

A Contrastive Study on Compliments in Sino-US Business Negotiation

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With the continuous advancement of globalization and the growing international trade, international business negotiations are crucial to the success of trade. In human verbal communication, compliment is a frequently used verbal communication behavior. In business negotiations, the proper use of compliments can bring the distance between the two sides closer and create a harmonious atmosphere for negotiation. China and the United States have their own unique cultural expression patterns, so there is a huge difference in the use and response of compliments. This paper contrasts the differences in the use of compliments in Sino-US business negotiations and explores the cultural factors that produce these differences. Based on these discussions, some strategies are put forward to solve the problems occurred in the business negotiation. It is hoped that the study of this topic will help Chinese negotiators to further improve their communication skills and improve their negotiation ability so as to obtain ideal negotiation results.

Keywords: Sino-US business negotiation, compliment, problems, strategies

Introduction

With the rapid development of the economic market in China, businesspeople are trying their best to expand their operation to foreign markets. With the business negotiation, the businesspeople from different countries may conduct business smoothly. However, as we all know clearly, countries and companies often communicate with one another in a special way that it is different from what common people usually do in our daily life. They need to adapt special laws, rules, and regulations in their communication in order to create a sound environment for commercial ties.

In the business negotiation, two or more parties carry on goods or services exchanges and try to reach agreement over the details of exchange for them. The prime target might be an agreement from the exchange that carries on, and it lays in the interaction of two phrases, that is, “common interests” and “conflicting interests”.

The compliment is a polite speech act which occurs frequently in business negotiations which acts as lubricant (Tian, 2004). As we can see, some studies show that compliments are typically performed to make the consignee feel happy by saying something nice to him/her, in the way of satisfying the consignee's expectations. Hence, in order to make the business negotiation run smoothly, it is quite necessary for us to know more about the use of compliments in the business negotiation.

Analysis of Different Uses of Compliments in Sino-US Business Negotiation

Compliment is not only a highly predictable and rigid language habit, but also a social norm of verbal social behaviour. The following three aspects in business negotiations: phases of occurrence, compliment topics, and compliment functions will be mainly discussed in this paper.

The first one is phases of occurrence. If we divide the business negotiation into three phases, they are the beginning stage, the discussing stage, and the ending stage. And, in the previous studies, we find that in USA, compliments mostly occur in the negotiation stage, while in Chinese, compliments are almost evenly distributed in three stages.

At the beginning stage, establishing relationship is very important. In this process, compliments are often used. Compliments are seen as the “lubricant” of social interaction, which play a crucial part in the relationship building stage. In business negotiations, it is not difficult to comprehend the great importance of building a sound relationship with each other. Whether in China or in America, no one would like to discuss deep topic at the beginning of their first meeting. They need time and opportunities to break the ice and open up their minds in order to know more about others. When they meet for the first time, the two parties negotiate about their relationship to a certain extent. For instance, if one party wants to seek for more benefits, he will start from a harmonious relationship and try to build a closer relationship. After becoming familiar with each other, they will make no efforts to seek the increasing number of favors. Therefore, both sides are willing to take some time at the beginning of the meeting to let them know each other, which will boost the development of the business negotiation aftertime.

In the discussing stage, also, there are great differences in the use of compliments between American and Chinese negotiators. The most remarkable one is the difference of discussing product quality. The compliments in this phase used by American negotiators occupy 11.3%, while 0% in Chinese ones (Chen, 2007). What makes such a huge difference? Most of the data show that when American businesspeople or companies come to China to do business with Chinese, they compliment products or services in China just because they like one or more parts of Chinese products or services. Under this condition, the compliments from Americans satisfy Chinese positive face, so Chinese feel the Americans give them face and are inclined to make much compromise which they do not do normally. Under this circumstance, the negotiators in America may benefit a lot by putting pressure on the Chinese to make decisions unconsciously on the sneak, which are beneficial to Americans. Therefore, American negotiations use compliments more naturally as time goes on. In Chinese culture, traditionally, people are practical and realistic, and they always praise themselves in the discussing stage. In this process, they want to show advantages to gain the other party's recognition. So, Chinese negotiators hardly use compliments as the data we collected shows.

In the ending stage of signing contracts, the most important phase of negotiation, compliments often occur. The compliments occurred in America occupy 11.3%, whereas 17.1% in China (Chen, 2007). Signing contracts is the final phase in the whole business negotiation, which is not only the end of one period, but also a new beginning of the long-time cooperation and communication. People have solved all problems and removed all disputes before this phase. If businesspeople want to make further cooperation, they will try their best to leave good impression on the other party and show wish for further communication and cooperation. So, the correct use of compliments is extremely crucial. What we should remember is that “face” has quite different meanings in China and America. In Chinese culture, face is a type of psychological and emotional structure, which relates

to the concepts of “honor”, “shame”, and “obligation”. Yet for Americans, “face” only exists when they meet face to face. Therefore, because of the existence of this difference, the Americans may say something unconsciously that hurts the face of the Chinese in business negotiations. So, we need to be careful about our words in order to reduce unconscious face-threatening acts. Leaving a favorable impression on the counterparts is quite necessary for negotiators.

