



Cultural Differences of Politeness in English and Chinese

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Abstract

Politeness, as a universal phenomenon in society, is a reflection of specific cultural values, which can be observed in all languages and cultures. This thesis attempts to make a comparative study of politeness behavior between English and Chinese on the contrastive analyses on such linguistic behaviors as addressing, greeting, complimenting. Owing to different beliefs and values, and different cultural backgrounds, these cultural differences of politeness are of great importance in cross-cultural communication. Therefore, in language class, such differences, especially those concerning the basic aspects of daily life, should be introduced to students, and this can be done in different activities effectively and efficiently.

Keywords: Politeness, Cultural differences, Intercultural communication

1. Introduction

For a long period of time, the focus of EFL class in China has been on grammatical knowledge and vocabulary. There has been great neglect about the teaching of using the foreign language appropriately. As a result, students are engaged in specific lexical and grammatical items, far from being equipped with sufficient knowledge, or rather, competence to communicate. However, the ability to communicate with native speakers is far more than to know the English grammatical system. Cultural differences are one of the main causes that give rise to pragmatic failures. Many teachers and linguists have realized the importance of cultural teaching and there is no way to avoid teaching culture when teaching language (Hinkel, 1990).

As a universal phenomenon in all societies, politeness is what people of different cultural backgrounds all try to observe for the purpose of increasing communicative competence. Being an important element in intercultural communication, politeness helps establish, maintain or consolidate harmonious interpersonal relationships, and reduces conflicts and misunderstandings. Therefore, principles of politeness in different cultures should be realized by students. This thesis intends to discuss the exhibition of cultural differences on politeness to help Chinese learners have a better understanding of different principles of politeness in English. Besides, this paper is to explore efficient means to teach students to use English in the polite way in order to communicate effectively and efficiently.

The present thesis is composed of five parts. Part 1 is an introduction to the thesis. Part 2 is a contrastive analysis of politeness in English and Chinese manifested in everyday conversation concerning addressing, greeting, complimenting.

2. Cultural Differences of Politeness between English and Chinese

Cultural differences in everyday conversation refer to the differences in habits and rules in communication between different cultures (Liang Jinghong, 2005). Customs are influenced and shaped by the beliefs and values of people in a certain community. People are brought up in community and they are so accustomed to their ways of doing things that they cannot accept different actions for achieving the same goal. Therefore, in this part, differences of politeness such as addressing, greeting, complimenting between English and Chinese are to be discussed.

2.1 Addressing

In English, people are usually addressed according to the gender: Mr. (for adult males), Mrs. (for married women), Miss (for unmarried women), Ms. (for women whose marital status is unknown) with surname, while in Chinese people are

addressed by surname with title or occupation such as “wang xiao zhang” (Principal Wang) and “li yi sheng” (Doctor Li). Sometimes the two terms “tong zhi” (comrade) and “shi fu” (master) can be used independently to address strangers or together with surnames to address acquaintances.

In Chinese, children usually use “shushu” (uncle), “a yi” (aunt) to address adults. There are no equivalent addresses in English. To address strangers, English speakers sometimes use “sir” or “madam”.

The kinship terms are used both in English and Chinese. Terms of family relationships are only used for relatives in English. But in Chinese, they are not only used for relatives, but also for non-relatives. In addition, kinship terms in Chinese are more complicated than those in English. In Chinese, “da bo” (eldest brother of father), “er jie” (second elder sister), “san ge” (third elder brother) are often used, while in English, “sister”, “uncle”, “grandma” are used alone or even before their first names.

2.2 Greeting and Farewell

Important as greetings are in daily lives, they are not conducted in the same way in different cultures. In English, when people meet each other for the first time, they usually say “How do you do?” and “Nice to meet you!” In Chinese, “ni hao” is used instead. When westerners meet an acquaintance, they often greet each other with “Hello”, “Hi”, or “How are you?” But a Chinese will say “chi le ma?” (Have you eaten?), “qu na li ?” (Where are you going?). When a native English speaker hears these sentences, he or she may interpret it as an invitation to dinner or interference in his or her personal affairs. So when interacting with foreigners, Chinese should avoid such greetings. In English, the common ways of greeting are “Good morning”, “Good afternoon”, “Good evening”, “Hi”, “Hello”, “How are you?”, and “How is everything going?”. What’s more, the English people like to begin their conversation by talking about the weather, like “What a lovely day!” “A bad day, isn’t it?”

