Influence of Culture Differences on Sino-America Business Negotiations

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Along with the sweeping trend of globalization and augment of international communication, cross-cultural communication becomes more frequent. However, misunderstanding and disagreement will arise from different cultural backgrounds. This study shows how the high- and low-context cultural differences between America and China influence Sino-America business negotiation. Then this paper emphasizes the importance and necessity of paying attention to culture differences and offers some suggestions and strategies to Sino-America business negotiation.

Keywords: culture differences, high-context, low-context, Sino-America negotiation, strategies

Introduction

Trading with America occupied a large proportion in Chinese business communication. As a big business partner of China, America plays an important role in China’s import and export transaction. But Sino-America business negotiation has existed barriers for a long time. The barrier came from the difference of Western and Eastern culture. Many business communication failed for neglecting the influence that brought about by cultural difference. However, most barriers can be avoided with raising the awareness of culture. Many experts did research on this area and found that the barriers between Western and Eastern culture are the biggest one on national stage. In this paper, the author will analyze the cause of Sino-America culture differences, and how these differences affect the language in negotiation process, as language communication is main process of negotiation. The author gives some suggestions about how to avoid conflicts and misunderstanding in business negotiation.

Dimensions of Cultural Variability

When we travel around the world, we can see people from different places share their different way of life. Ever since human start to developed civilized society, our culture is developed in different ways. To explain the reason of culture differences, many experts explored original causes of culture difference. In the book Theorizing about Intercultural Communication (2004), the author introduced main stream theories about the dimensions of culture—Edward Hall’s (1977) low and high context theory explain the culture differences in communication, which is very specifically in this certain area.

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Edward Hall’s High and Low Context

High and low context was first provided by Hall to be an effective way to examine cultural differences. According to this theory, context is the information that contains in language or action. Hall (1977) defined the high and low context in this way:

In high-context communication, most of the information is in the physical context or is internalized in the people who are a part of the interaction. Very little information is actually coded in the verbal message. In low-context communication, however, most of the information is contained in the verbal message, and very little is embedded in the context or within the participants. (p. 22)

By summarizing his theory, we can get several major differences of high- and low-context communication. To begin with, to low-context communicator, verbal language is very important. Secondly, low-context communicator can hardly gain their credit and fascinate another high-context communicator. Thirdly, a high-context communicator is more adaptable and capable of reading non-verbal language. Finally, a high-context communicator expected that people who communicate with them would understand the unarticulated language as well, that is the reason why the high context communicator do not speak so much as the low-context communicator.

In general, high-context cultures are those in which people have extensive information networks among family, friends, colleagues, and clients and are involved in close personal relationships.

And also, as the definition on Jeanne. M. Brett’s book Negotiating Globally (2007), people in low-context culture prefer to communicate directly. Meaning is on the surface of the message. Information is explicit, without nuance, and relatively context-free. People in high-context cultures prefer to communicate indirectly. Meaning is embedded in the context of the message and must be inferred to be understood.

We can use a chart to arrange several counties along the high context to the low context (see Figure 1).

![Figure 1. Contrasting high-context and low-context culture. Source: Beamer & Varner, Intercultural Communication in the Global Workplace (2nd ed.) (2000).](image-url)
Form the chart we can find out that some countries like Japan and China are high-context cultures, and some countries like America and Germany, however, are low-context.

According to Beamer and Varner (2000), high-context communicator and low-context communicator achieve their goals in different ways. High-context communicator establish social trust at the first place, value personal relations at the beginning, and then make the agreement according to personal relations of goodwill. At last, they start to negotiate slowly. By contrast, low-context communicator get down to business first, value the expertise and performance of their cooperator, and then make the agreement by specific legalistic contract. They negotiate as efficient as possible, when a high-context communicator meet a low-context communicator. The high-context communicator always feel uneasy and misunderstood but low-context communicator always feel annoyed and insulted when they neglect the cultural difference and conflicts will occur.

We can understand high- and low-context communication more easily with a dialog between an American and Japanese.

(The American manager praises one Japan employee in front of his group.)

American: Mr. Sugimono, I have noticed that you are doing an excellent job on the assembly line. I hope that the other workers notice how it should be done.

Japanese: (He is uneasy.) Praise is not necessary. I am only doing my job. (He hopes that the other Japanese workers do not hear.)

American: You are the best, most excellent and dedicated worker we have ever had at the Jones Corporation.

Japanese: (He blushes and nods his head several times, and keeps working.)

American: Well, are you going to say “thank you”, Mr. Sigimono, or just remain silent?

