The Influences of Cultural Different Politeness on the use of address terms in Chinese and in English Discourse

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Abstract—Address terms are words used to address others and oneself. It plays an important role in discourse, for it indicates the discourse afterwards as well as gives the counterpart a good impression by using the appropriate forms. The correct and appropriate use of address terms closely relates to the culture. There is a certain gap between Chinese culture and western culture, which contributes a great deal to Chinese and English languages. However, polite utterance with appropriate addressing always facilitates successful communication in all cultures. Therefore, in order to make a smooth communication in discourse, usually starting with addresses, it is quite significant to understand politeness in the use of address terms. Based on cultural different politeness theories in both China and west, this paper analyzes the different use of Chinese and English address in discourse under different circumstances. Only through fully comprehending the cultural featured politeness can address terms be used appropriately and serve the successful communication.

Keywords—Address terms, Discourse, Politeness theory, Cultural difference.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Language equivalence and awareness of culture differences are essential in communication between different languages. Address terms are frequently used in discourse and indeed the indispensable part of discourse, whatever speech, letter, announcement, conversation, etc. Appropriate address always contributes to efficient and successful intercourse. Politeness, as a common rule guiding people’s daily conversation and behavior in the culture, is important in the process of cross-culture communication. Address terms should obey the rule of politeness as well as cultural customs to insure the success of intercourse. Though politeness seems a unified common guide, it shows some extent of differences in different languages and cultures. If one doesn’t pay enough attention to the differences of politeness in the appropriate use of address terms, he or she may suffer pragmatic failure, or even offend others. In this paper, the author compares Chinese and western people’ addressing ways under various circumstances from the aspect of politeness theory, As for the politeness theory, Leech’s theory and Brown and Levinson’s face in west and G Yueguo’s theory in China are theoretical cornerstone in this paper.

II. THE POLITENESS THEORY

When the term “politeness” is mentioned, it generally refers to the meaning as being polite to others, e.g. one should say thanks to those who offer help, or say sorry to those who he or she offends. However, the politeness here is the surface of language use. The principle of politeness is a much more complicated matter in any language, which involves understanding not only the language but the
social and cultural values of the people.

2.1 Politeness Theory in the West

In western countries, nobody knows Leech, Brown and Levinson when speaking of politeness theory. Leech’s principle of politeness and Brown and Levinson’s face theory are most influential and successful to interpret politeness. Both of the two theories have a common base on Grice’s cooperative principle (CP), which aims at “making one’s conversational contribution such as it is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange (conversation) in which you are engaged”. [1] However, people always flout on this principle. Under these circumstances, they are not unwilling to be cooperative, but wanting to be more polite. So, the two theories are the supplement to the explanations of CP in authentic context. For example:

A: We’ll all miss Bill and Agatha, won’t we?
B: Well, we’ll miss Bill

This dialogue conveys the information that B doesn’t miss Agatha, but in order to avoid awkwardness, B chooses an indirect way to express his idea. Here, B wants to be cooperative, or he won’t answer. But B also needs to make his words more acceptable. So he has to satisfy politeness first.

Leech [2] defines politeness as forms of behavior that are aimed at the establishment and maintenance of comity, i.e. the ability of participants in a social-communicative interaction to engage in interaction in an atmosphere of relative harmony. He divided the principle of politeness into six maxims, each consisting of two sub-maxims:

1) Tact Maxim
   a. Minimize cost to other;
   b. Maximize benefit to other.
2) Generosity Maxim
   a. Minimize benefit to self;
   b. Maximize cost to self.
3) Approbation Maxim
   a. Minimize dispraise to other ;
   b. Maximize praise of other.
4) Modesty Maxim
   a. Minimize praise of self;
   b. Maximize praise of other.
5) Agreement Maxim
   a. Minimize disagreement between self and other;
   b. Maximize agreement between self and other.
6) Sympathy Maxim
   a. Minimize antipathy between self and other;
   b. Maximize sympathy between self and other.

