

Original Paper

Analysis on Cultural Differences in International
Communication—Taking Cultural Differences between Chinese
and American as Examples

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Abstract

This paper is written to analyze the underlying reason for the barriers, misunderstandings, or conflicts that might happen in the context of international communication: that is culture and cultural differences. Around the core of this paper, the definition, categories, and characteristics of culture have been explored, and then an example of cultural differences has been given. In the case, two different cultures between American and Chinese were compared. This kind of analysis is aiming to deal with some of the potential problems in international communication.

Keywords

culture, cultural differences, comparison, international communication

1. Introduction

With the coming of 21st century, human beings have already stepped into the information era. Advanced technology in various fields, especially in transportation, communication and Internet are rapidly changing the life in every second. Technology helps people to remove some of the physical barriers against international communication which once troubled people a lot in ancient times. Thanks to the advancement in science and technology, it seems that one should be more optimistic and confident in conducting a good job in communication among different people around the world. However, maybe people should think twice to decide whether it is the truth. Because culture is the very thing people should not forget. One may be perplexed at first sight of the word “culture”. However, it is necessary for everyone to admit that culture is an inevitable element in communication. Cultures, or it can be called, cultural differences, are playing important underlying role in communication from the

day a person starts off from his motherland. The more opportunities one gets to interact with people from different countries, the more necessary it is for him to have the awareness of cultural differences. Culture tells people how to behave appropriately and predictably, just as the proverb put it: “When in Rome, do as the Romans do.” In order to respect everyone’s communicators and be respected by them on the other side, it is necessary for people to bring some enthusiasm from their hearts to understand culture and cultural differences.

What is culture? It appears that culture is so broad, complex, and abstract that it is difficult to define it in a single way. A. L. Kroeber and C. Kluckhohn, famous scholars, listed over 160 definitions of culture made by related scholars from their different perspectives. Edward Burnett Tylor (1871), a British anthropologist, in *Primitive Culture*, a book, said: “Culture, or civilization, on its wide range of ethnographic sense, is a complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” (Taylor, 1992, p. 1) Many scholars take Taylor’s definition in 1871 as a starting point of culture studies. From the definitions like this, it is known today that culture is learned. Researchers tend to regard culture as a philosophical existence rather than a biological existence. A man acquires certain kind of culture based on the kind of environment he lives in. Culture underlies in almost every field in a society. Specifically speaking, the manner one behaves in, the notion inside one’s mind, the items one tries to make all belong to cultural field. Culture sounds like an abstract conception, but if it is analyzed in a practical way and is combined with some commonsense one has, then culture becomes a fact which can be perceived.

2. Method

From the above discussion, the topic of culture has been brought on the agenda. Culture itself is not so far from the modern life as its definition is. Here is a very interesting example provided by some scholars as follows: “Whereas money is considered an artifact, the value placed upon it is a concept, but the actual spending and saving of money is behavior” (Samovar & Porter, 1997, p. 13). This example, in an excellent way, shows how the main three elements constituting culture are reflected in a society. That is to say, the three main categories or say ingredients of culture consist of artifacts, concepts, and behaviors which have been mentioned above. Artifacts are all the “items” invented by man (Samovar, & Porter, 1997, p. 13). From daily products invented to facilitate our living to institutes such as schools and universities established to cultivate people, all the items which are not born in the nature belong to artifacts. Concepts are the “values system” a society believes in (Samovar, & Porter, 1997, p. 13). Behaviors are “the actual practice of concepts or beliefs” (Samovar, & Porter, 1997, p. 13). The three categories are not wholly separated from one another. They interact and integrate, forming a whole of culture. One behaves according to the concepts he has, and one presents concept since the artifacts he makes. In fact, this is a simple working mechanism in which culture facilitates and achieves its development.

