On Politeness in Cross-cultural Communication

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Abstract. “Politeness” is a frequently used word, but it is conceived and employed in different ways. Oriental culture applies “shame” while western culture uses “guilt” to regulate the morality of an individual. China is a country with a long history and the Chinese have shown respect for the elderly, seniority, rank, maleness, and family and family background. Confucianism embodies this attitude toward power and authority by stressing the benefits of fixed hierarchical relationships. Comparatively speaking, treating people according to their status and different contexts seem to violate the norms of western interpersonal relations which emphasize equality, fairness and informality. Therefore, how to deal with the cultural differences appropriately is a focus of world issues. This paper analyzes some phenomena of different behavior patterns of politeness in cross-cultural communication.

Introduction

Progress in telecommunications and transportation technologies has resulted in unprecedented growth in international trade in general (Laroche, 1999: 139). It brings people closer and at the same time it causes confrontations due to the cultural differences. As Hawley says, every social act is an exercise of power, every social relationship is a power equation, and every social group or system is an organization of power (Hawley, 1963: 422). What people say and how they relate to each other is influenced by the different values assigned to such dimensions as status and power, social distance and weight of imposition. So intercultural communication skills become extremely important in a shrinking world. This paper will discuss one of the dimensions—power distance.

Are you Leaving?

This question comes from the interesting experience of a Chinese student in America. One day, when the student was chatting with her classmates in the room, her teacher came in. So she stood up. Both the classmates and the teacher found it very strange. The teacher asked her: Are you leaving? The student didn’t know what to say and felt embarrassed. After several times, the Chinese student got to know some customs in America but she kept standing up in such situation since it had been an instinct act for her. In China, people will stand up when an elder person or a person with higher social status presents in order to show their respect and politeness. Students stand up when the teacher enters the classroom in the middle school. However, this is not necessary in the western countries and people will not understand it. With the open-to-the-outside policy, the Chinese have more contact with foreigners and begin to accept some of their cultures. It is generally recognized that the traditional Chinese culture embraces three different philosophies: the ideas of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. Among these three, Confucianism may be considered to have been the most influential one. Its essence is the maintenance of virtue in social harmony (Ma, 1997: 78). Moreover, respect for the elderly and hierarchical position is regarded as limao and jiaoyang (courteous and educated). Ages often have a determination of the hierarchical relations within the family. Even the Son of Heaven—the emperor—has to listen to laofoye. Children learn to respect elder members of their families who provide them with knowledge and sustenance. Younger children learn to submit
to older children. Respect to elders is not only within the nuclear family kinship group but is also extended to the community at large. Besides age, other dimensions of social organization within a culture such as experience, education and gender will determine social status which in turn influences a person’s behavior. As one grows, the image of power will be projected onto a teacher in the school, and later onto the individual’s boss or senior members of the company. The politeness approach leads to many forms of humbling oneself and praising others in China while it is considered courteous to approach another person with the stance that “You and I are equals” in the West.

Am I not Welcome?

An American teacher complains that his Chinese students always remain silent even when he deliberately makes some mistakes in class; however, the students talk among themselves actively after class. Thus, he considers himself not welcome by the students. Actually he misunderstands his students here. There are mainly three reasons for students’ silence in the above situation. The first is to show respect. The teacher-centered model of teaching in China becomes the norm of the educational process in which “teachers outline the intellectual paths to be followed” (Hofstede, 1991: 245) and students are particularly inclined to view their teachers in an idealized role endowed with a great deal of authority, esteem, and respect. Moreover, Chinese students do not only see the teacher as mediator or transmitter of knowledge, but also as an idealized role model, a resource for solving all types of human problems and a model for lifestyle as well. As one Chinese saying points out: Once your teacher, forever your father. But in west, teachers and students are expected to assume an equal position, and the educational process is student-centered, with a premium on student initiative. So the confrontation is due to the different concept systems on power distance. According to some investigation, the larger the power distance, the more students become dependent on teachers while the smaller the power distance, the more students become independent of teachers. Due to the value of respect for the hierarchical position, Chinese students tend to be silent in class and delay the question until the moment is right for it, namely, after class.

