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Cultural Differences in Compliments

DIFFÉRENCES CULTURELLES DANS LES COMPLIMENTS

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Abstract: Today, English has become the most widely used language in the world. So understanding and knowing about cultural differences play a more and more important role in intercultural communication. There are various cultural differences between English language and Chinese language, such as greetings, form of address, politeness and social dos and don'ts shape. This paper mainly studies praise and compliments, and analyzes the following aspects: social functions; the sentence patterns of praise language; usage mode and concerned topics, the ways to respond, as well as the social causes of these cultural differences. Therefore, English learners should grasp social cultural knowledge of China and western countries when they studying English. In that case, people could avoid misunderstanding in intercultural communication.

Key words: Intercultural communication, cultural difference, praise and compliments, social cause

Résumé : Aujourd'hui, l'anglais est devenu la langue la plus populaire au monde . Donc , la compréhension et la connaissance des différences culturelles jouent un rôle de plus en plus important dans la communication interculturelle . De diverses différences culturelles existent entre l'anglais et le chinois , telles que la salutation , formule de s'adresser , de politesse , etc . Ce texte étudie principalement les louanges et les compliments , et analyse ces aspects ci-dessous : fonction sociale , les expressions de louange , la mode d'usage , les thèmes concernés , les moyens pour répondre ainsi que les causes sociales de ces différences culturelles . Par conséquent , les apprenants d'anglais doivent maîtriser les connaissances de la culture sociale chinoise et celles des pays occidentaux quand ils apprennent l'anglais . Dans ce cas , on pourrait éviter les malentendus le plus possible dans la communication interculturelle .

Mots-clés : communication interculturelle, différence culturelle, louange et compliment, cause sociale

1. INTRODUCTION

When people with different culture communicate with each other, they will inevitably meet with some cultural differences. This paper mainly discusses one aspect of these cultural differences---praise and compliments. Firstly, it states the relationship between culture and language. There are various cultures in the world, if people use a foreign language without knowing the

culture, they will misunderstand each other in communication. Therefore while learning foreign language, people should also learn the relative cultures. Secondly, some cultural differences between China and western countries will be analyzed. Such as greetings, form of address, politeness and social dos and don'ts shape, appreciation and praise and compliments. Then it discusses that praise and compliments in intercultural communication are different expressions: social functions, the sentence patterns of praise language, usage modes and concerned topics, the ways to respond, as well as the social causes of these cultural differences.

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Thirdly, it discusses that people should know foreign culture when communicating with foreigners.

2. CULTURE AND LANGUAGE

The term "cross-cultural" or intercultural usually refers to the meeting of two cultures or two languages across the political boundaries of nation-states. They are predicated on the equivalence of one-nation one-culture one-language, and on the expectation that a "culture shock" may take place upon crossing national boundaries. In foreign language teaching a cross-cultural approach seeks ways to understand the other on the other side of the border by learning his/her national language. (Quoted from Claire Kramsch 2001, P81.)

So learning the relationship between culture and language is very important. People should know cultural differences in the communication of different cultures and different languages, and the importance of understanding cultural differences.

2.1 The relation between culture and language

There are more than 2000 languages in the world, and each language has its relative culture. Generally speaking, language is an initial part of culture, which plays an important role in culture. First, language expresses culture through using words, sentences. People express facts, ideas or events by using language, which is the way to spreading their culture. Second, language embodies culture. When people communicate with others, his tone of voice, accent, conversational style, gestures and facial expression will show his own culture. Third, language symbolizes culture. Language is also a signal system of its own cultural values, so people view language as a symbol of their social identity.

Language and culture influence each other deeply.

Etiquettes, expression of politeness, social dos and don'ts shape, people's behaviors are formed through child rearing, and behavioral upbringing, schooling, professional training. (Quoted from Claire Kramsch. 2001, P14.)

2.2 The importance of learning cultural differences

In this open modern society, intercultural language will be more and more important in communication, which has become a conspicuous character of modern communication. Anyone who has lived with different cultures could find the differences of speaking styles from others. Therefore, it is necessary for people to know that intercultural differences are not only about

the words, grammar, and pronunciations people use, but also about the ways of using language. But cultural differences among using languages are usually neglected and underestimated. Only when understanding the cultural differences and with a sincere hope to exchange with others, you will overcome the exchange obstacles.

Many scholars study on cultural differences realize that: First, people with different culture, different society, and different group have different speaking style. Second, the speaking styles are different extraordinarily, but the differences are systematic. Third, the differences of speaking styles reflect the differences in cultural value. Forth, the differences of speaking styles and communicative methods only explained in different culture and value system. (Jia Yuxin.1998:P275.)

Therefore learning a language should not only study pronunciation, grammar, words and idioms, but also know the history and the cultural background, the native's view of life, way of life, thinking style. Many people master words, grammar, and pronunciations of foreign language, but they couldn't communicate with foreigners freely or without any communicative obstacle, because they don't understand that culture plays an important role in intercultural communication. People usually master and consolidate linguistic knowledge and understand relative culture clearly through using, conversely that knowing the system of language and understanding cross-cultural differences can improve the ability of using English. So only when people grasp the social cultural knowledge of China and western countries, people could communicate with others smoothly and successfully.