Japanese: Excuse me, Mr. Jones. May I leave for five minutes?

American: sure. (He is annoyed and watches Sugimono exit.) I cannot believe how rude some Japanese workers are. They seem to be disturbed by praise and do not answer you… just remain silent.

We can get from this story that the Japanese, as a high-context communicator, will not speak as much as American. In this case, the American manager considers little about the culture identity of Japanese worker. Differences in culture have determined the way of communication.

The Influence of Culture on Language

With observation by many scholars, we can explain how the differences of context influence on verbal language. The level of context determined the pattern of people’s language. In high-context culture, words and sentences collapse and are shortened, which means the high-context communicator speak shorter sentences with more information.

Another difference of high- and low-context brought to language is that the level of explicit when speaking. A high-context culture communicator is good at giving information in obscure language, for example, a Chinese communicator would always quote an old saying or poems when he/she speaks, and hopes his/her counterparts could discover the implied meaning. But a low-context communicator will rarely do it. A low-context communicator will try to make everything explicit and clear. And also, he/she cannot adapt to the obscure way and get the implied meaning as well as the high-context communicator.

On the non-verbal language part, as low-context communicators are used to getting the information they
need or they want to express in verbal way, non-verbal language seems to be not so important for them. Low-context communicators always speak with little non-verbal language, and they prefer to communicate in simplex way. By contrast, high-context communicators speak with shortened language, and they need non-verbal language to complete the conversation. We can also explain that difference in another way. High-context culture communicators will not contain much information in their verbal language; they believe that added non-verbal language could help the people who listen to them easier to understand.

**Culture Impact on Sino-America Business Communication**

As it can be seen from many literature works, Chinese always leave the impression of polite and soft-spoken. China is a high-context culture country, and it is common that most Chinese respect tradition and always being implicit. However, American style remains aggressive and direct. In the process of Sino-American business negotiation, many misunderstanding or conflict may occur for different language style of America and China. If a negotiator lacks the awareness of culture, he/she can so easily be misunderstood. He/She may has misperceived words, actions, and clues in international business encounters, which leads to the failure of business negotiation.

**Verbal Language**

English and Chinese came from two totally different language family; unlike German, Chinese shares little common features with English. Both English and Chinese are influenced by culture in a large degree. Different letter, vocabulary, grammar, tone, and the way people speak could all misperceived by a Chinese negotiator. In this case, we collect three parts that culture mostly influenced on language.

Chinese and American language patterns are much starker contrast than those languages from the same language family. Chinese focus more on synthesis, imagination, unity, subjectivity, and inductive reasoning, while American negotiators pay more attention to analysis, logic, dichotomy, objectivity, and deductive reasoning. Among these differences, the following two contrasting thought patterns have stronger impact on the organization of language between American and Chinese.

**Linear and Nonlinear Language**

When people speak, we can find that under the different culture, the pattern of speaking is not the same. Because of the difference of high- and low-context communication style, English is linear language, while Chinese is nonlinear language. According to the definition, linear language has a beginning and an end and is logical and object oriented. Linear languages such as English look on time as a continuum of past, present, and future. This view has affected communication patterns and business practice in the United States; an example of such business practice is short-range planning.

Nonlinear language is circular, tradition oriented, and subjective. Nonlinear language such as Chinese looks at time as cyclical and the seasons as an ever-repeated pattern. The nonlinear concepts are apparent in the long-range planning of the Chinese.

Robert B. Kaplan, a scholar of linear and nonlinear language area and an assistant professor in the Department of Linguistic at the University of Southern California, divided language into five major language groups—English, Semitic, Oriental, Romance, and Russian. In this five groups, we find that American belongs with the group of English, which is linear language, while Chinese belongs to Oriental, a nonlinear language group.
This feature can be illustrated by a chart introduced by Kaplan in 1966 (see Figure 2).

![Figure 2. Linear and nonlinear language.](image)

