less physically animated, with the meaning depending on content and the spoken word.

Case 3

Li Hong is a Chinese student who studies in America. Before she went to America, she had never lived apart with her parents. Although Li Hong and her mates went well in study and daily life, there is still a thing that made her mates uncomfortable, that is, Li Hong seldom did cleaning of the room and never made up her own desk. Her roommates gave Li Hong some lighthearted reminders such as joking about how they hated cleaning, but this didn’t produce any positive results. So the American roommates decided to discuss the problem directly.

One evening in the room, one of her roommate asked: “we don’t know whether it is the same situation in China that one needs to take the responsibility of cleaning the room on turn, but in America we do. It is really a problem troubling us, so can we have a talk?”

Li Hong was silent and stared at the table.

Her mate tried again: “we hope you would spend time in cleaning the room, if you are business the day and have no time to do it, it will be ok, but just do it when you are not involved in some immediate situation.”

Li Hong didn’t say anything. She didn’t look at her roommates and just stared at the table, with face turning into pale.

Her mates tried again. “We’re not angry, just confused, tell us what you’re thinking. We want to understand your point of view.”

More silence.

Finally the roommates couldn’t tolerate Li Hong’s silence any longer. They became angry and one of them said: “you know, in this culture it’s very rude to stay silent when someone is trying very hard to resolve a misunderstanding.”

Analysis and Discussion:

In this case, those American roommates finally annoy of Li Hong’s silence, since Americans rely on talk to make an

agreement and resolve a conflict, while Chinese use indirect and silence to pass their feelings. Actually, Li Hong is also angry when her mates continuously ask her questions about the same subject which embarrasses her most. But Chinese people tend to keep silent, using nonverbal codes to impart their feelings. And American goes the opposite. For them meaning is conveyed through language not by guessing from others' performance or the circumstance they are in.

3. Tips for communication between high-context and low-context

As cross-cultural communicators, having the awareness of high-context and low context with different cultures especially the differences within the two, can help to lessen and even prevent conflicts, and make the communication smoother and easier.

Generally, low-context communicators interacting with high-context communicators should be mindful that

- (1) nonverbal messages and gestures may be as important as what is said;
- (2) status and identity may be communicated nonverbally and require appropriate acknowledgement;
- (3) face-saving and tact may be important, and need to be balanced with the desire to communicate fully and frankly;
- (4) building a good relationship can contribute to effectiveness over time; and
- (5) indirect routes and creative thinking are important alternatives to problem-solving when blocks are encountered.

High-context communicators interacting with low-context communicators should be mindful that

- (1) things can be taken at face value rather than as representative of layers of meaning;
- (2) roles and functions may be decoupled from status and identity;
- (3) efficiency and effectiveness may be served by a sustained focus on tasks;
- (4) direct questions and observations are not necessarily meant to offend, but to clarify and advance shared goals; and
- (5) indirect cues may not be enough to get the other's attention.

Conclusion

Although this paper mainly deals with the cases of communication between American and Chinese, Hall's distinction of high and low context, as elaborated in his work, can be identified through almost all the countries with typical cultures. Since context plays really an important role in the cross-cultural communication, a well understanding of the differences within contexts is quite necessary. And knowing the distinctive characteristics between the two contexts, then generalizing guidance for communication would also be quite beneficial.

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