3. CONTRAST ON PRAISE AND COMPLIMENTS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND CHINESE LANGUAGE

There are two forms of intercultural communication: language communication and non-language communication. Language communication also has two forms: spoken language communication and written language communication. Paper will discuss some cultural differences in spoken language communication briefly, and mainly discuss praise and compliments.

3.1 Some cultural differences

People greet to each other every day, but they greet with different things, words and methods in different countries. But if a Chinese greets an American by asking him or her "Where are you going?" or "Have you eaten yet?" the American might feel very uncomfortable because asking these questions could be interpreted as an invasion of privacy. Similarly, Chinese will feel

puzzled when foreigners talk about weather as a greeting to Chinese.

In China people know they should respect the old, the higher status, and cherish the young, the lower status. He calls the old with respectful form of address formally, calls the young with nickname. But in American people who speak English usually call other's name (such as, Tom, Michael, Linda, Sue.), but not use Mr. or Miss or Mrs. (such as Mr. summers, or Miss Howard, or Mrs. Stones.)

In American street, you could hear “Thank you” and “Sorry” frequently, in Chinese, people show their appreciation not to say “Thank you”, and Chinese sometimes are afraid of losing face; they would like to apologize tactfully, indirectly.

Chinese expression is implicit and modest, but people should not answer a foreigner’s compliments and praises in a negative way. People from English countries ask others to come in room first, say “After you” but not “Please”.

Social dos and don’ts shape are different between Chinese culture and English culture. In English countries, people should not visit others without dating a time; going to a party should not arrive early but on time. People should not ask question about others’ private affairs: age, weight, salary and so on.

3.2 Mainly contrastive analyze praise and compliments

Many English learners have known that in English, the right answer to other’s praise and compliments is “Thank you”, which is different from Chinese self-effecting answer. However, “Thank you” is only one kind of answer, the situation is more complex in real communications. It will discuss the differences between English and Chinese praise and compliments from the sentence patterns of praise language, usage modes and concerned topics, respond and social functions, as well as social causes of cultural differences.

3.2.1 Social functions of praise and compliments

Praise and compliments is a kind of communicative action. It creates and keeps the harmony of human

relationships, and is used as greetings, encouragement and so on.

In American society people usually widely use praise and compliments, which plays an important role in communication. Gradually, using praise and compliments become a custom just like regards, thanks and apology. In American society, people encourage some admirable actions with praise and compliments. For example, in school, teacher always use praise to encourage students in teaching, with the sentences “ You know something, Tom. You did a good job.” People also build and keep social relation with praise, and usually use them instead of apologies, regards and thanks, such as “ That’s a delicious dinner.” “Thanks for having us.” They also use praise to appease artistic atmosphere. Two good friends will praise each other before they appraise other's deeds frankly. When two companies or friends who have not seen each other for a long time meet again, they will compliment each other firstly instead of regards. Praise and compliments also be as the introduction of conversation. Praise and compliments play the same role in China. Praise could improve human’s relationship, and people like to hear other’s praise. When Chinese people meet old friend also greeting each other with the words “You looks younger/more beautiful than before.” Sometimes after people having dinner in friend’s house, they will praise that dinner is very delicious. The principle of Chinese people praising others is making others feel better. So in China people should pay attention to the words that are used to praise others.

3.2.2 Contrast the differences of the sentence pattern of praise language

People usually use complimentary words to praise others, such as “nice”, “good”, “beautiful”, “pretty” and “great”. The function of praise and compliments becomes more and more important, so the praise language becomes standardized.

After Wolfsan’s and other linguists’ study, they found there are many sentence patterns used differently in English language and Chinese language in praise and compliments.

They are:

| The sentence patterns of praise language in English | The sentence patterns of praise language in Chinese |
|---|--|
| N is/look (really) ADJ. Your blouse is beautiful. You are so efficient. | (Your) N (ADV) ADJ. (Your) this sweater really nice. (Your) V N (ADV) ADJ. (You) wear this coat really beautiful. N (you V) (ADV) ADJ This job you did really well. |
| I (really) like/love N. PRON is (really) an ADJ N. That is a nice wall hanging. | PRON is (really) (a) ADJ N. |
| You V (a) (really) ADJ N. What (a) ADJ N. ADJ N! Nice game! | You V (a) (really) ADJ N. What (a) ADJ N! ADJ N! (ADV) ADJ! (Really) smart! |

(Jia Yuxin. 1998: P363. quoted from Wolfson. N, Socialinguistics, Newbury House Publishers, 1989,pp109_124.)

The first three patterns in the table are used frequently. In Chinese the sentence pattern of N (ADV) ADJ is the main structure, examples in Chinese compliment language shows that “really” is the one word which is necessary in the sentences, or the meaning of the sentence is not showed clearly. So adverbs play an important role in compliment language, they could strengthen the compliment. People often use (ADV) ADJ to praise others. In English language people prefer to use the sentence pattern “ I like/love ...”. They usually use third person and use first person in their compliment language. But in Chinese, people often use the sentence pattern “You ...” use second person, such as “This job you did perfectly.” “You wear this skirt really beautiful.” But not the first person “I like /love N” is not strong enough to praise others. There are also same sentence patterns of compliment language in Chinese language and English language, such as last three patterns could be used in both languages.

