

A Talk on Cultural Differences Between Chinese and English

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Abstract: Culture means ideas, beliefs, and customs shared and accepted by people in a certain society. In different cultures, there are different customs and behaviors. For example, when one makes mistakes, one should say sorry, but there are different meanings in Chinese culture and English culture. There are different ideas about the same thing, for example, Chinese people show more respect to old people, but English people are reluctant to be considered old. Differences don't mean distance, on the contrary, knowing the differences can bring the distance closer between people in different cultures.

Keywords: Culture ; Cultural differences; Make apology; Appointment; Festivals ; Directness and indirectness

1. Introduction

Foreign language learning is a required subject in primary and secondary education in China, and English is one of the most important languages. In New General High School Standard Curriculum, when it comes to the tasks of language teaching, it says “to help students to understand the world and learn the differences between China and the West.” It is very important for a teacher to learn the cultures between China and the West when he wants to fulfill this task well. As an English teacher I have collected some differences from different channels so I will present them to share with my colleagues in senior high schools so as to be a reference when it comes across the similar topics in work and life or just for fun with the topic .

2. Body

Culture means ideas, beliefs, and customs that are shared and accepted by people in a society. Different countries share different cultures. The world becomes smaller and smaller with the globalization. Cultural communication and cross-culture phenomena penetrate more and more to the different societies. Here are some representations with examples between Chinese speakers and English speakers.

2.1 Apology

In China, when one makes mistake or offends sb not by purpose, one is usually supposed to make apology. But in America, when you say sorry, you mean not only make apology, but it also means you admit your mistake and willing to shoulder the responsibility for consequences legally.

2.2 Seniority

Western people usually have different ideas about age. Chinese think old age is experienced and respectable. They usually call a man Old Wang or Old Li etc. Seniority is considered a hopeless age in English speaking countries. Most of the people are not to be dressed with”old “As a story goes, in theatre, many ladies wear hats, which block the sight of audience behind, the educated manager said “only old ladies are allowed to wear the hat “. Immediately all the hats are down.

2.3 Hospitality

Chinese speakers will always walk a long way to see the guest off out of the door while English speakers seldom walk out of the threshold when a visit is made. It is not considered rude if you refuse a visitor, for, as a rule, an appointment is needed to make a visit , but Chinese are more causal than westerners in this matter.

When a Chinese treats a friend, to show the hospitality, he\she will take all and the best he\she has at home, with many more different dishes put on table, and never consider it a waste, while they tell the guests the dishes are very shy and not the good ones etc. But the American guest would produce an impression that the host still has more delicious food that he\she doesn't want to show them.

When English speakers treat friends to dinner, they will consider the need practically. And they will use the best kitchen and dining utensils instead, and they will never expect you to return the kindness.

2.4 Directness and Indirectness

In English culture, direct communication is valued, and people often express their thoughts and opinions openly. However, in Chinese culture, indirect communication is more common, and people often rely on non-verbal cues and context to convey their messages. This can sometimes lead to misunderstandings between English and Chinese speakers.

For example, an Englishman paid a visit in Hong Kong to his friend. His friend made black tea, which is considered a best tea in China. Although the guest didn't like black tea, he had to drink it because his friend had poured tea for him. To drink it up is a western custom. So he drank it all in a breath. His friend thought he likes the tea, when he drank, he poured more and more to fill the cup. It is a Chinese custom not to let the cup empty. In the end the English man had drunk 12 cups though he didn't like black tea.

It is often observed that English-speaking people tend to be more straightforward and assertive when expressing their needs and desires. They are more likely to directly communicate their wants and expectations without hesitation or beating around the bush. This directness can be seen in various aspects of their lives, including personal relationships, professional settings, and everyday interactions. English-speaking individuals are generally comfortable expressing their opinions and making their intentions clear, which can sometimes come across as assertive or even blunt to those from different cultural backgrounds. This direct communication style is valued in many English-speaking societies as it promotes efficiency and clarity in communication.

In contrast, Chinese people often use more subtle language and rely on context to convey their intentions. They like to tell "white lies" when they feel it a trouble to the listener if it is said honestly. For example, when a Chinese went to Canada, eleven hours journey made him hungry and tired. But at the breakfast time, when his friends asked him if he was hungry, he told against his will, "I am all right. I am not hungry at all". But English speakers will show his hunger and tire and the friend will know what to do.

2.5 Festivals

This emphasis on family extends to celebrations and holidays as well. In English culture, holidays like Christmas and Thanksgiving are often celebrated with immediate family members. However, in Chinese culture, festivals like Chinese New Year are celebrated with extended family members, emphasizing the importance of family unity and maintaining strong relationships.

