

# Cultural Differences in Everyday Conversation between the East and the West

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**Abstract:** Language is a product of the society. In the communication between the East and the West, it's essential to master the language itself as well as the profound knowledge of cultural background. There are a number of everyday conversations in the East and the West. This paper presents a comparative study of the East and the West daily verbal communications, with the attempt to peek into the differences between them, and the underling cultural factors. It briefly introduces the differences in vocatives, compliments, greetings and farewells and thanks and apologies between the East and the West cultures, expounds that language differs from culture to culture. Study shows that language and culture are as closely related to each other as milk and water, and that culture pervades every particular speech act.

## 1. Introduction

With the developing of sciences and technologies, people with different cultural backgrounds are communicating more and more frequently. People with different lifestyles, ways of thinking, behavior and values are interacting more with each other. With more cross-cultural communication, because of cultural differences, misunderstandings may arise, although the language used in communication may be faultless. The same words or expressions may not mean the same thing to different peoples. Due to culture differences, a serious question may cause amusement or laughter; a harmless statement may cause displeasure or anger. Cultural difference may result in jokes by a foreign speaker being received with blank faces and stony silence. Yet the same stories in the speaker's own country may leave audiences holding their sides with laughter. Language is a part of culture and plays a very important role in it. This paper focuses on studying certain cultural differences between Chinese and native speakers of English. And analyses specific culture differences, and their historical causations, between Chinese and Americans. It will focus on differences between the ways in which Chinese English speakers and Americans communicate in daily situations. The purpose of the paper is to make the Chinese English speaker more aware of the difficulties or problems that may occur when using certain English words or terms in everyday communication with Americans. It therefore follows, that awareness of these problems may result in the possibility of any misunderstandings, embarrassment and even conflict being avoided and reduce the barrier to cross-cultural communication.

The relations of language and culture Language is a means of expressing cultural customs, as a part of culture, and plays an important role in culture. Language can not separate from related culture to be independent. Some sociologists believe that the language is the cornerstone of culture-no language, no culture .From another aspect, language is affected by language and reflected the culture. Language is based on the historical and cultural aspects. The nation's way of thinking, values, concepts, habits and behavior will affect aesthetic language development. The formation of a national culture, development and absorption ought to pass the language to achieve. Language and culture influence each other; we should try to understand language and culture and to learn them. Language is like a mirror which reflects the entire culture, and every nation has its own culture. Language as the carrier and idea of culture, its representation form is influenced and restricted by culture. Understand their unique cultural background to understand the language features. Only more exposure to foreign cultures, familiar with different language national history amorous feelings, way of life, value and national psychology, open up their vision, learn more about the cultural and language differences. Culture promotes the development of advertising language,

the language of advertising propagandize its culture. Chinese and Western advertising language has its own unique form of language which contain the beautiful scenery of language and culture. The charm of the language of instruction is fully displayed in the advertisement. Meanwhile, the Chinese and Western social and cultural knowledge which contained in language make us experience the infinitude delight .Chinese and Western advertising languages let us deepen our understanding of foreign countries, and bring to the world of cross-cultural exchanges.

Language and culture evolved and have been mutually dependent through the society. Language is one part of culture, specifically to say, a very important part. Therefore we can say that culture is the background where language exists. Also culture is reflected in language and exists in the intellectual structure of some nation who uses this corresponding language. In the process of communication cultural factors in a language and cultural consciousness in mind interact with each other. Once the original cultural environment is changed or disappears, or the linguistic system that cultural factors leave with is changed, the communication will suspend.

Cultural differences in communication When people in different cultures communicate with others, they have to follow some norms limited and regulated by different cultures concretely. It is necessary to know such rules as when to make conversation and when not to make conversation, what to say and what not to say, and what kind of situations suitable, and how to say. The cultures are different; the norms of them are therefore different. There will three parts to illustrate different manifestation of conversation in different cultures.

1. The limitation to the contents of conversation in different cultures. Generally speaking, there are some themes to be talked freely in both cultures. For example, in western culture, people are usually allowed to talk about weather. Job, amateur, hobby or some national events. But some other topics are limited such as ages, income, religious belief or marriage .etc, whereas such topic can be allowed to talk about freely in China. In western culture, it is natural for men to compliment lady's appearance, stature or wearing. But in Chinese tradition, such things belong to taboos to some extents. Although there are some changes in China nowadays, there still exists limitation. So if an American boy compliments a Chinese girl to be sexy. It is unacceptable, but this seems natural and common to Americans are on the contrary. Even a mother could compliment her daughter in such words in American.

2. The direct or indirect expression in different cultures. About how to express hopes, demands and opinions in conversation, there exist some differences. Different cultures always have different customs. Chinese are prone to some indirect way, always exchanging greetings before get to the point. In their conversations, greetings seem like a prelude, which may have little and even nothing connected with the subject. And the people's attitudes are so humble that there seldom appears any offensive words while the western people tend to direct their expression which come straightly to the point and spoken frankly. In addition, they often show their stands when explaining the reason during their talks. Chinese often take different way by complying with the conversation order, explain reasons first, and then show stands. Even if the modernized methods of communication are used, there still exist cultural differences in social intercourses. Take a phone call for example, a German who is wanted on the phone will certainly tell his name first without hesitation, but a Chinese would like to wait for the other's name before he tell his, unless he gets the others' name or he will not be willing to show who he is.