3.2.3 Concerned topics and usage modes

According to some scholars’ opinions, contain and topics of praise and compliments mainly refer to two facets, one of which is about appearance and belongings, and the other is about ability and achievements.

In American culture praise, other’s appearances or belongings is a common phenomena. Any person could praise others. No matter how about a lady’s age, social status, and job, her appearance is the object of compliment forever; people think she is a lady. Maybe a man speaks to his female superior: “You looks so pretty when you smile, you should do it often.” But in China, complimenting female’s appearance is not permitted. A middle-aged man who just comes back from American complimented a Chinese woman, “Ah, you looks so beautiful and young.” The woman’s face turn red and she said, “No, no. Don’t play joke with me.”

About contain and topics of praise and compliments, there are some cultural differences. Westerners like to praise other’s changes and differences, but Chinese don’t.

In American society, usually person who has higher status compliment about ability and achievement of who has lower status in that people keep normal relationship between superior and subordinate. For Americans, appraising to other’s ability or achievement is a serious matter, so only people who are qualified can appraise others. But in Chinese culture, it is different in this aspect. People generally don’t compliment other’s ability and achievement, only some young man praise superior’s ability or achievement in order to give deep impression to superior.

3.2.4 Response to compliments

How to explain and respond to compliment is a complex question. In American life, people not only say “Thank you” to other’s compliment but also do other responds.

In 1979 A. Pomegranates, K. Herbert and others

study on responds to praise and compliments in American English. They divided responds to two types: *Agreement and No agreement. Each type has five different situations.* (Quoted from Herbert. R. K, "Thank you or something", American Speech, 61(1), 1986a, pp76_88. Sex Based Differences in Compliment Behavior, paper presented at the American anthropological Association meeting, 1986)

When people agree with other's idea, most of American people will take appreciation. People use “Thanks”, “Thank you” or smiling respond to compliment. Or they show their same opinion with “Me, too.” A few people would like to upgrade other's praise. For example,

Male 1: Looks like a good man this year.

Make 2: Thanks. Healthy complexion makes me look even more handsome, doesn't it?

In the example, the second man say “Healthy complexion makes me look even more handsome, doesn't it?”, which shows the second man think he is better than before, he could upgrade praise. But there is only a few people using this way to respond to other. Hearing other's compliment, if you also agree with them, you could use commenting history, reassignments or return to respond to other's praise and compliments.

More Chinese people like to disagree with other’s compliment; contractively, American people like to agree other’s compliment. Chinese prefer to sale down and point out the fault.

Female: That’s a nice watch.

Male: It’s all scratched up and I’m getting a new one.

Generally speaking, Chinese people usually use questioning and scale down to other’s praise, and people don’t like to praise others, and don’t often use return way. But Americans like to use return way to respond to other’s praise. So there are differences between Chinese and American response to praise and compliments. The way Chinese choose to response may be the way American avoids to choose. Without understanding these cultural differences, cultural strike will happen in communication.

3.2.5 Social causes of this cultural difference

In fact, the cultural differences of praise and compliments are reflections of differences of both Chinese and American cultures.

First of all, American culture is taking individualism as a main orientation, compliment language is extremely important ---- the important facet to protect interpersonal relationships. But Chinese culture is taking groups, relation, and others as orientation; compliment language plays a different role from that of American culture, and is used not as frequently as in American English. The cultural differences are caused by two society’s structures of traditional culture.

In China, a nation with modesty as virtue, everyone should respect the old and cherish the young. In American culture, everybody is deep-rooted with the minds of "Everyone is equal", and pursuits that. The individualism of American makes people incline to express the view and opinion from the self- angle even more, in using compliment language, they like to use the structure of the first person very much. Chinese group or others' orientation makes people try one's best to narrow oneself in communication; the utilization of the first person in compliment language is not frequent.

3. CONCLUSION

Language of a society is a factor of its culture; the relationship between language and culture is the relation of fraction and integer. In intercultural communication language is a main tool to learn culture; people could learn the whole culture during learning and using language. For Chinese students, they are lack

understanding the differences among different culture and true language environment, and easily transplant the Chinese mode of thinking to English while expressing. For example, if you greet an American by saying "Hi/Hello!" but not by asking "Where are you going/Have you eaten yet?". In that case, you do wrong, and your foreign friend will think you intervene his privacy. So how misunderstandings can be minimized when people communicate with others from different cultures is important for people to do. The direct way to solve the problem is learning and grasping the relative social culture of your foreign language, understanding the culture differences well, and grasping the ways to communicate with westerners. Understanding cultural norms and rules such as the way we are expected to greet others, and the way we are expected to answer questions also are important in improving communications with people with other cultures. People could consolidate linguistic knowledge of foreign country and spoken ability during their practice. Therefore people could do wonderful performance in intercultural communications.

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