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2.6 Laughing

For an English speaker, Laughing when others have troubles is very impolite and offensive. But this may not be the case in Chinese culture. Native speakers of English, especially, Americans, tend to smile even to strangers to show their friendliness. Even a girl may smile to a male stranger for no reason other than showing friendliness. In contrast, Chinese speaking persons would not smile to strangers without a reason for doing so. If a female does so without any reason she might be viewed as frivolous. In English culture one is expected to treat criticism seriously and this should not smile when criticized. One might smile to show politeness or that she, as a Chinese expression goes, is "glad when told of one's own errors."

2.7 Body contact

In English speaking countries, emotional bodily contact such as kissing, shoulder clapping, hugging are acceptable at public place. Moreover, In English culture touching or bodily contact between persons of the opposite sex is more acceptable or tolerable than that between persons of the same sex. However, in China touching between members of the same sex are more tolerable and acceptable than those between the opposite sex.

There is an interesting story, which I am afraid would digress a little from the topic. However, I like to share with you here for fun. Northern Europeans usually do not like having bodily contact even with close friends, and certainly not with strangers. People from Latin American countries, on the other hand, touch each other quite a lot. Therefore, it's possible that in conversation, it may look like a Latino is following a Norwegian all over the room. The Latino, trying to express friendship, will keep moving closer. The Norwegian, very probably seeing this as pushiness, will keep backing away—which the Latino will in return regard as coldness.

2.8 Sense of Ownership and territory

English speakers respect their family members including the children's ownership over primary territories. For example, at home parents ask for permission before they enter their children's room. In contrast, Chinese speakers don't have such strong sense of territory at home. English speakers may mark their primary territory in different ways. For example, English speakers mark boundary of

their yard symbolically with very low walls fences. In contrast, high walls normally protect a Chinese yard. A passerby couldn't see what is going inside.

2.9 Compliments

In English people exchange compliments each other, father to son, husband to wife, friend to friend, etc. But there are culture differences between English and Chinese. Firstly differences exist in who can be complimented. English speaking countries one can praise members of one's own family. A woman can tell how hard her husband works and how he has done in his career and she might do the same about how well her children do at school. But Chinese people don't praise members of their own families. They consider it bad tastes. Secondly culture differences exist in what can be complimented. It is quite common for a male English speaker to compliment females on the good looks, while it is almost a taboo in Chinese culture.

2.10 Thanks

The way to show thanks is of great difference. Firstly. Difference lies in what to thank. English speakers thank others for many reasons and on many occasions such as borrowing a pencil, asking for directions, requesting some-one to pass on a message, receiving mails for others, calling a person to the phone so on and so forth. and this seems to be unnecessary and sometimes even hypocritical to many Chinese people. The Chinese people tend to thank the one, who has done them a major favor several times. This may seem excessive, empty or insincere to English speakers and therefore make them uncomfortable. Secondly, differences lie in whom to thank. In English culture a male thanks his wife, a female thanks her husband, a father thanks his son, and close friends thank each other for having done any-thing. That's because people are treated as individual and the kindness they have shown in whatever should be appreciated explicitly. But in Chinese most of the polite expressions are reserved for strangers and casual friends. Family members and close friends never thank each other. For the Chinese attitude is that the appreciation is understood and need not be expressed among friends and family members. However, this attitude may be taken for rudeness lack of consideration by English speakers.

2.11 Time and Punctuation

There are differences in time systems between English and Chinese culture. As for formal time is concerned, English and Chinese cultures have their own traditional means of keeping track of time. For example, Chinese farmers are still using the lunar calendar when planting crops. As for informal time, 8 levels of duration exist in English informal system: Immediate, very short, neutral, long, very long, terribly long, and forever.

When native speakers of English wish to invite relatives, friends, or colleagues to dinner, they send a formal letter of invitation a week or so in advance. A formal letter invitation calls for a formal letter of reply.

What do the people mean when they want a person to be punctual? To Americans and Englishmen it means on time if not a little before. But to Chinese people being a couple of minutes late or about ten minutes later may be tolerable.

3. A summary

Generally speaking, I state above differences between English and Chinese speakers in culture. Which will take up a small percentage in the sea of cultures. Long development of human history and civilization has created many different glorious cultures, which explain why peoples are different from each other. But the differences and similarities coexist. When we have learned that, we can have a better understanding so as to have a good communication in the end.

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