

# The Comparative Study on Politeness Between Chinese and English

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Politeness is a symbol of human civilization that can be found in all languages and cultures. It has a crucial role in establishing and keeping good relationships and maintaining social harmony. Through the comparative study of the polite language, elaborating differences of politeness in addressing, greeting, and apology and analysis of “privacy”, “courtesy”, and “individualism” in different culture interpretations, people could understand that English and Chinese people have very different cultural value views. Cross-cultural communications could be more successful and effective by understanding these cultural differences.

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## Introduction

What is politeness? That seems like a very simple question. In our daily life, people always consider punctuality as polite behavior while lateness is impolite action. To offer your seat to the pregnant women or the old on the bus is seen as politeness while to come into one's house without knocking is impolite. So we can say that politeness is an observable social phenomenon. Politeness is the behavior standard to show mutual respect and friendliness among human contacts and exchanges, furthermore, it is also the most basic requirement of civilized behavior. Politeness is respecting others; it is a stepping-stone to achieve success of good relations. So in our daily life, being polite is very important. This thesis analyzes politeness phenomenon from theoretical perspectives and illustrates with examples to show how politeness formulae are implied in western and Chinese cultures, it including how to response to compliment, how to convey thanks and apologies, how to make requests, and how to address each other.

With the development of globalization, international exchanges become more and more frequent, so it is very important for us to know the principle of politeness. Because of the culture difference, languages are differing crucially from one to another in the ways of expressing politeness and the judging standards. Being unaware of such differences would possibly result in troubles or misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication. Accordingly, it is essential and important to study different concepts and expressions of politeness in different cultures, so as to achieve good results. As we will meet the culture shock in the process of communication, this study is to arise English learners' consciousness of culture difference, so they can have a better communion.

It is an important part of our life and an essential part of human communication. Polite behaviors bring about success; while lack of politeness often results in disunity and even abomination toward each other. From

the interpersonal perspective, it is not only like a lubricant to set up friendly social relations, but also a bridge to retain and strengthen the interpersonal friendship. It has been considered as one of the basic social doctrine for human interactions. What kind of rules that people should abide by has become an important issue which many researchers have been studied. Therefore, this study aims at enhancing students' awareness of politeness across cross-culture communication. It will help English learners reduce making trouble in cross-culture exchanges. It also helps teachers give more concerns to pragmatic factors in the process of teaching. Being aware of politeness will help English learners communicate with foreigners more easily.

### **The Differences on Politeness Between Chinese and English**

#### **Forms of Address**

Companied by the appearance of speech communication, human beings created a serious of addresses. In speech acts, the first signal of information is address in spite of Chinese or foreigners. An appropriate use of address will make the communication proceeding smoothly while a failure use of proper address often causes displeasure to each other, even making exchanges collapse. Address forms can be taken as important politeness makers. They play a crucial role in reflecting interpersonal relations, showing the attitudes and politeness degrees of interlocutors. The tact of addressing not only reflects the relationship of the speaker and the hearer, but also shows the speakers recognition of the hearer's social status. It helps maintaining social relationship and keeping social distance. China has the most complicated system of address among the entire world; by contrast, English-speaking country has less items of address than China does.

For kinship terms, in China, the use of given name often shows a much closer relationship. The use of full name will give the addressees a feeling of distant. Generally speaking, when you anger your parents, they will call your full names. The use of full name which might make them misunderstand it is a refusal to his initiative approach. Western people hold a more optional attitude toward kinship terms than Chinese people do, and even they address their parents and grandparents by their first names, while most Chinese people not only use kinship terms within their families but also follow a strict hierarchical order such as in 大哥(eldest brother), 二姑 (father's second younger sister), and 三叔 (father's third younger brother). If a child calls his grandparents names, he will be regarded as not having been well thought. In addition to kin-ship terms, people use non-kinship terms among neighbors, friends of one's parents, strangers, and service personnel. When meeting neighbors or strangers, Chinese people usually call people “大爷”, “大叔”, and “大姐” according to their age or gender, etc. While in foreign counties, people always call strangers with “sir or madam”. For titles, Chinese people often add occupational titles to address people, such as 王经理 (Manager WANG), 刘局长 (Bureau director LIU), 李老师 (Teacher LI), or simply 老师 (Teacher), and so on. But in English-speaking countries, it can hardly hear that they address their dialogists as Teacher Brown or Teacher, Manager John or Manager, and the like. In China, when we meet some old people, sometimes we will say: 李老, 老人家. They are pleased to hear that, because it shows respect for them, while in English-speaking countries, calling a woman old lady is not polite, or even makes trouble.

To sum up, there are some differences between Chinese and English in using the address forms. The address forms of English are characterized by the glorification of individuals, so that personal names are widely used. On the contrast, the address forms of Chinese have their specific features and arrangements in order of seniority in age or in generation; all of us should know the difference in actual exchanges.