Culture, like a person, has its characteristics. These characteristics make culture different from other

similar social science subjects such as philosophy, anthropology, sociology, etc. First, one is not born like this. One is not born thinking in a certain way; one is not born eating in a certain way; one is not born speaking and making greetings like this. However, when one person has grown up, he would surprisingly find that, he has thought, behaved, and led his life in a certain way from generation to generation. That is, “culture is learned” (Samovar, & Porter, 1997, p. 13). One has acquired similar way of thinking and behavior because he learned his native culture from his seniors. This process of learning is called enculturation by many scholars. The ways of enculturation are various. Education is a very formal way to cultivate people’s minds. In one’s daily life, seeing a film may also belong to an enculturation activity. In a word, one acquires culture practically. Life provides one person with many forms of culture learning. After learning, one can and should undertake the task to transmit the culture to the younger generation, just as the process he once received. This is the second characteristic of culture: culture can be passed on (Samovar & Porter, 1997, p. 13). That is why culture can be inherited for thousands of years. However, culture is not static. It must update itself for its development, so the third point is that: culture is ongoing (Samovar, & Porter, 1997, p. 14). Furthermore, culture only provides some ways of thinking and behaving for us to choose, not all the ways to think and behave. For example, Chinese culture can only give its learners a specific pattern of living in Chinese style rather than other styles.

For the above definition, categories, and characteristics, it can be deduced that culture is everywhere. Culture is in no doubt a fact existing in the world and has its own characteristics. It plays an important role in communication. Because everyone is living in a society in which culture is functioning itself to its best all the time, he unavoidably has his own tendencies to see the world, think about the world, and behave in the world. Everyone has his own style of acting, and the style has a cultural basis in it. Is that the source which cultural shocks or communication conflicts stem from? The answer is no. When one communicates with other people, especially people from different cultures, it is the lack of understanding the characteristics of their cultures that arises communication barriers or cultural shocks. The disappearance of cultural difference is not the key to solve the problem in international communication, understanding and respecting is the right attitude one should hold. Next the essay is going to take the cultural differences between American and Chinese as a typical example to raise the cultural awareness.

3. Result

China, a country which has been influenced deeply by Confucius, regards Confucianism as its basic philosophical system. Thousands of years’ history has seen the profound impact exerted by Confucius’ value system. Taking humanism, faithfulness, propriety, and wisdom as its four principles, this system pays its attention to the harmonious relationships among people, the subtle meaning contained in words, and holds past and present-conscious time attitudes.

Hundreds of years ago, European immigrants sailed across the ocean to settle in a new world, which

made the establishment of the United States become a fact. Those immigrants brought their culture and traditions into the new world. This kind of “culture importation” made America a multicultural country. The tradition of American culture can be dated back to the ancient Greeks’ culture and ancient Hebrews’ culture. The ancient Greeks’ culture and ancient Hebrews’ culture have always been the deep-rooted culture systems in English-speaking countries such as England. And the cultures in English-speaking countries have built up the main frame of American culture. What ancient Greeks’ culture and ancient Hebrews’ culture is to the Western world is what Confucianism is to China. Because of different traditions, the American culture system lays emphasis on individuality, efficiency, privacy, and accuracy. Opposed to Chinese culture system, American culture values on independent ability. Direct oral communication is acceptable and most Americans have a notion of future in mind. Next, the essay is going to focus on three aspects to compare the two different culture patterns. The reason is that the three aspects play as the main points in Chinese and American cultural differences. The other differences can be deduced from them.

First, Chinese culture system lays emphasis on collectivism while American culture emphasize on individualism. Collectivism—individualism dimension can be taken as the first dimension which differentiates Chinese culture from American culture. In China, collectivism is regarded as the core value in its society. Chinese people tend to form an “ingroup” (pointed out by Ting-Toomey, S.) (Samovar, & Porter, 1997, p. 393), which is a group who has common and consistent norms, values, rules, and principles for all the members to obey. Members’ behaviors are connected and have the same objective. The effective functioning of the whole group will be influenced by members’ actions. If conflicts happen, the interests of the collectivity should be assigned a high priority from the individual. Always taking the collectivistic values into account, “ingroup” members do care more about teamwork. They do not admit the existence of a singular talent. “More people, stronger power” is what Chinese groups believe in. In comparison, individualism lies at the most notable core of American culture. A scholar called Geert Hofstede defined individualism as “the emotional independence of individual persons from groups, organization, or other collectivities” (pointed out by Yum, J. O.) (Samovar, & Porter, 1997, p. 78). This culture pattern tends to form an “outgroup” (pointed out by Ting-Toomey, S.) (Samovar, & Porter, 1997, p. 393), rather than an “ingroup”. Consistent norms, values, rules and principles are not musts in an “outgroup”. Members have the rights to think inconsistently, judge according to their own criteria, make choices as they like, behave, and live a life in their own style. It is individualism that can be the only regulation in American society. It provides a space for every member to develop himself in a group. Talents exist and have their values. Efficiency of an individual can be an identity card in an outgroup society. One can choose to do one thing rather than another. He or she can voluntarily take part in an organization or withdraw from it. “I” is always capitalized while “we” is not. Individualism makes everybody in this culture maximize his abilities, energy, and talents.