3. The cultural differences can affect and limit the quantity of talk. In Chinese tradition, people could seldom say "thank you" all the time. However once there's a need to express thanks, the words "thank you" or "thanks a lot" would be not enough. There would come more words to express their thankful feeling and they will even thank many times, whereas the people in the English countries have the different reaction. Although they express "thank you" all day and there's hardly any place not to use such words, they seldom express twice or more times to the same people and the same thing. In words style, Chinese people used to rely on the hinting statement, and avoid explaining directly. Chinese people also prefer to use liken and analogy to explain and clarify one's views. Compared with English speaking people, Then Chinese people state, explain and expound, their view has circulation nature, lacking complicated and effective debate method and word order.

The mode of Chinese's application is describing a certain concrete incident first, and then reviewing its history; they explain the measure taken at present and look forward, finally to prospect. While criticizing other people, Chinese often use the mild and roundabout language, double denial, etc... Though the way is indirect, it is very effective. While filing a request, Chinese will do the best to avoid saying the rude words and can't demonstrate the selfish attitude. This speech style and communication tactics come from Chinese culture. In daily communication, both sides often communicate and fail, because Chinese often treat others with one's own mode and reply on wrongly. The British and the Americans are also like this.

Produce the Reason of the Difference. The environmental difference pregnant with culture has caused the differences among Chinese and Western culture. Because of the difference of history, region, folkways and customs, morals ethics, and religious belief Chinese people and western people are totally different. The difference on all these cultural aspects has caused the differences of respects in vocabulary and language between Britain and Chinese.

## **2. Ways of thinking**

In western culture they emphasize "individuals" and "individualism" that is a commonly accepted life value by British and American people. But in China we emphasize "collective spirit". And we accept the view that "collective power is indefinite while individuals are tiny" So in contrast with "collective heroism", "individualism" is a selfish ideology and a negative word as well.

Some Abstract English words are very hard to find their equivalent expressions in Chinese and are very difficult to master their meanings. In our opinion "privacy" refers to aspects of age, income, family and marriage, etc. In fact those are not enough about the meaning of "privacy".

English people and Chinese people are very different in ideas towards time. In the English mind time is personal property. So "Do you have any time?" and "Could you spare me a few seconds?" are often heard among English people. When English people ask someone to do something, they ask, first of all, whether someone is free or likes to do. Even when they invite someone to attend a banquet or other social activities both sides should find a convenient time for both, then decide whether "invitation" can be achieved.

But in Chinese culture it is very hard to say it is cooperation, or at least to some extent it is different. When English people invite someone they think they should respect his time arrangement. While in China to invite others to attend activities is regarded as a waste of one's own time to show due respect and invitees think it as an honor. Thus time is mainly decided by hosts. So when they say goodbye, in English a host is grateful to his guests, while in China guests are grateful to their host.

## **3. Customs**

The Chinese people and the westerners have different rites in greetings. For example, in China, one often meets with such greetings "where are you go?" "what do you do?" And soon, which have no much, deep connotation. Greeting like, "Do you have super?" And are only some common greetings when people meet together. However, westerners will be sensitive and serious about these questions, which seems to be the private things in their views and should not be inquired about freely, except between or among intimates, Greeting like "Do you have super?" Will make them so amazing, and be a loss that they wonder whether you want to invite then for supper, so, these greetings should be transferred into English culture like "Hello", "Good morning", and so on. Take the phone call for example, in our Chinese custom, we often say "who are you ?", "I am ...", but in English there are different expressions, as "Who is this speaking?" And "This is so-and-so speaking." The scope of usage to a conception will be different in different cultures. Take names for example, sister and brother are simple words in English which include all ages in this scope, regardless of concrete senior or junior age, which in Chinese, names are much more detailed and complicated. They are elder sister and younger sister, elder brother and younger brother etc. The

similar example is also embodied in the name of “cousin“ which is just the general name in English. But in Chinese we put cousin in very detailed way according to the blood-relationship with one's parents embodying not only concrete age, but also different sexes, such as cousin. Chinese have a saying of “red or white thing“, it is not difficult to understand “Red is good thing“ once connected red with having a baby, marriage or birthday congratulations etc which westerners call “the red-letter day“. But they couldn't understand why Chinese think it to be “a happy thing“ when someone passed away. In fact, in western culture, the connotation of “Red and White“ is contrary with that of Chinese custom; westerners often associate Red with blood and death sometimes with radical action or rebellion, which carries a certain political color. Also, red can bring their minds to debts or deficits.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In order for Chinese people and English people to communicate in spoken language in everyday situations, it is not just a simple case of learning vocabulary and grammar and then making conversation. It involves an understanding of culture and values so that when speaking the other language, the proper vocabulary is used in the proper way and in the proper context. It may or may not be appropriate to use certain terms which are used in one country because they may not be necessary or indeed may be totally misunderstood if directly translated and used in the other country. By viewing the historical background of Chinese people and English people traditional cultures; a better understanding of why we communicate in certain ways can be reached. As can be seen by the examples looked at, the differences between Chinese culture and values with the emphasis on hierarchy and the group and the relatively young culture of English with its emphasis on the individual do have an effect on how people communicate. Conflict, misunderstandings and embarrassment can be avoided if people have an awareness of these differences and therefore act appropriately. Then both Chinese people and English people can communicate more effectively and comfortably. With the development of our country's economy, international exchange and cooperation becomes closer and closer. The process of communication in which people in different cultural backgrounds are engaged is Intercultural Communication. And language is the most basic and important media to intercultural communication. Therefore, as a foreign language learner we should fully understand the culture of the language. It is unquestionable that the relationship between language and culture is very close. Language is the carrier of culture. The process of learning a foreign language is also the process of understanding this country's culture. The degree of mastering this country's cultural background knowledge influences directly one's capability of using the language. It is the premise of using the language properly. Different cultures add the most colorful element to the world of 21st century. The cultural gap should not be the obstacle to the civilization of human being. It ought to be the motivation of our going farther.

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