

# A Comparative Analysis of Pragmatics in the Perspective of Intercultural Communication

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**Abstract:** As an international Chinese language teacher who will go overseas for internship, it is very necessary to master the discourse rules in different cultural backgrounds, which plays a crucial role in the smooth implementation of intercultural communication. In this paper, through the author's four personal experiences of cross-cultural communication, as four cases of analyzing the discourse rules of cross-cultural communication, we will combine the relevant discourse rules and authoritative communication theories, such as Grice's principle of conversational cooperation, Edward-T-Hall's theory of high-context and low-context culture, Leech's principle of politeness, Brown and Levinson's theory of face, and so on, to analyze the discourse rules of appellative speech, introduction speech, greeting speech, etc. The differences in language terms such as appellative speech, introductory speech, greeting speech, invitation speech, request speech, compliment speech, and thank you speech are compared and explained, and the cultural conflicts and cultural communication phenomena involved are specifically analyzed.

**Keywords:** Linguistic contrast, Linguistic communication theory, Intercultural communication.

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## 1. Introduction

People often lack sensitivity to socio-linguistic differences in cross-cultural communication, and unconsciously transfer, acquire and follow the socio-linguistic rules of their own language, and often unconsciously identify with and use the rules in cross-cultural communication. "The relationship between language, culture and communication is also a kind of cross-cultural language communication relationship." Teaching Chinese as a foreign language and culture requires teachers to master the rules of discourse in different cultural contexts. In this paper, we will analyze the language rules and intercultural communication conflicts in different cultural contexts through four cases. The cases involve invitation, compliment, instruction, introduction, greeting, thank you, request, etc.

### Case 1

Jessica, an American teacher, was very enthusiastic about me, often sharing with me things she found interesting and inviting me to her home several times. I was very surprised and nervous that she really wanted to invite me. The day after her invitation, I went to the supermarket and bought a present for her little girl Lucy in advance. However, day by day, Jessica never invited me to her house again until a month later. It was only after I was invited that I felt a little angry.

She called me that day and asked if it was convenient for me to go at 7pm this Saturday night, and after serious discussion, we decided on a trip for that day. When I arrived at her house, Jessica complimented me enthusiastically in front of my family on how beautiful I was dressed today. I was overwhelmed and said, "No, no, I'm not pretty". Jessica thought I was bored by my silence, but I denied it. She asked me if I wanted to drink a Coke, and I was embarrassed, so I superficially refused. My mood was not very good.

## 2. Case Study

### 2.1. Invitation language

#### 2.1.1. Invitation method

First of all, in American society, inviting each other is an important social activity, which is in essence an instrumental and purposeful act. Invitation can be regardless of rank and status, and teachers often invite students to get together for dinner. Chinese interpersonal invitations are mostly between friends and family and are emotionally centered. Therefore, I was surprised to learn that I was going to be invited to the home of an American teacher I had just met, but for Jessica it was very legitimate, and Jessica had only formally invited me to the party after I had been fully consulted. Due to the influence of individualism, Americans will carefully determine the itinerary, never impose on others, and leave room for each other.

For Americans, a real invitation must specify the time, place, and activity, etc. A non-real invitation is only to maintain a good relationship between the two parties, and is not valid without specifying the time and consulting the other party. On the contrary, Chinese people usually have a habit of "self-invitation", visiting others at any time without inviting themselves, by going to a familiar relative's house.

#### 2.1.2. Brown&Levinson face theory

In Brown and Levinson's view, the communicator in the process of participating in social interaction, will always be concerned about their own face needs, including positive face and negative face. Positive face is the desire to be approved and appreciated by others, and is the principle of interaction that people follow in social interaction to support and give to others. Negative face, on the other hand, emphasizes interlocutor's individuality, it emphasizes the right of the individual not to be bound, at least in its entirety, by the group to which he belongs or by the values of his group, and not to impose his personal will on others. Thus for the United States, which emphasizes individualism, Jessica fully respected my individual will and did not give me a Coke because she was

thirsty and would assume that I was thirsty too, but instead defended my positive face from threats.