When acquaintances part, the English people may say “Goodbye”, “See you”, “So long” and “Good luck”. Differently, in Chinese, when a guest leaves, the host will show the guest to the door and say “man zou” (Walk slowly.), “zou hao” (Take care.), or “yi lu shun feng” (Have a nice trip.). But none of these can be directly translated into English.

2.3 Compliments and Responses

It’s common for people to exchange compliments both in English speaking countries and in China. Expressions such as “hen hao, bu cuo, hen bang” in Chinese are often used, which mean “great, good, terrific” in English. However, there do exist some cultural differences in compliments between English and Chinese. One difference lies in who can be complimented. It is usual for an American woman to praise her husband, talking about how hard he works and how well he has done. She might do the same about a son or a daughter of hers. In the English-speaking countries, one can praise one’s family members. But we Chinese people seldom compliment our family members in front of others. The Chinese are polite rather than honest while the westerners tend to be frank and direct. The other difference lies in what can be complimented. It is quite common for a male English speaker to compliment females on her good looks. But in China, praising a man on his wife’s looks will be regarded as indecent, and even a taboo.

When responding to compliments, westerners tend to accept the compliments naturally by saying “Thank you!” In contrast, Chinese generally murmur something implying that he or she is not worthy of the praise in order to show modesty, because modesty is considered as a kind of traditional virtue. In China, modesty is the best policy, but to westerners, honesty is the best policy (Luo Ningxia, 2000).

2.4 Apologies

Both Chinese and English have expressions for apologies. For example, there are “dui bu qi”, “bao qian”, “hen yi han” in Chinese and “I am sorry”, and “Excuse me” in English. But generally speaking, English speakers apologize more often than the Chinese people by saying “Excuse me” preceding a request or an interruption. When they want to push their way out of the crowd, leave a dinning table to the toilet, stop a stranger to ask for direction, and even when they need to answer the phone, they would usually say this. But in China, “dui bu qi”, “hen yi han” are very often used only when they feel sympathetic or when they need to bother others. In English, “Excuse me” can also be heard when someone sneezes or hiccups. This is quite different from Chinese culture.

2.5 Taboos

Taboo expressions exist in nearly all cultures, and inappropriate use of taboo language will cause obstacles in communication. Expressions concerning some phenomenon are considered as taboos in both Chinese and English cultures such as human’s excreta and death. But generally speaking, there are more taboos in English than in Chinese. English-speaking people place a higher value on privacy. Therefore, some topics would be considered as privacy and it is impolite to mention these topics. For instance, asking others about age, especially a woman’s age, is regarded as impolite in western cultures. Besides age, other topics such as income, marital status, and religion are also sensitive topics which may likely cause offense. Chinese sometimes talk about health and express their concern by giving some advice such as “Have a rest.”, “Put on more clothes and drink more water.” However, English speakers will feel

uncomfortable on hearing these words. According to English culture, they are independent adults and are supposed to be able to take care of themselves. Such expressions as “Put on more clothes” seem to deny their ability of taking care of themselves. On this occasion, expressions such as “Look after yourself.”, “Hope you will be better soon.” sound better to them.

3. Conclusion

Politeness is what people of different cultural backgrounds all try to observe and maintain. This thesis makes a study of politeness in the EFL classroom by analyzing different linguistic behaviors of politeness between English and Chinese based on various politeness theories. This paper holds the view that politeness indicates different meanings in different cultures. It is hoped that English learners will attach great importance to the communicative functions of the target language so that they will realize the importance of using polite language appropriately, and then their pragmatic competence of target language will be greatly improved.

This paper does not aim to cover all aspects of politeness in EFL teaching. Its ideas and arguments are far from mature. But it is our sincere hope that through a careful study of politeness in FL classroom, we can achieve a more effective teaching and improve students’ communicative competence.

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