The face theory put forward by Brown and Levinson [3], which was based on the face notion raised by Erving Goffman in the late 50s of the last century. This theory rests on three notions: face, face threatening act (FATs) and politeness strategies. They define face as an “individual’s self-esteem” or the “public self image” that every member has rationality wants to claim for himself/ herself. They then divide it into two parts: positive face and negative face. Positive face is a person’s desire to be appreciated and approved by others, while negative face is a person’s desire to be unimpeded by others, to be free to act without being imposed upon.

2.2 Politeness Theory in China

In China, a close equivalent term for politeness is Limao, advocated by the ancient Chinese philosopher and thinker Confucius, whose main purpose was to keep the hierarchy system of the society. The Chinese concept of politeness has a strong trace of moral and political goals as it helps to maintains social hierarchy and order. In modern Chinese, the first scholar to introduce politeness theory is Gu Yueguo, who is a student of Leech. Based on his teacher’s politeness principles, Gu Yueguo[4] conducted a research on Chinese principle of politeness. He then concluded it into five parts:

1) Self Denigration Maxim
   a. Denigrate self;
   b. Elevate other.
2) Address Term Maxim
   Address your interlocutor with an appropriate address term.
3) Refinement Maxim
   It means the use of refined language and a ban on foul language.
4) Agreement maxim
   It refers to efforts made by both interlocutors to
maximize agreement and harmony and minimize disagreement.

5) Virtues–Words–Deeds Maxim
   It refers to minimizing cost and maximizing benefit to other at the motivational level, and maximizing benefit received and minimizing cost to self at the conversational level.

2.3 Comparison of Politeness in China and West

2.3.1 The Similarity between Chinese and Western Politeness
   The six maxims of Leech’s politeness principle call for benefits for hearers. When there are disagreements in conversation, speaker should try to reduce disagreements. In the exchange, speaker should try his best to give more convenience to listeners or the third party, and take them as the centre of the conversation. Or he will be taken as being impolite to move away from the centre. In conversations, graceful expressions are appreciated.

   In Chinese conversations, speakers also try to avoid being self-centered. Self-denigration calls for denigration to self and apprising to listeners or the third-party. When there is any disagreement, speakers should first praise or admit others and show the preciousness of the common points that the two enjoy. Then, speakers point out the disagreements. In Chinese conversations, people also like to use graceful words.

2.3.2 The differences between Chinese and Western Politeness
   In Chinese, rules for address terms are quite complicated. Under the influence of feudal ethics and Confucian culture, people are supposed to obey “仁”(Benevolence) and “禮”(Propriety) strictly. As the author has mentioned, primal use of Limao is to keep the social hierarchy. Therefore, it is very important to rectify or to have everyone has his appropriate name. People do this to show they are members of the society or the community.

   In China, self-denigration is a typical cultural phenomenon. There are many terms used for respectfulness. Such as “请教”、“高见”、“光临”“愚见”、“拜读”、“寒舍”、“鄙下” and so on. However, these terms are almost impossible to find equivalent terms in English.

III. CULTURAL FACTORS INFLUENCING CHINESE AND WESTERN POLITENESS

3.1 Individualism in Western Culture Vs Collectivism in Chinese Culture
   Individualism, according to Longman English-Chinese Dictionary, means "the idea that the rights and freedom of the individual are the most important rights in a society". It was the individualism that lead to the emancipation of man from the yokes of the church on the European continent, while with the opening up of the New World on the other side in China, due to the tradition and customs, people believe in collectivism, which means "the system under which the means of production are owned and controlled by the state or the people as a whole" according to Longman Dictionary. That's why individualism, if put into Chinese, frequently means selfishness, just the opposite of collectivism. Individualism is the highest value in Western culture and society. English speakers value individualism and believe that each person has his own unique identity and personality. They emphasize personal importance and self-esteem and uphold that every individual is a unique center of values, and a person should live and achieve his own personal goals. The core of individualism is the pursuit of personal happiness and achievements. Individualism is not selfishness but rather a virtue for English speakers.