### 2.1.3. Silence and the concept of face

"Talking may be the tactic people use to maximize the maintenance of positive face, while remaining silent may be the tactic to maximize the maintenance of negative face."

In low-context cultures, people's attitude toward silence is negative, and silence is interpreted as coldness and anger, hostility, etc. In high-context cultures, such as Japan and China, silence is often viewed positively and interpreted as respectful, submissive, agreeable, etc. So my silence was misconstrued by Jessica in the US as a sign of negativity and apathy; but for me, silence was more of a sign of reverence and submission, or a polite act out of attentive listening.

## 2.2. Compliments

The topics of compliments are related to two aspects, one is "appearance" and "all things", and the other is "achievement" and "ability".

Compliments on a woman's "appearance or belongings" are very common in the United States. But compliments on women's "appearance" may not be socially desirable behavior in China. Westerners are more interested in change and novelty. Traditional Chinese culture expects "consistency," so "change" and "difference" are complimented to a much lesser extent than in the United States. On the contrary, Chinese people often choose the "no" and "non-agreement" tactics when receiving compliments, and are accustomed to reject or devalue the semantic content of the compliment, while in American culture the complimented person usually chooses the "accept" tactics to show that he or she has accepted the compliment. "strategy to show the maintenance of the positive face of the complimenter.

Because of the cultural differences between China and the U.S., Jessica generously complimented me on the changes in my appearance, but I did not like such compliments. In order to maintain a harmonious relationship with the foreign teacher, I chose to show my humility and politeness by using the "not accepted" and "non-agreed" strategies.

According to Hall's High-Low Context Theory and Leach's Politeness Principle, people from different countries also present different language habits in speech communication, which sometimes cause some conflicts, see Case 2 for details.

### Case 2

When I was a sophomore in college, I sat next to an Italian student in the cafeteria at lunch one day. She greeted me warmly. I was very hungry that day, but I had to talk to her while eating out of courtesy. After learning that I was a Chinese student, she said, "Although other people say that Chinese is a difficult language to learn, I don't think it's that difficult." I thought she was not very humble, but out of courtesy I said, "I think the major course is quite difficult, you are really good!" She said "thank you" very happily. When she was leaving, she asked me if I could add a WeChat, and I excused myself and said I would consider it later, trying to refuse her. But she didn't hear my tone, she still wanted to add my WeChat, I had to agree.

## 3. Case Study

### 3.1. Hall's theory of high-context and low-context cultures

Hall divides the world's cultures into high-context cultures and low-context cultures. In low-context communication, the

listener knows very little about what is being said and must be told everything clearly. In high-context communication, the listener already knows the context and does not need to provide background information. The main difference between high-context and low-context cultures is in terms of verbal communication. "Low-context communication tends to use a direct style of linguistic communication. This includes no particular emphasis on situational context, relying on explicit verbal communication to convey important information, fluent self-expression and eloquent speech, and expressing one's opinions directly and trying to persuade others to accept them." People in high-context cultures express their language with ambiguity, express meaning indirectly, value the listener's sensitivity and ability to speculate, and speak in a roundabout, subtle way. In an attempt to maintain harmony within the circle, their message may not be consistent with their true feelings.

Although I did not want to add her to WeChat, China is a high-context culture society, so I could only politely express my refusal, using other excuses to imply it, hoping that the other party could guess my real intention. But people in low-context cultures prefer to express themselves in a straightforward way and rely on clear language to convey, so the Italian student did not guess my refusal.

### 3.2. Leech Politeness Guidelines

Codes of courtesy include codes of decency, generosity, praise, modesty, consistency, and sympathy. The Chinese place more emphasis on the modesty criterion, while Westerners highlight the consistency criterion and the decency criterion. Westerners consider it polite to accept compliments gladly to avoid damaging the other person's face. Compliments are more likely to be received with pleasure and gratitude, with a pandering approach so as not to appear inconsistent with the complimenter.

Gu Yiguo summarizes the principles of Chinese politeness including: the code of demeaning oneself and respecting others, the code of addressing, the code of elegance, the code of seeking common ground and the code of virtue, speech and behavior. When facing compliments, Chinese people more often follow the humility principle of "demeaning oneself and honoring others", demeaning oneself to elevate others.