### **Greetings and Partings**

In almost occasions, language is the first means to show politeness. Greetings show politeness or friendliness to others by some actions or languages. It is a common phenomenon among the entire world and it is a significant signal of politeness. The function of greetings is to establish and maintain good relationship among people you care about. There are some differences between different countries for the ritualized phrases. For the English-speaking countries, they tend to talk about weather or life, they will not ask about things private, just some usual pleasantries, for example, "Hello, is it a good weather, isn't it?", "Your dress is nice", and so on. Those are common subjects usually talked in actual greetings. Chinese like talking about age, family, or salary, while Western people dislike them. Chinese are used to greetings like "你吃了没?" (Have you eaten?), "你在做什么?", and "上哪儿去?". However, in foreign countries, it will be seen as impolite or even rude, because it is an action of inquiring other's privacy. Westerners care about individual privacy very much. For example, an inquiry like "你去哪儿啊?" is often heard in Chinese daily life, while if you ask a foreigner, his response may be: "It is none of your business". And it may make him feel offended. Thus, if greetings are conveyed inappropriately, they can become interference in cross-cultural interaction. Chinese greetings usually focus on other people's situation and tend to ask questions, while it is quite different from Western countries. Just like when an English speaker asks you "How are you?" or "what is the weather?" he is not actually concerned about your physical condition or weather condition, but it is just a way of showing his politeness.

### **Compliments and Responses**

Compliment, in other words, is the praise or positive comment from other people. A proper use of compliments will help one gain more good impressions while the inappropriate use of compliments usually gets opposite effect. The traditional virtues in China are modesty and prudence, they are always trying to deny or refuse other people's praise or flattery. When you say: "你歌唱得真好" (You sing very well). Most Chinese will response with: "哪里哪里, 一般般" (No, no, no, it is just so-so). In Chinese eyes, it is the presentation of humility, while it may make the English people feel not so good. An English person usually shows confidence. If you praise them: "You sing well", they will reply: "Thank you". Refusing their compliments is an expression of disrespect. Chinese always put adverbs before the adjectives, such as 真漂亮 (very beautiful). Actually, there are many differences in compliments between Chinese and English, including the conception of compliments, the way of offering compliments, and the response to compliments.

### **Thanks and Responses**

Thanks mean gratitude when you accept other people's help or compliments. It is a way to show gratitude and appreciation from one's heart. It can also be used under some other circumstances, such as tolerance. And it sometimes indicates that you will be rewarded one day. The expression "thank you" is used both in English and Chinese to show gratitude, and it is less frequently used in Chinese than in Western countries. "Thanking is an illocutionary act performed by a speaker based on a past act by the hearer that was beneficial" (Searle, 1996).

## **Causes of the Difference**

### **Individualism and Collectivism**

According to the traditional Chinese values, Chinese culture tends to be group-orientation. It is an important belief in Confucius ethics that benevolence means to love others. Confucian culture is the dormant

trend of traditional values. As a result, Chinese traditional value system prefers groups rather than individuals. The development and perfection must cross the baptism of society in order to adapt to the social communication. The direction of individual developments is jointly with others rather than self-contained. They give precedence to group aims over their personal aims. To achieve harmony, Chinese people emphasize tactfulness, indirectness, and ambiguity. While English people pay more attention to their own targets that promote or improve them. They stress directness and self-exposure in conversation. The origin of Western individual values could trace back to ancient Greek philosopher Plato and Socrates. They advocated that prominent yourself. English people lay emphasis on individual identity, needs, and rights; they highly value self-autonomy, self-realization, and self-reliance (God helps those who help themselves). For Chinese, individualism is a signal of selfish and self-centered. While in the English-speaking countries, individualism means making decision by oneself, emphasizing independence. When there are some conflicts between individual and community or state, they usually stress their rights rather than community. "Due respect to an individual's liberty, rights and independence will be considered polite. Lack of it will appear to an English-speaker to be improper and even rude" (HE, 1995, p. 2). The core of individualism is the seeking of personal happiness and success. Individualisms on English-speaking country are not selfishness but rather a virtue. It can better explain that politeness is related with culture.