   However, Chinese culture is collectivism-oriented. It is characterized by individuals subordinating their personal goals to the goals of some collectives. As Liang Shuming put[5], “In the individual-rights-centered western society, the concept of rights is cherished by everybody; on the contrary, in the duty-conscious Chinese society, individual rights have no place.” Chinese society advocates that individual must obey collective wishes; it upholds unselfishness and emphasizes devotion to others without any thinking of self. The individual in China is emotionally dependent on organizations and institutions; the Chinese culture emphasizes belonging and loyalty to
groups or organizations. In China, Everyone is supposed to have and know his place in the Chinese culture, just as individualism is the predominant norm or value in American culture.

3.2 Assertive Characteristic in Western and Chinese Culture

According to Hulbert, the characteristic of assertive is a belief in the following rights: firstly, assertive people believe that individuals have the rights to be treated with respect. They value others as well as themselves and desire fairness in interpersonal relationship; secondly, assertive people even believe that individuals have the rights not to assert themselves at times. People are entitled to establish their own properties, to make mistakes, to suffer the consequences, and to the ultimate judges of their own actions.

Under this circumstance, people emphasize both on respecting others and valuing self. They would not sacrifice much of self’s benefits to satisfy others’ needs. Interactions are carried on in an atmosphere of cooperation and mutual respect. When conflicts occur, self’s needs, feelings are given priority to others’ because people are entitled to establish their own properties. Therefore, they can express their thoughts and opinions directly and appropriately. If one’s behavior brings inconvenience to others, others can tell him or her directly and listen to his or her explanation; and if what one said or did makes others unhappy, they will immediately let him or her know and listen to his or her explanation, too.

Whereas Non-assertiveness echoes the quintessential aspect of Chinese limao, i. e. "humble oneself friendly and cooperate in the still not-so-hostile confrontation. The Chinese people's non-assertiveness determines that one usually downplays self's contribution (offering, inviting, suggesting, achievement, quality etc.). It is in accordance with the four notions (respectfulness, modesty, attitudinal warm the PP and its sub-maxims (Self-denigration, Address, Generosity and Tact) formulated by Gu in his summary of Chinese politeness. To non-assert self means to put other's face, wants, self-esteem, self-worth, interests, rights, etc, ahead of one's own. And non-assertive behavior accounts for a large part of the Chinese people's everyday behavior. Non-assertiveness well reveals itself in the Chinese people's self-denigrating practice.

IV. ANALYSIS ON THE USE OF ADDRESS TERMS IN CHINESE AND ENGLISH DISCOURSE

Due to the cultural differences, politeness influences Chinese and western languages differently. When Chinese students learn English, they may transfer Chinese conventions into the using of English, which results into pragmatic failures. Hence, the author will compare different address terms in these two cultures.

4.1 Address terms in Kinship Relation

Address terms in China are often representations of each other’s relationships. It is widely accepted that only when everyone knows his position can this society be harmonious. Relationships among family members, colleagues, and between teacher and student, higher authority and lower level are much complicated. Chinese kinship terms make distinction between paternal kin and maternal kin; English kinship terms do not. For example, in Chinese, “zufu”(祖父) refers to paternal grandfather, and “waizufu”（外祖父） refers to maternal grandfather; while in English, there is only one term “grandfather”.

Furthermore, in Chinese, paternal kinship terms are more complicated. Chinese kinship terms make distinction between paternal kin and maternal kin; English kinship terms do not. The paternal uncles are further divided into “Bofu”（伯父） and “shufu”( 叔父) according to their age. The elder brother of father is addressed “Bofu”（伯父），and the younger brother of father is addressed “shufu”( 叔父) The maternal uncles are “Dajiu”（大舅）, “Erjiu”（二舅） etc, according to their age.

Spouses of paternal uncles are addressed “Bomu”（伯母）, and spouses of “Shufu”（叔父） are called “Shenmu”（婶母） The spouses of paternal uncles are called “Jiumu”（舅
In English, there are only two terms to replace them all, which are “Uncle” and “Aunt”, making no distinction between paternal kinship and maternal kinship and their age.