Form Figure 2, we can see that the figure of American language pattern is a vertical straight line, while Chinese language pattern is a spiral line. In the Sino-American communication process, the different pattern leads to barriers between the communications from these two countries. On the negotiating table, the barrier appears from the start of a conversation. An American negotiator will enter into negotiations with outgoing, upbeat enthusiasm attitude, and always open up with the problem of prices. In this phase, a Chinese negotiator would rather start the conversation in an indirect way. During the negotiation, the Americans remain their outgoing style, and because of the low-context language pattern, they state all their opinion and information with language. The Chinese negotiators are used to speaking in an indirect way. They will state their opinion by giving a clue. However, an American would hardly get these clues. Many Americans feel that it is really hard to get a consensus with Chinese negotiators for the difference of language patterns. As they remain a direct style, Americans appeared to be very positive; they express their deals and attitudes, hoping for an agreement as soon as possible. From the Chinese prospect, they appeared to be passive and hide their purpose at the first place. The Chinese executives are good at listening, and find what they are not satisfied with after the American offer their deals. The afterward bargaining will be a long period discussion. When they failed to make an agreement, the Americans will make the discussion even harder, while Chinese would rather remain silent. This difference always led tension in a conversation. The Americans regard discussion is the most effective way to solve the problem, but the Chinese executives think that stopping talking and listening to their counterpart is a clue to express their disagreement and a way to show their respect. At this moment, the American negotiator’s hard bargain will make the Chinese feel uncomfortable and rude. On the other hand, the American will also feel that keeping silence is a kind of disrespect. Finally the different language pattern will lead to the failure of negotiation.

Another feature we can see from Figure 2 is that the American communication will only focus on short period, but Chinese’s regard the communication as a repeating progress that should start with past relation, and also focus on future. In a negotiation progress, the American will find that the Chinese executive keeps talking about the past and future. As for an American, the past relation will not account for a standard to his/her judgment. The Chinese, however, will make it in an opposite way. For example, if an American failed to build a business relation with another company, he/she might still work with this company if he/she got any opportunity. A Chinese might considered to choose other company in the future. This difference makes the Chinese consider as
much as he/she could when starting to negotiate. For this reason, the Chinese always delays the negotiation when his/her idea can not be accepted by the American. This will make the American suffer from an inefficient negotiation. And his/her impatience will be regarded as lack of sincerity by the Chinese.

**Deductive and Inductive Level**

Another level of different language pattern is deductive and inductive. From the Chinese education, it can be seen that summarizing is an important skill. It is usually appeared in exams that require students to summarize the main idea of a passage. By contrast, in American education, inference and explanation is the most important process rather than summarizing, which illustrates the different way of talking. When talking, Chinese will speak in inductive way but American speaks in deductive way. Inductive is a reasoning process in which particular or minor points move toward general or major topic; deduction is a reasoning process in which general or major topic moves toward particular or minor points. The reason of this difference is high- and low-context culture; because of the high-context feature of Chinese culture, the Chinese communicator is good at making a brief talk with minimum sentences and maximum information. As a low-context culture communicator, American used to make a long conversation with logical coherence. This difference may easily cause the time lag in a conversation, because it is impossible for an American to keep talking while a Chinese responds a few words.

Another problem caused by inductive and deductive language pattern is the place of topic. The inductive pattern usually puts the main point at the last part. When stating a point, a Chinese businessman will talk about the reason and background first, and then give their opinion and suggestion. An American will do it in different way. It brings confusion in business negotiation.

**Suggestions to Effective Business Negotiation**

Through the analysis of high- and low-context culture, the impacts on business negotiation caused by these culture differences can be summarized. However, it is not enough to analyze the differences only. The purpose of this paper is to make some practical recommendations which can do some help to avoid misunderstanding in business negotiations.

**Suggestions for Chinese Negotiators**

Because of lacking awareness of culture difference, many conflicts have arisen. These differences include the direct and indirect way of communication and whether people like to build close relationship with their counterparts. When Chinese businessmen seek a chance to make a deal with their American counterpart, there are some tips they need to keep in mind: (1) Be aware of the culture difference between America and China, and always give positive reaction for the counterpart; (2) Speak more directly to the counterpart and express the ideas more clearly; (3) Try to be more efficient in negotiating process, and do not delay the discussion if it is hard to make consensus; (4) Pay attention to the logical coherence rather than personal relationship; (5) Take the objective factor as the most important condition for judgment; and (6) Give the personal space to the counterpart, and do not be so close when first meet.

**Suggestions for American Negotiators**

American businessmen could be so aggressive and direct generally. Sometimes they do not consider the feelings of their counterpart. Chinese make decision on their impression, and they will always care about the
polite atmosphere and personal relations. The American can eliminate the misunderstanding and increase the rate of success in business negotiation by noticing the following tips: (1) Start the negotiation with a friendly and warm atmosphere, and try to build a friendship with Chinese negotiator; (2) Take the negotiating process as long term cooperation, and always have a plan about future; (3) Try to speak in an indirect and soft way; do not blame the counterpart directly; (4) Be patient about the negotiation with Chinese negotiator, and do not show the impatience and bad temper to the counterpart; and (5) Accept the Chinese offer of friendship in the spirit in which it is extended.

References