I said that I had encountered great difficulties in learning, as a way to set off the international student's great ability in learning Chinese, to show my courtesy to her. The international student, on the other hand, directly expressed the truth that she did not encounter any problems in learning Chinese, and did not pretend to be modest, but graciously accepted my praise as a sign of politeness and respect for the complimenter.

The linguistic rules for directives, greetings, introductions and appellations differ greatly from one culture to another and need to be paid attention to in the process of cross-cultural communication, as detailed in Case 3.

### Case 3

I was once involved in an online Chinese language teaching program. In my first class, I introduced myself in detail, including my family size, phone number, education, etc. The students were all a bit surprised. I asked them to introduce themselves in the same way, but they were reluctant to do so. The students called me by my first name in class, and I corrected them to call me Mr. Song, which they did not understand. Probably because I was very unthreatening, individual students were playing with their cell phones and

sitting in a very lazy posture. I directly asked the international student to put his cell phone in the desk drawer and pay attention to the lesson and sit upright. After the class, he sent me an email message, saying that I had no right to criticize him directly in class, which made him lose face. Afterwards, I had a deep reflection on myself.

## 4. Case Study

### 4.1. Introduction, greeting words

When Chinese people introduce themselves to each other, they often give each other's names, workplaces, occupations, or talk about their personal identities, which can be confusing to Americans whose primary orientation is individualism. Even the "greeting" language of some societies involves topics that may constitute a threat to the "privacy" of another member of society. Therefore, it is rude for me as a teacher to ask for personal information about a student, and in serious cases, it can be considered a violation of the student's own rights.

### 4.2. Instructive verbal behavior

Personal power, privacy, and personal freedom are sacrosanct in Western society, which is centered on individualism and parallel or equal relationships. Therefore, directive speech acts such as "command", "advice" and "criticism" from superiors to subordinates or from teachers to students are regarded as an intrusion into individualism. Therefore, it is important to follow the "code of decency" to reduce the threat of negative face to others when performing "directive" speech acts to others. In Chinese society, interpersonal communication is influenced by the traditional concept of hierarchy, and must follow the rule of "superior respects the inferior", so that superiors do not need to be "euphemistic" or "roundabout" when giving "instructions" to subordinates. When superiors give instructions to subordinates, they do not need to be "euphemistic" or "roundabout", but simply state their instructions directly. Once the teacher-student relationship was clarified, I took it for granted that I, as a teacher, had the right to give direct instructions to my student, asking him to take back his cell phone and sit up straight in class. However, for individualistic international students, asking for their personal information and giving them direct instructions such as "criticism" or "request" is a violation of their personal freedom and rights.

### 4.3. Appellative language

The famous scholars Philipsen and Huspek, when talking about the regularity of the speech act of "address", suggest that "people's address is a systematic and variable social phenomenon, and this feature makes it a fundamental sociolinguistic variable".

China has vertical social relations, and non-reciprocal appellations imply hierarchical tendencies and power levels in Chinese society, while Western societies are influenced by parallel relations and do not have obvious hierarchical meanings in appellations. The Chinese "address" language is influenced by the patriarchal blood relations and ethics of traditional feudal society, and the "address" language is a sign of "power" and "equality" in social relations. "When addressing people who are senior to them, they must use honorific and respectful terms. Americans often address each other by their first names to express the speaker's desire to establish "equality" in the relationship. Sociolinguist Wolfson

has pointed out that anyone in American society can address anyone by their first name in order to establish a relationship of "equality," and more and more young people tend to address each other directly by their first names. Therefore, foreign students consider it appropriate to call their teachers by their first names, but for Chinese people who are very polite, I felt very rude and actually the result of cultural differences.

At the same time, the differences in the performance of speech acts requested by people from different countries also reflect the differences between different societies and cultures, which can be explained to a certain extent by using the principle of conversational cooperation proposed by Grice, as detailed in Case 4.