As have been mentioned above, Chinese kinship terms strictly distinguish age; English kinship terms do not. In Chinese, there are four kinship terms for siblings: “Gege” (哥哥), “Didi” (弟弟), “Jiejie” (姐姐) and “Meimei” (妹妹). If there are several siblings, the order of age should be marked. Prefixes such as “Da” (大) (the eldest), “Er” (二) (the second), such as the 二姑娘，三姑娘，宝二爷 in A Dream of Red Chamber(e.g.1). In English, there are only two kinship terms for siblings, “Brother” and “Sister”. The relative age of a sibling to a certain people is not marked. So, they will not tell whether it is 二姑娘 or 三姑娘, and just use lady to replace them all; 宝二爷 is replaced by Master Pao, without mentioning his order in age. Besides, Chinese kinship terms distinguish paternal uncle’s children and maternal uncle’s children. In Chinese, terms for sons or daughters of “Shushu” are added “Tang” (堂), while term for children of “Jiujiu” are added “Biao” (表). However, in English, there is “Cousin” to replace them all.

e.g. 1.忽见素云进来说: “我们奶奶请二位姑娘商议要紧的事呢。二姑娘，三姑娘，四姑娘，史姑娘，宝二爷，都等着呢。”（第四十二回）
Just then Su-yun came into announce: “Our Mistress wants you both to go and discuss important business. All the other young ladies are there with Master Pao.”

4.2 Address of Titles

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2.贾夫人仙逝扬州城，冷子兴演说荣国府。（第二回）
Lady Chia in the city of Yangchow, Leng Tzu-hsing describes the Jung Mansion [6]

The example is taken from one of Chinese literature masterpieces A Dream of Red Mansion, together with their counterparts in English, which is translated by Yang Xianyi and his wife Dai Naidie (Gladys B. Tayler). The address terms “贾夫人” are simply translated into “Lady Chia”. The English equivalences of the address term is basically based on the social individual respect, with “lady” “Mr.”, whereas, influenced by Confucian culture, Chinese address terms of titles are strictly stick to “仁” “礼” “忠” and hierarchy, especially in previous dynasties throughout China.

Therefore, address terms of titles in Chinese discourse are much more various than those in English discourse. By the way of illustration, in China, address terms such as “张老师”, “李律师”, “王医生”, “李经理”, “胡总书记” and so on are quite common. As for the address “太老爷” in A Dream of Red Mansion, it’s quite difficult to find an equivalent term in English. In English, there are only few forms to address titles, such as “Doctor Smith”, “Prof. White”. High officials in government are addressed in accordance with their posts in discourse, such as “Mr. President”, “Mr. Ambassador”, “and Mr. Colonel” and so on. When addressing other posts, people only use Mr./Mrs./Miss+ Surname. Thus, the translation of “太老爷” can only be “you” or “Mr. X”, while “张老师”, conventionally, cannot be addressed as Teacher Zhang, nor “王医生” be addressed as Doctor Wang, etc.

4.3 Address Terms of Social Relations

In China, we can address strangers “Laoyeye”(老爷爷), “Dajiejie”(大姐姐), “Wangma”(王妈),
“Nongminbobo” (农民伯伯) and so on. All these terms illustrate Chinese people’s sense of unity and the spirit of “All are brothers within this country”. However, people do not use them randomly in English. To call someone “uncle” or “aunt”, they should be relatives. The address terms as “sister” and “brother” can not be used among strangers, except among people believing in God, for they hold themselves as children of God.

4.4 Address Terms of Names

Address terms of names include surname and giving name. The forms of Chinese names are with surname in the beginning and giving name coming after, which is contrary to western names. This difference has profound historical roots. In a patriarchal-rooted society, surname is the representation of status as well as one’s duty and rights. So in China, a person is known by his family name first, and then his individual identity. This is also in accordance with China’s spirit of collective superiority while individual inferiority. However, in West, there is no such sense as the unity of family and country, and they cherish individualism and assertive characteristics a lot. A person is known by his own name first.

