

An Analysis on Proxemics Phenomenon Between China and America

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International culture communication is a new discipline which arouses people's attention and becomes more and more popular among the researchers from different countries. A comparative study of proxemics phenomenon between China and America finds that those two countries have a great differences. American seems especially sensitive to their body spaces, and Chinese don't care much about it. In the book *The Silence Language*, Edward hall first uses the term proxemics, and he has given a detailed analysis of proxemics. Proxemics is the study of spatial distances between individuals in different cultures and situations. Cultural factors for proxemics has a great influence, and the factors such as gender and religion also has a profound significance on proxemics. This thesis will mainly analyze this phenomenon in the way of the definition and theory of proxemics, especially, the ways how people deal with the international culture situation. In order to improve the readers cultural accomplishment and ability to communicate, prevent the errors in the protocol, this paper will further explain how to solve these cross-cultural problems in cross-cultural context, especially for Chinese learners. With some fresh insights into international culture communication research, hopefully the readers may benefit from this paper and communicate with foreign people in a better way.

Keywords: proxemics phenomenon, across culture, international communication

I. Introduction

With the rapid development of China's economy in recent years, the communication between China and other countries is growing. In different culture backgrounds, how people communicate with foreigners and how to keep good relationship with them, these are questions that people really need to think about. People use verbal and nonverbal communicate with others, language is the explicit thing that we hear with our ears, on the contrary, nonverbal is implicit, it requires us to observe through using our eyes, and to feel it with our heart. As David Abercrombie said we use the pronunciation organs to talk, but we talked with the whole body. In fact, people can speak by using different parts of the body. Hill also said that time and space can speak. This paper is mainly talking about how to communicate with foreigners from the aspect of proxemics, especially the communication between China and the United States. Generally speaking, Human communication is done through two forms, one is a language communication behavior, and the other is a kind of nonverbal

communication behavior. Proxemics is one of the most common human communication behaviors of the nonverbal communication behaviors. It is the essential part of the cross-cultural communication. In cross-cultural communication, many people believe that as long as we pay attention to the appropriates of language communication behavior, we could completely understand the foreign culture. However, as we often ignore cultural differences of nonverbal communication behavior, we often have cultural misunderstandings and conflicts in cross-cultural communication. In different cultures, even the simple gesture, such as a look, a wave, may carry different meanings. This paper mainly studies the classification of the common non-verbal communication behavior, and discusses proxemics differences in cross-cultural communication in English and Chinese.

II. The Study of Proxemics

2.1 The Definition of Proxemics

According to the research, proxemics can be defined as “the interrelated observations and theories of man’s use of space as a specialized elaboration of culture (wikipedia, 2015)”. Edward T. Hall, the cultural anthropologist, who coined the term in 1963, emphasized the impact of proxemics behavior (the use of space) on interpersonal communication. Hall believed that the value in studying proxemics comes from its applicability in evaluating not only the way people interact with others in daily life, but also “the organization of space in their houses and buildings, and ultimately the layout of their towns (Hill, 1968a, p. 85). Simple speaking, proxemic is the invisible spaces around the human body, people’s physical spaces is differences in the different cultural background. Hill called this phenomenon “proxemics”, it also can be called personal body distance.

Proxemics is the study of human space and physical distance in the communication. For example, animal have the domain concepts, especially the animals at the top of the food chain. The more brutal animal, the wider field ranges. (Wood, 1994, p. 79). In the African continent, rattlesnakes have a very strong domain concepts, once people or other animals enter his territory, then it will stand up and against them. Another example, an older giraffe are protecting its thicket, and then a young giraffe came and infringe his territory, so there is a contradiction between them, the war started. Human being has the same conditions. Individual and individual, even countries and countries, there is such concept.

2.2 The Theories of Proxemics

Concerning the study of proxemics, this article have to mention Edward Hill. He thinks that the spaces around human has five kinds of areas; each of them plays a different meaning in communication. These areas include intimate distance, personal distance, social distance, public distance and long distance. Intimate distance refers to the closest distance, such as husband and wife, the closest friends, the distance generally within 0 to 1.5 feet. The length is equivalent to a half of adult’s arm. Personal distance is over intimate distance, but no more than social distance, the distance generally within 1.5 to 4 feet, it’s about one the height of adult’s leg. Social distance also known as polite distance, it’s almost 4 to 12 feet, the length is equivalent to an office desk. Public distances apply to formal occasions. The distance ranges from 12 to 25 feet. Places like beaches and bus stops can be used. Long distance is used for the occasions like public speech or a president speech, it’s more than 25 feet. It is the distance maintained between the audience and a speaker such as the president speech (Hill, 1968b, p. 103).