#### Case 4

During my undergraduate years, I worked as an assistant teacher of the International Chinese Language Association (ICHA), and Chris was the main teacher in charge of my school's foreign language club from the United States. Before the start of the school year, the other foreign teacher had to adjust the class time due to a temporary problem and did not send me the list of students for this course and the specific arrangement of the course. I had to ask Chris to send me the syllabus and the list of students and make adjustments in the course plan accordingly. I explained a lot of things out of courtesy, until he finally asked me point blank, "So what exactly do I need to do? Only then did I explain my intentions directly to him. He suggested to me that next time I could just explain the idea without much explanation.

## 5. Case Study

### 5.1. The act of requesting speech

Ervin-tripp classifies British and American "request" behavior strategies into six categories, which are demand statement, supplication, embedded supplication, permission request, non-explicit request, and "implied" request strategy. The difference is in the degree of directness or indirectness of the request, which is limited by the social status, environment, and physical distance of the requested and the requestor. In Chinese culture, the requestor needs to establish a reasonable framework for the situation before making the request, so that the other party can be prepared. The request is usually made "indirectly", which is a "discursive indirect" or "embedded" type of requesting behavior. In Western cultures, requests are more often made with syntactic structure changes or by relying on the extra-verbal force of the utterance. Chinese people try not to damage their own and each other's positive face; Americans think first of all about not damaging each other's negative face.

Therefore, I made a lot of precautions when I asked the teacher for help, out of the hierarchy of teacher-student status, in order not to damage my own positive face and that of the other person. The foreign teacher, being in a more egalitarian culture, was more egalitarian and wanted to be informed of my needs in a direct and concise manner in order to ensure that my negative face would not be damaged.

### 5.2. Principle of conversational cooperation

Grice argues that conversation is governed by norms or conditions, and that the reason why people do not talk in a series of incoherent utterances is that both parties follow the principles of conversational cooperation, including: quantitative criteria, which refer to providing the required

amount; qualitative criteria, which refer to providing truthful information; relational criteria, which refer to providing information relevant to the topic; and modal criteria, which refer to providing information in a clear and concise manner. Grice believes that "qualitative criteria" are the most important in Western countries, followed by "quantitative criteria".

For Eastern societies such as China and Japan, "quality norms" and "quantity norms" do not constitute a major social fact. The Chinese are more likely to focus on "ways" at the expense of "quality" or "quantity" norms. On the contrary, Westerners place more importance on "qualitative" norms. Therefore, the Italian students were very direct in expressing their true thoughts and responded politely to my compliments. The American teacher followed the "quantitative" and "relational" guidelines, placing great emphasis on concise and relevant language. I chose to follow the "manner criterion" at the expense of "quality" and "quantity", and the language was subtle and convoluted, resulting in a lack of concise language and purpose.

The cases also involve politeness strategies. Politeness strategies are influenced by the power distance between the speaker and the listener. Power distance is the degree to which people accept the unequal distribution of power in an organization, where high power distance cultures have hierarchical societies; while low power distance societies have their students and teachers on equal footing and people are equal to each other. In cultures with high power distance, power distance is the most important factor that influences people to use politeness strategies. As a high power distance country, China puts great emphasis on respecting teachers, and calling teachers by their names is extremely bad in China, while international students under the influence of low power distance culture believe that teachers and students have equal relationship and teachers have no right to do direct orders to them personally. It was because I was in awe of my teacher that I did my best to preserve the positive face of the other party from threats when I asked Chris for help and did a lot of explaining for my request. Thus the use of politeness strategies cannot be separated from the consideration of the power distance between the two parties.

"The application level of intercultural communication spreads across all levels of human society and has become a common phenomenon in Chinese society." Overcoming intercultural communication barriers is never a quick fix; language, culture and communication skills all need to be

improved. The first step is to establish a high degree of cultural self-confidence, respect and understand the culture of other countries, and abandon the concept of ethnocentrism. The above cross-cultural comparison of speech acts through case studies illustrates that different societies.

Significant differences are shown in the use of pragmatics or language rules. Errors in the use of linguistic rules and the lack of standardization of speech acts can cause different degrees of offense to people from other cultures. We need to understand the differences in language rules in different cultures and implement them flexibly in cross-cultural communication activities, especially in second language teaching, so that the teaching process can be carried out smoothly.

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