An interesting phenomenon is the use of “Lao” in Chinese. In China, people respect those who are elder, for they are considered to have done lots of contributions to the society. So, anyone who is experienced or old, “Lao” is usually added in front of people’s surname, such as “Lao Wang” (老王), “Lao Shifu” (老师傅) etc, to show our respect or close relationship to them. However, “Lao” in English contains the meaning as useless and helpless. Therefore, it is seldom used, contrarily, if you call an old man “Lao”, you will offend him.

4.5 Address Terms of Dexit

雨村道: “.....后知火焚草亭，鄙下身为惶恐。今日幸得相逢，益叹老仙翁道德高深。耐鄙人下愚不移，至有今日。”（第一百十回）

(Yu-tsun replied) “Later I was very worried to hear that your temple had been burned down. Now that I am luck enough to meet you again. I am sure your virtue must be even greater. As for me, owning to my own inveterate folly, I’ve now been reduces to this.” (From A Dream of Red Mansion) [6]

The address term “鄙下” is a typical cultural phenomenon self-denigration in China. In Chinese discourse or communication, people usually denigrated themselves to show respectfulness to the audience. Due to the cultural differences, it is impossible to find English equivalent terms in the discourse above.

Chinese people also tend to address others 您, 尊, 贵 etc, to show their respect, and use 鄙人, 晚生, 小的 etc, to refer to self to designate self. However, English address terms seldom show the social level of the addressee. They just use “I” or “You” to express the meanings above. “You” can be an equivalent word for both “ni”(你) and “nin”(您). Besides, Chinese people often use “咱们” or “我们” to replace “我”, such as “这苹果咱们那儿多着呢!”, or “我们在本文提出的论点还不成熟”; And they like to use “我们” to replace “你们”, such as “我们同学想一想, 这样持之以恒, 怎能不成功?” From the above, we can find that how Chinese people value unity and collectivism. They hold that every people should infuse into the collective. In daily conversation, the uses of English and Chinese terms also perform lots of differences. For instance, the differences are clearly displayed in the following two conversations:

Chinese version  A:您贵姓?(Your precious surname?)
B:免贵姓 X.(Without being precious, my surname is X?)

English version  A: What’s your name?
B: My name is X. [7]

When A refers to B’s surname, he elevates it as "precious surname", whereas in mentioning his own

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surname, the first two words he utters are mian gui (免贵)-to remove gui(贵:Precious) a pure honorific signifier.

In old China, A might go as: jian xingX (贱姓X: My worthless surname is X- denigration of self to the extreme).

To denigrate self and elevate other has long been a well-established tradition in Chinese culture. What self-denigrating exhibits is modesty, a virtue widely perceived by Chinese. It is universally acknowledged that to be modest is another way to show politeness. But the Chinese people's concept of modesty differs from the English one to a large extent. In this respect, non-assertiveness is best displayed. For example, when complimented, an English-speaking person would readily accept the compliment by saying something like "Thank you" to show his appreciation of the praise, but a Chinese would generally murmur some reply about being modest and it is naturally regarded to be proper response and behavior.

From the statements above, it is obvious that Chinese address terms are vertical or hierarchical, while western forms are reciprocal or symmetrical. It is because Chinese people from their origin pay much attention to the hierarchy. Only when everyone in the society has their clear position and address term can they keep the social order. However, the western people are instilled the spirit of freedom and individualism since their birth. Their best concern is to have their free rights to do anything they want instead of group harmony, so they prefer negative face more.

V. CONCLUSION

Generally speaking, people from English-speaking countries value individual and assertive characteristics, while their counterpart in China cherishes collective and non-assertive characteristics. This is closely related to historical and cultural elements. These differences result in different politeness in address forms in these two cultures. Chinese people tend to be self-denigration and collective, they have their own system of address terms. However, western people cherish individual value and equality. They hold the opinion that it is not their address terms that distinguish them, but their own deeds do. Their address terms show the characteristic of equality. Therefore, being aware of the cultural different politeness improves the communicative efficiency between Chinese speakers and English speakers thus avoid pragmatic failures in addressing others.

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