Second, Chinese people prefer to conveying subtle meaning during the process of oral communication. They have formed a communication pattern in which the “spiral logic” and “indirect verbal

negotiation” play the main parts of a communication activity (pointed out by Ting-Toomey, S.) (Samovar, & Porter, 1997, p. 394). Edward T. Hall gave this pattern a special name: high context pattern (pointed out by Ting-Toomey, S.) (Samovar & Porter, 1997, p. 394). In a high context society, message is transmitted with “minimal information” (pointed out by Ting-Toomey, S.) (Samovar, & Porter, 1997, p. 394). Context is the practical circumstance or setting in which message is transmitted. More information is contained in the context itself rather than the message sent. In contrast, American people have formed a communication pattern in reverse to Chinese people, which is named as “low context” (pointed out by Ting-Toomey, S.) (Samovar, L. A. & Porter, R. E., 1997, p. 394) by Hall. This pattern takes “linear logic” and “direct verbal communication” as its characteristics (pointed out by Ting-Toomey, S.) (Samovar, & Porter, 1997, p. 394). This style of communication makes the message a speaker transmits contain as much information as possible. Because the people in this communication pattern think that what they say should make up the missing information in the context. High context—low context differences may lead to misunderstandings in international communication. Westerners sometimes find it difficult to grasp the subtle meaning in interaction with Chinese. Ambiguous and implicit, Chinese people are especially sensitive to what they say to others and what others say to them. They have high expectation toward words and often weigh their words carefully. However, Americans can accept directness and clearness in language speaking. For this point, we should pay special attention to raising the awareness of high context—low context differences. Only in this way can we possibly conduct harmonious intercultural communication activities.

At last, it comes to the concept of time in cultural differences. People’s attitudes towards time vary in accord with the cultural patterns they belong to. Different patterns of time govern different cultures. The tempos and paces of a conference can be influenced by time notion. There exist two basic attitudes toward time. If the people in a time pattern “don’t take appointments so seriously” and hold “a fluid attitude toward time schedules”, it can be called a “polychronic time schedule” (pointed out by Ting-Toomey, S.) (Samovar, & Porter, 1997, p. 395). To the opposite, if the people in a culture “take appointments seriously”, “emphasize the accuracy of time” and hold the opinion that certain schedules should be preset to handle problems, it can be a “monochronic time schedule” (pointed out by Ting-Toomey, S.) (Samovar, & Porter, 1997, p. 395). The two patterns were introduced by Hall in 1983. He included China in “polychronic time schedule” countries while America the “monochronic time schedule”. That is sensible. Chinese people tend to take more time in exploration and analysis and try to understand the process rather than just emphasize or grasp the very point of time. They pay more attention to “the process of time” and “center in the present and the past” (pointed out by Ting-Toomey, S.) (Samovar, L. A. & Porter, R. E., 1997, p. 395). Chinese often combine work activities with their social activities. They regard it as a good and natural way to build a relationship between partners. On the contrary, Americans lay importance on the clock time preset and tend to accurately obey the schedules. They separate work time from social time and prefer to dealing with conflicts within certain time schedules. They are future—oriented groups who look forward to the future rather than look back

on the past. Understanding different time patterns can help one control the tempo and hold a proper attitude toward conflicts in international communication. If one knows the time pattern his partners belong to, he can easily avoid some miscommunication, unhappiness, and impoliteness.

4. Discussion

It is impossible for one to completely avoid or escape from intercultural communication problems. Cultural differences may often lead to unexpected miscommunication and misinterpretations, which are among the reasons for cultural shocks. Through the comparison of cultural differences between Chinese and American, a brief view of the role culture plays in international communication can be seen. It is a world of information and communication. Raising the awareness of cultural differences is as important as improving the communication technology. Once cultural misunderstandings happen, it is everyone's task to handle and clarify them appropriately and in such a circumstance one's knowledge of cultural differences can be a big helper. A good attitude toward cultural differences is respect. The key to solving intercultural miscommunication is to understand cultural differences sincerely. Respect partners and be respected by them. Understand partners and be understood by them!

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