

A Comparative Study of Conflict Discourse Based on Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory: A Case Study of *A Little Dilemma* and *Modern Family*

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Abstract: This study utilizes Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory to compare conflict discourse in the Chinese TV series *A Little Dilemma* and the American sitcom *Modern Family*. It analyzes how cultural values influence communication styles and conflict resolution strategies, revealing the impact of cultural norms on family dynamics and dispute management.

Keywords: Conflict Talk; Cultural Dimensions; Intercultural Communication

1. Literature Review

1.1 Conflict Talk

1.1.1 Discourse Analysis

Recent studies, including those by Grimshaw (1990) and Honda (2002), have analyzed the structural aspects of conflict talk, but its pragmatic functions, especially in family education, are underexplored. Grimshaw views conflict talk as a verbal event, while Honda sees it as a process of opposition. Existing research often links conflict talk to impoliteness and negative impacts on identity (Goffman, 1967; Brown & Levinson, 1987). While Heath (1983) and Emihovich (1986) examined cultural and status influences, there's little focus on family educational contexts.

1.1.2 Conflict Talks in Family Environment

Research by Deutsch (1963) recognizes the constructive roles of conflict talk in identity formation, yet specific discussions related to family education are rare. While Grimshaw (1990) and Dorrill (1997) investigated speech act structures and strategies for conflict engagement, they did not apply their findings to familial settings, marking an important gap for future study.

2. Theoretical Frameworks

2.1 Speech Act Theory

Speech Act Theory, advanced by Austin and Searle, categorizes communication based on the speaker's intent and context. Analyzing conflicts in both shows allows classification of speech acts as assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations.

2.2 Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory

Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory identifies six dimensions for understanding cultural differences: Power Distance (acceptance of hierarchies), Uncertainty Avoidance (comfort with ambiguity), Individualism vs. Collectivism (individual rights vs. group cohesion), Masculinity vs. Femininity (competitive vs. nurturing traits), Long-Term vs. Short-Term Orientation (future rewards vs. immediate gratification), and Restraint vs. Indulgence (personal freedom and enjoyment). (Hofstede, 2010).

3. Research Findings and Discussion

Table 1: Categories of Conflict Talks in *Modern Family* based on Speech Act Theory

Categories	Dialogue	Example
Assertives	Negative Judgment	Claire to Phil You're not a role model for the kids.

	Derogatory Comment	Haley to Alex: You're such a nerd for studying on a Saturday night.
	False Statement	Phil: I didn't eat the last cookie! I swear it!
	Intolerable Accusation	Claire to Phil: You never take anything seriously!
Directives	Ordering	Claire: Clean your rooms now!
	Suggesting	Phil: What if we just take a vacation?
Declarations	Inconsiderate Declaration	Phil: This food is gross! What were you thinking?
	Irrational Declaration	Claire: I'm moving out! I can't deal with this family anymore!
Expressives	Sarcasm	Phil: Oh great, another family meeting. Just what I wanted!
	Disbelief	Claire: You did WHAT?! I can't believe you'd decide without asking me!
	Indignation	Cameron: How dare you suggest I can't handle this!
	Disappointment	Gloria: I thought you'd be more supportive, Jay. I need you by my side.
Commissives	False Commitment	Phil: I'll remember to pick up the cake!

Table 2: Categories of Conflict Talks in *A Little Dilemma* based on Speech Act Theory

Dialogue	Key Points	Reason for Conflict
Nan Li: Why aren't you studying hard? What if you can't get into a good school? Zi You: I'm already trying hard; you just pressure me.	Negative Judgment: Questions effort Demanding: Insists on studying harder Expression of Disappointment: Zi You feels pressured	Nan Li's strict expectations clash with Zi You's capacity.
Tian Yu Lan: You must join this tutoring class; it's vital for your future. Huan Huan: I don't want to; I'm already tired.	Ordering: Mandates tutoring attendance Demanding: High demands lead to exhaustion	Tian Yu Lan's desire for academic improvement overlooks Huan Huan's exhaustion.
Zhao Na: Have you considered the child's feelings with your pressure? Tian Yu Lan: I'm doing this for his benefit; he won't succeed otherwise.	Intolerable Accusation: Questions methods Suggesting: Urges consideration of feelings Expression of Indignation: Tian Yu Lan reacts defensively	Conflict between perceived parental duty and the child's emotional needs.

4. Interpretations of the Conclusions: Theoretical Framework Insights

4.1 Power Distance

In *A Little Dilemma*, the parental characters played by Nan Li has a very strong desire to control their children, even to a pathological degree. This control is one-side, that is, they do not allow children to interfere in trifles of their own, and the only requirement for their children is to put their hearts and souls into their college entrance examination.

In a culture with low power distance, the United States is a society characterized by an almost parallel structure. The US values democratic leadership styles, favoring collective decision-making and participation. In interpersonal relationships, individuals admire equality between one another. In the families, parents respect their children's every decision, whether on a whim or deliberately. Correspondingly, children also respect every decision of their parents. What's more, parents of children, also respect the decisions of their parents, namely Grandpa and Grandma. They won't obtrude themselves upon interfering with their personal affairs.