The second reason is concerning face. In the “shame” culture, everyone is trying to avoid loss of face. Hence, students will try to preserve their own face. In a public place like a classroom, students seldom speak out their opinions for fear of other students’ laugh. If they say something incorrect and inappropriate, they will lose face. In another situation, when students find their teacher making a mistake, they will not point it out for they consider it causing the teacher to lose his face. As Hofstede anticipates, cultures with high power distance ratios also tend to have high anxiety levels about the future, and correspondingly avoid risk-taking. The result is that silence is the best. Here, we can apply another Chinese saying: silence is gold.

The third reason is that under ordinary circumstances, it is quite inappropriate and therefore quite uncomfortable for a student to introduce a topic of his or her own in a communication with a teacher.

Everything has exceptions. In most situations, the Chinese maintain social distance through silence. However, under certain circumstances, they would show respect by speaking. For example, students greet their teachers in chorus at the beginning of classes.

They are so Impolite

Last week, I invited my foreign friends to my home to have dinner and my grandma is at my home. Those foreign friends are well educated and easygoing, but my grandma did not have a good impression upon them. I asked her why she didn’t like them, she said: “They are so noisy and address me by name. I’m much older than they are, so they should show respect to me! Furthermore, they didn’t pay attention to whether the elder people eat first but just ate what they liked.” Oh, this is the root for bad impression. This proves again how the neglect of intercultural differences may cause misunderstanding.

In China, people will avoid addressing the elderly or the person with higher hierarchical status
directly by name. For example, they will use the title of a teacher and never call them directly by name. The elder relatives are addressed as grandpa, grandma, aunt, uncle or other titles but never their names.

The westerners address their parents, teachers and even their bosses by name, which is viewed by them as closeness, whereas this closeness is regarded as lack of politeness in China. When having meal together, the Chinese will expect the elder or the one on a higher hierarchical position to eat first while the westerners tend to ignore it. The ignorance of power distance in different culture backgrounds may give you a bad name even without your notice.

**Which is Better?**

In the business world, power distance plays an extraordinary role. It determines the system of the organization and the ways of doing business. In low power distance country, managers like to see themselves as practical and systematic, and they admit a need for support. They are more likely to make decisions only after consultation with subordinates. Subordinates find it easier to cooperate with each other, and interdependence is stressed. Generally speaking, communication in lower power distance cultures is often more consultative and less literal, involving more feedback, creativity, and flexibility in interpretation and application. People are given rights as well as responsibility for the outcomes. This facilitates new product development during initiation stage by encouraging the contribution of diverse ideas and efforts from persons irrespective of their position. In contrast to the low power distance style, in high power distance countries, managers are seen as showing relatively little consideration but like to see themselves as benevolent decision-makers. Employees manage their work according to what the manager wants—or they intuit what he wants. Employees do not want to take the responsibility of the work. Thus, both the manager and the subordinate prefer that the superior closely oversee the whole work. Hierarchy in the workplace is structured like a pyramid: within this pyramid are clearly defined levels of authority and rand. Thus, most people tend to think power is negative and repressive. But it is only one of the aspects of power. Foucault writes: “If power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but say no, do you really think one could be brought obey it? What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn’t only weigh on us as a force, that says no, but that it traverses and produces things; it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression.”(Foucault, 1980: 119)

**Conclusion**

Different cultures may have totally different value systems, which in turn will lead to various attitude and behavior towards power. In China, the so-called Five Cardinal Relation (Wulun)—the relationships between sovereign and subject, father and son, elder brother and younger brother, husband and wife and, finally, between friends, still forms the basis of a strict hierarchical order which corresponds to each respective virtue: loyalty, respect of the son for his father, care, fidelity and sincerity. One of the important aspects of these structural relationships is that they serve as a foundation for social interaction. In western culture, latent harmony between the powerful and the powerless is accepted and people lay more emphasis on independence and initiative. People are more willing to take risks (Laroche, 1999: 60). However, those discussed above are just differences due to the conception of power and distance. There is no such kind of division as good or bad here. Culture consists of shared symbolic resources possessed by communities while it is constantly being reinterpreted, refashioned and regenerated by the individuals who make up the community. We have entered an era in which global organizations and corporations determine our economic and
social well being. Getting to know the cultural differences and respect each other’s customs are important for our future development.

References


