

An Analysis of a Miscommunication Example by Using Cultural Patterns

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Abstract: Politeness is culture-specific. What is polite in one culture may be impolite in another culture. This paper analyzes a miscommunication Example by using cultural patterns. When engage in intercultural communication, people should be always aware of their cultural differences and choose the polite way of communication.

1. A miscommunication example

Hall points out that “there is not one aspect of human life that is not touched and altered by culture” (Hall, 1977:14). Politeness is no exception. Politeness is culture-specific. What is polite in one culture may be impolite in another culture.

“Despite its universality, the actual manifestations of politeness, the ways to realize politeness, and the standards of judgment differ in different cultures” (He Zhaoxiong, 1995:3). Janet Holmes (1992:285) also asserted that “Linguistic politeness is culturally determined”. Let’s have a look at an example of miscommunication.

Below is a conversation on a plane between Liu Dahai who is a Chinese exporter and Benjamin King who is an American businessman and buys some of the products from Mr. Liu’s company.

Mr. King: By the way, my name is Benjamin King. My friends always call me Ben. This is my business card.

Mr. Liu: I’m Harry Liu. Very nice to meet you, Mr. King. And this is my card.

Mr. King: Oh, no. Please call me Ben. I believe that we’ll do a lot of business together.

Mr. Liu: Yes, I think so, too.

Mr. King (reading Mr. Liu’s card): “Liu, Dahai.” Dahai, I’ll call you tomorrow once I am settled at the hotel.

Mr. Liu (smiling): Ok. I’ll be expecting your call.

After separating, these two people have very different impressions of their conversation. Mr. Liu feels very uneasy with Mr. King, because Mr. King called him by his given name, Dahai, rather than either his western name, Harry, or Mr. Liu. This uneasiness caused him to smile. He thinks that Mr. King is not sensitive to cultural difference and it is going to be difficult to do business with him. As for Mr. King, he is very glad that he started a very good relationship with Mr. Liu on a first name basis and feels it will be easy to work with him by interpreting Mr. Liu’s simile as friendliness instead of embarrassment. The most pleasant point for Mr. King is that in regards to Mr. Liu’s Chinese background he used his given name, Dahai, instead of his western name, Harry, which might unnecessarily impose western culture on him.

2. Cultural patterns: American culture vs Chinese culture

Individualism and egalitarian have been the main points of social values since 18th century in Europe, and reach the extreme in North America now, while collectivism and hierarchy are the main characteristics of Chinese culture. The cultural differences between Chinese and American also lie in the different concerns on degree of people’s dependence on the group, power distance, assertiveness and privacy.

Cultures differ in their tendency to urge people to be independent or interdependent.

The American culture is predominantly individualism. Freedom and equality are the kernel of individualism. “Due respect to an individual’s liberty, his rights, his independence will be

considered polite, and lack of it will appear to an American-speaker to be improper, and even rude” (He, 1995:8).

While western cultures are individualistic, Chinese cultures place much emphasis on harmony among people, and between people and nature, and value collective judgment. The Chinese are more likely to be sensitive of the connections that they have as members of their social groups and the consequences of their behaviors on their group members. On the other hand, westerners are more likely to emphasize their independence and to be more conscious of their own freedom. In intercultural communication, it tends to be that a Chinese person who is from highly collectivistic culture would pay more attention others’ face and consider his/her own face as the face of his/her social group, such as his/her family, school or company, and that a westerner who is from more individualistic culture would always has his/her own face needs in his/her mind and consider his/her face just personally.

Cultures which are low in power-distance are organized around horizontal relationships, while cultures which are high in power distance are organized around hierarchical relationships. People from low power distance culture expect equal style communication and prefer the minimization of social inequalities, the reduction of hierarchical organizational structures, the wide questioning of authorities and the use of power only for legitimate aims. But people from high power distance culture more expect hierarchical communication and think that the hierarchy and inequality of the society are appropriate, that every social member has his/her rightful place in the society, that what the authority figures have done should not be challenged, and that authority figures can use their power to anything for any purpose in any way.

In the American-speaking culture, it is a common practice of children calling their parents by first names, but this would be very unpleasantly astonishing for Chinese children to do the same thing. In china, the ascending generations are believed to be prior and even superior to the following generations. This kind of hierarchical relationship is stressed by Confucius and even in the learning materials used in school now.