### **Modesty and Self-Denigration**

It is common that expressing politeness shows modesty both in china and western, but the degree of modest is different in different cultures; the task is to interpret the difference between the English modesty and Chinese modesty. China is a country which has a time-honored civilization and a land of ceremony and decorum. To respect others and to denigrate self is the core of Chinese polite. For example, Chinese like using modest words and respective words to show modesty and respect. In China, in order to show our modesty we often turn "I" into "fool", "small potato", "lonely man" (愚兄, 愚弟, 敝人, 鄙人, 不才, 寡人), and so on. For other people and the kinships of his, we always say: "贵姓, 贵名, 贵眷, 令尊, 贤兄, 令爱", and so on. The other presentation is Chinese usually denying others' praise. If you are not doing so, you will be seen as being arrogant. All could reflect the strict hierarchy and the notions of superiority and inferiority. Western country is pomp of democracy, emphasizing equality. So they often take "I" as capital rather than "we". They always say: I like... I want... for invitations, Chinese people will insist on more times to show sincerity, while Western people will not; they could not understand it. For praise, English people often show gratitude without modesty, because it is an affirmation to his achievement. In conclusion, English modesty can be summarized as minimizing praise of self; however, Chinese modesty tends to make self-denigration.

### **Privacy and Attitudinal Warmth**

We have been talking about Chinese collectivism and English individualism, that is, the different makes the difference of privacy. It is acknowledged that privacy exists in all cultures. However, the definitions and recognition of privacy are different. The definition of privacy in English includes some aspects, the first one is living alone; the second one is the condition of being concealed or hidden; the third one is feeling exposed. In China, privacy is definite to things that one is unwilling to tell others, just secret. English-speaking countries highly stress privacy.

In China, we always take our friends as family members, and take care of friends and acquaintances. Asking one's health condition, income, and family is very common. For example, when we greet someone, we

often say: “where are you going?” to show warmth and concern; it is considered as polite behavior. While asking an English lady “how old are you” is impolite and rude; it is offensive to her privacy. Westerners have a strong sense of privacy, and sensitive to topics that you ask. There are many taboo topics in English-speaking countries, such as family, age, job, salary, etc. Westerners often claim their intention to protect their privacy, and they think privacy is what others have no right to inquire into. When we think we are showing warmth while in their eyes it may be an invasion of privacy.

### **Suggestions of Improving Cross-Culture Communication**

#### **Respecting the Other’s Culture**

Culture exists in everywhere in human society. Traditional culture of a nation is unique in the world, and it will reflect in its languages. Culture civilization is varying from region to region and country to country. Language is the primary way to express politeness in cross-culture communication. Chinese original politeness was programmed by the ancient Chinese philosopher and thinker Confucius. It referred to the social hierarchy of the slave society.

In the actual communication, people will meet people from different countries with different culture backgrounds. To make sure of the success of communication, one of the important things is respecting other’s culture. Only by respecting and understanding other’s culture and thinking things in others sides can a better relationship be built. Culture is a complex phenomenon which is hard to understand and master.

#### **Seeking Culture Similarities During the Cross-Culture Exchange**

Politeness is, in fact, strategy to establish and maintain a certain kind of relation with others, but different societies usually have different norms. Whether we would be polite or not is important to people in a certain circumstance. Actually, in our daily life, we will be unconsciously and habitually taking the style or customs from other’s culture the same as our cultures and taking it for granted. These will result in culture prejudice. This culture prejudice has damaging effect on the intercultural communication. To avoid this misunderstanding, we should have an open-mind in the process of international exchanges. One of the useful ways is to seek culture similarities during the intercultural exchanges. In fact, the similarities are usually neglected. The similarities between cultures are the premise of mutual understanding and communication. Realizing it will be helpful to the cross-culture exchanges. On the contrary, lacking realization of it would bring about uncertainties and misunderstandings in actual communications. It is important for us to know it.

#### **Developing Cross-Culture Awareness**

Cross-culture awareness is the capacity of understanding and accepting differences. In the process of cross-culture communication, the differences exist in many sides, such as customs, food, life styles, values, thinking modes, and ethics. We could not only see the difference apparent, but also see the deep-seated levels. If we cannot get a thorough understanding, it is hard to communicate successfully. Pay attention to others taboo topics and respect their privacy in exchanges. In the actual communications, we should see things from the point of view of others so that we could understand and adjust to others culture better.

### **Conclusion**

Culture and language are inseparable. Every language has its specific culture background. In actual exchanges, culture conflicts and pragmatic failures are usually raised. Politeness is related to culture. To avoid

this phenomenon, the study of politeness is necessary. Through the contrastive study, people have known that there are many differences in the comprehension of politeness between English and Chinese cultures. Due to cultural differences, it is known that Chinese culture highly focuses on group rather than English individual-oriented culture. Both Chinese and English focus on modesty and privacy, whereas the organization and degree of it are different. English people pay more attention to privacy and Chinese stress on modesty. It is important to know the difference. Globalization has enlarged the needs of communication skills for cross-culture exchanges.

Languages learners not only learn the system of a specific language, but also know the culture backbones. Finally, the thesis is based on the previous studies, observations, and ideas. Of course, there is a large room to improve. Only after a cross-culture speaker knows native and target culture well, could he have a smooth and effective cross-culture communication. With the changing times, the meaning and content of politeness would be different, so it is suggested that more study should be carried out in the future.

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