As we all known, Hill's study is to make analysis for widespread phenomenon. People should take different attitudes to different things under the cross culture background. This paper lists five kinds of human space relationships, it is universal. This paper will supply Hill's view and give more detail about proxemics. In the different countries, especially between China and the United States, cultural differences have a large influence to study. There are many factors that can affect interpersonal relationship, the factors such as personality, age, religion, etc. (GENG, 1988, p. 108). These are what Hill ignored, and these factors will be reflected in this paper. Only paying attention to the distance proxemics itself is far from study proxemics.

2.3 The Differences of Proxemics

As long as there is the existence of different cultures, differences will be reflected by them. In the United States, intimate distance is only suitable for husband and wife, children and other rare situations. This distance is seldom to show up between homosexual friends. So Americans are often surprised why Chinese can keep so close distance between homosexual when they come to China. In the United States, everyone seems to have an invisible realm around the body, it means that this is personal spaces. When waiting in line, this kind of situation will be fully reflected, each person maintains a certain distance. Encountering the particularly crowded situation, they have to make the body contact with others, they should say "excuse me", and it means that "can I borrow your spaces". Americans considered that the distance is to protect their privacy, but it is polite, they can tolerate each other, and it also can be adjusted at any time according to the change of social relations (Hill, 1970, p. 65).

On the contrary, the Chinese take no account of space around them. If there are too much distance between good friends, friends may be considered whether it has problems. Physical contact is also often happened, when friends has a conversation, the distance is close enough to contact each other, it is so intimacy. Perhaps Chinese population number are huge, Chinese take crowded as grant. Walking in the street, the distance between people is very short. According to the survey, it is easy to be seen what the foreigner can't bear the thing in China is to take buses because of crowded. In addition, in China, male went to watch movie or hang out by taking arms on others shoulders; the female went shopping hand in hand, which is very normal things.

III. The Causes of Proxemics Difference

3.1 The Causes of Environment

For studying proxemics, the factor of environment are cannot be ignored. Environment here is not only refers to the geographical environment, it also includes the humanities environment. Of course, comparing the geographical environment, those two countries seems to have the same conditions, both are vast territory, climate condition have little difference. China are little warmer than Americans, the earth latitude is basically at the same height. Since 1620, English immigrated to American. They has experienced the test of blood and fire and finally established the federal government. For now, the most of people in the U.S. are immigrants, who come from different countries and nations. Multiple national combined the united national; multiple cultural has become a unique American culture. The countries such as the United States, some scholars call for low-contact countries, because of the cold weather and other factors, few Americans have physical contact with other people.

Some Asian countries, including China, known as high-contact countries, some scholars think that it due to the environment (JIA, 1997, p. 263). In Asia, the climate is generally mild; it caused the Asian people's gentle character. Talking to Asian people, people will fell mild and moderate. Especially in China, the mainland area is

vastness, life here is relatively stable. Chinese are always friendly; it is famous for the world that Chinese love peace. So the Chinese are more willing to touch others. The climate of China decreases down from south to north, the climate differences result in different personality, comparison with north, the people who live in south are more delicate. The old saying is that “northern general and southern scholar”. The north is relatively straight forward bold, southern euphemism. Talking to the southern people is closer than northern people.

3.2 The Causes of Cultural Background

Cultural different is also one of the factors that affect international cross communication. The United States has been advocated liberal spirit, advocated the liberation of humanity (Baddassare & Feller, 1975, p. 112). And some of Europe’s cultural thought also has a profound influence to American culture. Under the Puritan’s leading, English man immigrants to American continent, then the American colonies were set up, the Puritan propagate the Puritan religious thought, advocate for individual liberation, and release the confine of thought from traditional religions thought. Puritanism have the great effect on dispelling the mainstream church tradition, it promoted the secularization of society. In the early days of the United States, it promotes the personality liberation, laid the foundation of American mainstream culture, and made the United States national features. With such a cultural background, Americans emphasis self-centered, hero worship. So it is not an easy thing to make contact with Americans.

Compared with American culture, Chinese culture has a long history with extension and profound. Chinese culture has constantly, it has impacted by the foreign culture, but the mainstream is unchanged. China dose not have the strong religious beliefs, but the Chinese culture has its own unique charm. The Chinese believes many gods, the god is more than hundreds, and the gods seems to be everywhere. Chinese believed in heaven and earth, the ancient emperors are generally called the son of heaven, he is inviolable. In addition, the mainstream of Chinese culture is the Culture of Confucianism, the Chinese affected by the Confucianism more than two thousand years. So generally speaking, Chinese characters are mild and gentle. The image of China in the world is peaceful and kind-heart. What’s more, Chinese are enthusiastic. When people talk to others, by holding hands, which means “this I admire you”. This action will never happen in the United States.