The most fundamental relationships in China are not horizontal, but hierarchical. From birth every individual is made know the debt that he/she owes to his/her own parents, children, and other offspring, and is gradually becoming aware of his/her duties and responsibilities to people who are before and to people who are after. The results of this emphasis on hierarchical relationships is that every member is well practiced in the forms of hierarchical communication from the very beginning of his/her life and that he/she may consider all relationships to be hierarchical at some degree. First everyone learns to respect those who are older than them, and when they are old enough themselves they learn to lead and guild those who are younger than them. If hierarchy is not based on age, then they would see it based on other things, such as education, gender, experience, political relation, geographical position, or one of the other aspects within the culture.

According to Hulbert (1986), there are two extremes of people’s behavior: passive and aggressive behavior, and assertive behavior lies between them.

Samovar and Mills (1988:66) remarks that “American culture is known for its assertiveness and aggressive style. Americans are expected to ‘stand for their right’ and even be confrontational should the situation call for such action.”

Hulbert (1986:75) says:

Assertiveness involves direct, honest, and appropriate expressions of one’s beliefs, feelings, and needs. It means respecting oneself, that is, valuing oneself and treating oneself with as much intelligence, consideration, and goodwill as any human being deserves. In short, it means being one’s own best friend. He also says: “one usually knows where they stand; they say what is on their minds rather than beat around the bush” (Hulbert, 1986:75).

American culture is an assertive one, while Chinese culture is a non-assertive one. As it is said in the Chinese classic *Li Ji*, “humble yourself and show respect to others”. Chinese people usually do not want to make others inconvenient. When there are conflicts, they always choose to sacrifice their own benefits.

3. An analysis of the miscommunication example

The discomfort of the communication between Mr. Liu and Mr. King is the cultural difference in their expectations of what people should call each other is polite in such an initial business encounter.

The difference of Chinese and Western culture in individualism and collectivism would come into play when people speaking to one's own group members and to members outside one's group. In a collectivistic culture, many relationships in certain groups are more likely to be steady and the ways of people speaking to members of the group and those out of the group are much more different, while in an individualistic culture, groups do not form with the same extent of steadiness like that in a collectivistic culture, and the ways of people speaking to each other in this culture are similar on different occasions. In that short conversation between Mr. Liu and Mr. King, Mr. Liu felt uncomfortable when Mr. King addressed him by his given name, Dahai. In fact, a Chinese person's given name is always used within ingroup communication, that is, among family members and intimate friends, never among strangers or people who are outside his/her immediate social group. Every Chinese person may have several names, such as school name, family baby name and even western name. The use of each name depends on the situation which people are in and the relationship which people have with each other. This is the reason why Mr. Liu was embarrassed when Mr. King called him Dahai.

The cultural difference in Low power distance and high power distance is most likely to influence people's choice of politeness strategies. Americans tend to use positive politeness strategies in order to emphasize egalitarian while Chinese are more likely to use negative politeness strategies in order to show deference. In that short conversation between the American (Benjamin King) and the Chinese (Liu Dahai), the American wanted to start their relationship by the use of their given names, Ben and Dahai, as a way of establishing egalitarian relationship. This kind of difference in the use of politeness strategies which causes discomfort is typically the result of different cultural emphasis on egalitarian and hierarchy.

The cultural difference between the two cultures are evident in the third aspect: although Mr. Liu feels very uncomfortable because of Mr. King insisting on calling him by his Chinese given name, Dahai, he doesn't express his discomfort directly. Instead, he smiles embarrassingly, which signifies he is from the non-assertive Chinese culture that requires its members to be modest and respect others. The assertive American culture teaches Mr. King to be direct, so he adopts the American way to call Mr. Liu by his given name while showing his consideration of cultural differences between them by avoiding the use of Mr. Liu's western name, Harry.

4. Conclusion

Miscommunication like this is very usual among people with different cultural background in intercultural communication. This kind of miscommunication lies in the different cultural patterns which people are from. When engage in intercultural communication, people should be always aware of their cultural differences and choose the polite way of communication.

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