The second one is compliment topics. From the most of the previous studies, we can see that substantially all compliments used for many times only concentrate on a few general topics. As we can find in the researches above, the topics of compliments that American negotiators select are relatively concentrative, compared with Chinese ones. More than 50% American compliments are about the products involved, including the packing, quality, design, prices, and so on. The topic that next frequently used is the other party’s company, especially its reputation, scale, development, management, etc. This kind of topic occupies more than 10% (Han, 2006). And then some seem to have no connection with the negotiation, such as the environment of hotel, scenery, civilization, people, and so on.

Instead, the topics that Chinese negotiators may use in the Sino-US negotiation are dispersive. What can we find is that compliments about performance of work and products are relatively centralized, which occupy about 22% respectively. Other topics are basically accounting for about 14% each (Han, 2006). Why? Firstly, in a symmetrical deference politeness system, all participants prefer to do things independently because the social distance between the hearer and the speaker is so large that cannot be ignored. They would express their own topics through discussion rather than introduce their own points of view directly. Secondly, America is a low-context culture, in which ideas are fully and directly expressed. People care more about words rather than some nonverbal behavior. In these societies, it is very important that cultural behavior and beliefs should be expressed clearly so that people can know how to behave correctly when entering the cultural environment. On the other hand, China belongs to the culture of high-context, in which the communicators bear a great deal of common knowledge and views, so they always choose to express their thoughts more indirectly. In this society, people often keep a long-term close relationship with other people. Thirdly, the topic of compliment may be limited by different ways of thinking. The America’s thinking way is linear, that is, Americans like to express their thoughts directly, while the way of thinking in China is circular.

The third one is compliment functions. One of the basic functions of compliments in a social context is greetings, especially if the interlocutors have not been in touch recently. Giving a compliment is considered as a wonderful way to starting a conversation. Negotiators may feel warm and sincere. Just as an old saying goes that, “A good beginning is half the battle”. Thus, compliment is beneficial to further negotiations. And people can use compliments to soften criticism, particularly when the interactor finds that the relationship is likely to continue. Therefore, it is quite common that compliments are used with “but” or “although” in criticism.

These two functions are similar in America and China, but there are also some differences.

In America, compliments are often used to express encouragement. People express their encouragement in business whenever and wherever in order to improve their kindness, which plays an important role in daily life. However, we also find that, when the social status is equal, compliments in Chinese lack the function of encouragement. In Chinese society, compliments are often flattered by subordinates. For example, “Manager Chen really has a general’s demeanor”, from which we can predict that the speaker obviously carries favour with the listener and even wants to ask for help.

What is more, in business negotiations, we can also see that admiration of each other's products or capabilities accounts for the largest proportion of compliments in China and the United States.

In Chinese culture, if others do them a great favor, people will express their gratitude openly. Chinese always hold the opinion that people who thank others at all time may not seem to be genuine at all. Once the Chinese thank others, it means that one person owes something to another, and one day he will give it back to another. As a result, Chinese people rarely accept gratitude easily. For if they do so, they will recognize himself as a creditor and the other as a debtor.

But in American culture, people often show their thanks to others, which is the most common occurrence, and people are ready to thank anyone, even the things are insignificant or trivial that may be ignored easily in the life.

Problems and Strategies for International Business Negotiation

From the above analysis, it is clear that there are not only similarities but also differences between Chinese and American business negotiations when it comes to compliments.

What makes these differences happen?

Cultural background, the approach of thinking, and the way of expressing are all the factors that make differences. Because of these elements, the incorrect use of compliments can make the distance between the two sides farther and bring about a disharmonious atmosphere for negotiation in business negotiations.

To some degree, the failure in the negotiation does harm to the development of both countries and even the friendship between the USA and China. Therefore, in business negotiation, knowing the importance of using compliments correctly is quite important.

First of all, cherish the opportunity to know more about the differences between cultures and develop cross-cultural awareness. Secondly, learn to grasp the true meaning of empathy and convey meanings correctly. Thirdly, prepare fully for the negotiation and cultivate a healthy mentality.

Conclusion

In the global-oriented society, Sino-US commercial intercourse becomes more and more frequent. The analysis of the compliments in business negotiation is not only helpful to Sino-US negotiations, but also useful for other countries in business negotiations.

It is known to us all that every country has its own unique culture, China is no exception. It is necessary for us to learn from other culture in order to develop our country at a rapid speed. Hence, we should respect each others' culture. In the case of business negotiation, negotiators must know and deepen the understanding of the culture of compliments of both sides to achieve the success of the negotiations.

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