3.3 The Causes of Social Relationship

Different proxemics is also related to social relationships and personal relationships. America’s social relationship is coequal because of the American law and the religious. Under the spread of religious thought, Americans believe that everyone is equal. And *the Bill of Rights* also suggests that each person has freedom and equality since his born. For personal relationship, however, the Americans seems to be a little interest in his friend’s problem, in fact, Americans just only care about themselves, and care seldom of others. Because they also worry that their friends will bring trouble to them, which make people have estrangement. In addition, due to the busy work and the rapid development of Internet in recent years, friends become less and less, the relationships also appear increasingly indifference.

Since in ancient time, Chinese pay more attention to collectivism, Chinese think that collective interests is more important than individual interests. In nowadays, Chinese still has a strong sense of belonging on collectivism. This increased the cohesion of the Chinese people. On the one hand, the Chinese people care more about the relationship of collection. There is an old saying, “to stick one’s neck out”, which means we must

follow the rules when we are doing things, and keep consistent with the collection. This caused Chinese people depending each other, and mutual cooperation (HU, 1999, p. 132). On the other hand, the relationship of Chinese is very important, leave the so-called relationship; it will be so hard to do one thing. So Chinese people are fond of making friends, the more friends, the more convenience. Such social relations have a special significance for proxemics. And this is one of the reason why Chinese are friendly and kindly.

IV. The Attitudes to Proxemics Differences

Under the cross-cultural communication, what kind of attitude should we have, and how do people face the proxemics differences under different cultural background. This paper will express it from cross-cultural knowledge and cultural background. Learning more knowledge about cross-cultural is good for communication.

4.1 Learning About Proxemics

There is no doubt that learning more intercultural knowledge is very useful. But there is one thing that people needs to care about; it is no universal proxemics in the world. Different countries have different proxemics, some proxemics is just suitable for the special cases, for different environment, it may have different meaning. For those foreign students or short-term abroad travelers, knowing something about proxemics is very necessary, in that way, they can get away a lot of unnecessary troubles. Some Chinese students who went to the United States are often having a series of troubles because of some unconscious behavior, which causes a lot of bad influence in their life and study.

On the other hand, learning inter-cultural knowledge can make a person keep a high personal accomplishment. When they communicate with others, they will have a good manner. Assuming that student A comes to America to study, whatever to communicate peers or the opposite sex, they both can easily understand the meaning of what A want to express, A gets along with them, and keep a good relationship with the people around him. A dose not feels hard because of lack of inter-cultural knowledge. While the others may think that A was a pretty good one. After learning the intercultural knowledge, people will feel comfortable whether it's communicating with people or doing things. But it dose not means people have nothing to worry about. Learning is just a way that people could only have this kind of consciousness, and it must be accordance between consciousness and behavior. So people still need to observe, to learn more about cross-cultural knowledge.

4.2 Respecting the Proxemics Differences

Apart from learning more knowledge, we should more respect the differences. Because different countries have the different cultural background, people can't use their national vision to measure other people's manners and attitudes. This kind of behavior is called ethnocentrism, which is to treat other ethnic groups in their own national culture as a reference, with their own cultural standards to measure the behavior of other ethnic groups, and isolate him from other cultures. Respect doesn't means blindly accept them all, it should be based on their own culture. China has a word called "seek common points while reserving difference", it means that in spite of the differences existent, people should understand it, and find a common point. It also embodies the Chinese think harmony in diversity, means difference can not bring conflict; the different and identical exist at the same time.

Respecting other cultures means think of things depends on others' cultural background. "Do as the Romans do". In the process of communication, people should be able to quickly put himself into the other cultural

background. This ability is referred to cultural empathy competence, try hard to put yourself in someone else position to think, to experience, to express feelings (ZHU, 1989, p. 189). It also needs to improve the ability to adapt to different cultures ability.

V. Conclusion

In recent years, with the emergence of the global village, the influence of cross-cultural is more important, the study of proxemics is also more fervency. This paper has made a certain explanation about Hill and other scholars' study, and focuses on different proxemics phenomena between China and the United States. Geographical environment and cultural background at China and the United States are different, this causes different proxemics. At the same time, the differences of culture and values has also influence both national characters in both countries. This paper has an extension and expansion to the study of Hill's from the perspectives of gender and religion.

Of course, the social relations still is the most important factor, different social relations between China and the United States caused the different proxemics phenomena, the related sociology is also extremely important. How to achieve effective intercultural communication is not only the problem of a certain country or nation, but also a problem of the whole world. When facing of different proxemics phenomenon, either with the assimilation of consistent or go his own way? The main point of this paper is to understand differences, "when in Roman do as the Romans do", it is the rule to follow.

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