4.2 Individualism vs. Collectivism

A Little Dilemma illustrates a collectivist perspective, where individual desires are often suppressed for the sake of family harmony. Conflicts frequently arise from divergent familial expectations, and resolution tends to favor consensus rather than individual expression. This starkly contrasts with the more self-assertive resolutions found in *Modern Family*, showcasing the influence of collectivist values in shaping conflict discourse.

In *Modern Family*, each character exhibits a greater sense of independence. While they do support one another and share a harmonious existence, their relationships lack the deep intimacy found in the Chinese family portrayed in *A Little Dilemma*; they resemble friendships more than traditional familial bonds. For instance, Haley views her sister as a nerd and a bookworm, while Alex sees Haley primarily as eye candy. Their communication style is often blunt and unfiltered. In contrast, their parents, Phil and Claire, refrain from intervening in their disputes and demonstrate respect for their daughters and their choices. This dynamic clearly underscores the individualism deeply rooted in American culture.

4.3 Masculinity vs. Femininity

Although traditional Chinese TV series demonstrates that male characters adopt dominant positions in conflict scenarios and female characters exhibit nurturing behaviors. However, both male and female characters actively participate in conflict negotiations

in contemporary Chinese families. In *A Little dilemma*, mothers like Nan Li are particularly anxious about their children's grades, giving rise to a lot of family conflicts.

In *Modern Family*, characters like Mitchell and Cam represent a departure from traditional masculinity, promoting a discourse that values emotional expression and negotiation over power struggles. This reflects a more feminine approach to conflict resolution, demonstrating how cultural values shape interpersonal communication. On the other hand, as a country with a tendency towards a more muted masculinity, the United States places greater importance on the concept of quality of life. People generally prefer conciliatory and negotiation-based approaches to resolving conflicts within organizations.

4.4 Uncertainty Avoidance

Individuals from high Uncertainty Avoidance cultures prefer structured environments and clear guidelines, leading to conflict avoidance. In *A Little Dilemma*, characters often express anxiety when unpredictable scenarios arise. Their attempts to mitigate uncertainty through rigid familial roles and expectations reveal a strong preference for stability.

In the United States, where there is a low level of uncertainty avoidance, people may appear somewhat lethargic and lacking in work autonomy. They often feel emotionally resistant to codified regulations and believe that having fewer rules is preferable. Organizations that exhibit weak uncertainty avoidance tend to place less emphasis on control, with lower levels of procedural standardization and formalization in workplace guidelines. Consequently, both organizational characteristics and work features that influence work-family conflict are affected by this culture of low uncertainty avoidance in the United States.

4.5 Long-Term vs. Short-Term Orientation

Chinese parents assume study is always the top priority for their children and their entire future and prospect hinge on College Entrance Examination. In addition, they take children as an integral element of the whole family, and regard their future critical factor of the whole family's future well-being. The outcome, however, is less than satisfactory. Children are more likely to grow up as an dependent adult, accustomed to being controlled by their parents. They may live most of their life fretting about the future and can hardly enjoy the present. This outcome boils down to long-term orientation.

In *Modern Family*, characters like Phil and Claire often approach parenting with a focus on their children's current happiness rather than strict discipline or long-term goals. They make decisions based on what will make their kids feel good in the moment, sometimes overlooking future implications. What's more, characters make career decisions that favor immediate success or satisfaction rather than long-term fulfillment. For instance, Phil's pursuit of various real estate ventures shows a desire for quick wins rather than establishing a stable career path. The families frequently prioritize fun and spontaneity over long-term planning. Family gatherings are filled with humor and unpredictable moments rather than carefully structured events, showcasing a preference for enjoying the moment. The prevailing view of life is that work is to live.

4.6 Indulgence vs. Restraint

China is characterized as a society bound by self-discipline and adherence to the way, a result closely linked to its educational philosophy. As is reflected in *A Little Dilemma*, Chinese parents instil in their children from an early age the importance of self-restraint, teaching them to endure, be alone, remain quiet, and practise delayed gratification. They encourage the effective use of leisure and holiday time for diligent study, while also emphasizing the importance of manners and behaviour in social interactions.

Modern Family promotes indulgence, where characters openly express emotions and pursue happiness, even at the risk of conflict. The ease with which characters communicate their desires fosters a vibrant, albeit chaotic, family dynamic. There is a widespread belief that individuals emotionally struggle to accept formal regulations, leading to a preference for fewer rules. Organizations exhibiting a weaker uncertainty avoidance do not place much emphasis on control, resulting in lower levels of formalized and standardized work regulations and processes. Consequently, both the organizational and job characteristics that influence work-family conflict in the U.S. are shaped by this low uncertainty avoidance culture, impacting the nature of work-family conflict itself.

Conclusion

The study of conflict discourse, through the lens of Hofstede's cultural dimensions, provides deeper insights into how cultural values influence family dynamics and conflict resolution. By understanding these cultural nuances, educators and communicators can better navigate and manage cross-cultural interactions, improving overall intercultural communication.

References:

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