

Cross-Cultural Misinterpretations in Social Information Processing within British-Chinese Context

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Abstract: Cross-cultural communication refers to people from different cultural backgrounds interacting with each other for informative purpose. Based on this understanding, this essay explores the misunderstanding types and mechanisms of formation in British-Chinese context. Furthermore, this essay takes social information processing theory as analytical lens, discusses two influential factors and their roles played in generating misunderstandings: cognitive biases and regional cultures. The degree of influence of regional culture on social information processing leads to different cognitive biases, and the types of misunderstanding are divided into two extremes: positive misunderstandings and serious offenses; Innocuous misunderstandings are intermediate between positive misunderstandings and serious offenses, playing a transitional role between the poles.

Keywords: Cross-cultural Communication; Regional cultures; Social Information Processing Process

With the development of international exchanges, it is necessary to study the cultural differences between east and west, especially between China and western countries, and the role and impact of such differences on cross-cultural communication. In order to successfully conduct cross-cultural communication between the two parties in different cultural backgrounds, it is necessary to study the mechanism of misunderstanding based on the culture of different regions, so as to avoid misunderstanding in cross-cultural communication.

1. Literature Review

1.1 Social Information Processing Theory

Crick & Dodge divided social information processing into five interrelated cognitive processing operation sequences: decoding process → explanation process → seeking reaction process → reaction decision process → coding process. The decoding stage is mainly about the individual selectively input the specific clues that are important to him in the context, that is collecting relevant information from the surrounding environment. The process of explanation is that after the individual perceives the clues in the situation, he must first compare and contrast the information with his existing knowledge and experience, and then make possible explanations for the clues obtained. The response seeking stage is when an individual interprets a situational cue and then looks for possible behavioral responses. The decision stage is concerning the evaluation of the reactions, the prediction of the effects of the various reactions, and then the determination of which reaction to take. After the behavioral response is selected, the individual enters the final stage of social information processing theory-the stage of implementing the response.

Cross-cultural communication is a process of encoding and decoding information, which is closely related to environmental and psychological factors. This essay is mainly based on the standard classification of understanding results. The “comprehension outcome criterion” refers to a way of distinguishing misunderstandings by comparing the speaker’s meaning with the amount of information the reader understands. Based on this, according to the result of misunderstanding, which is the degree of good or bad in this essay, the misunderstanding can be divided into two extremely interesting misunderstandings and very serious offenses, and the harmless misunderstandings are intermediate transitional results.

1.2 Cultural Model of Social Information Processing

Culture is a society in the sum of all material civilization and spiritual civilization, a certain language is the soul of a certain culture (Gregory J.B, 2020:159). Regional culture refers to the unique cultural characteristics of a certain region, the perfect integration of culture and regional environment, and the unique cultural tradition formed in a specific region in a long historical period, which reflects the ecological situation, folk customs, traditional customs and living habits of the region. The differences of regional cultures make different parts of a nation or the world have different understanding of the same thing. The Chinese people often associate the cow with hard work, selfless dedication, hard-working, honest duty and incomparable strength. Unlike the Chinese, the British see the distinctive image of a cow as a grumpy, rambunctious and clumsy animal.

1.3 Cognitive Model of Social Information Processing

Cognitive bias is considered as a mental deviation in information processing. In this sense, that cognitive bias is considered as an individual’s cognitive preference based on individual experience, from which individuals may make irrational or illogical inferences about events. From the perspective of social cognition, it is believed that in the social cognitive context, the individual as the cognitive subject often has cognitive biases due to the influence of various factors such as knowledge experience, personal position and motivation.

2. An Analysis of Social Information Processing Within British-Chinese Context

2.1 Cultural Regionalism Based Misunderstanding in Social Information Processing

For example, Li Hua asked Jack, “did you have dinner?” “Jack replied,” no, let’s have dinner together. Li Hua would think that Jack’s answer took him by surprise, because it was just a polite greeting. I didn’t intend to have dinner with Jack, which made me feel like an outsider. However, Jack thought it was Li Hua who proposed the dinner. Why would Li Hu not be happy that I agreed to it? As a result, the two men misunderstand each other because of their different regional cultures. It can be seen that regional culture penetrates into processing process of social information and functions and influences processing process. However, regional culture does not influence the process of social information processing with the same intensity, that is, the influence of regional culture in the process of interpretation, response seeking and decision making is greater than that in the process of decoding and coding.

2.2 Cognitive Biased Misunderstanding in Social Information Processing

In the process of social information processing, people eventually have misunderstandings due to cognitive bias. Due to the strength of the cognitive bias, these misunderstandings tend to go to two extremes: the positive misunderstanding at one end and the serious offense at the other. The misunderstanding in the middle can be grouped into the category of innocuous misunderstanding, which can also be regarded as the transition from the good extreme to the bad extreme.

For example,

A:I almost slipped today, but luckily an uncle held me up.

B:You are a lucky dog.

A:Oh, my god, I almost fell down and you said I was a dog.

B:No, no, no, lucky means you’re lucky not to fall, not a dog.

A:Wow, I am a lucky dog today.

B:Ha ha ha yes.

In this case the misunderstanding is not only solved, but also the cultural knowledge of the other side is learned. Therefore, the results of this kind of misunderstanding are classified as the positive misunderstanding.

A:How old are you?How much money can you make?

Where is your home?Are you married?

B:I don’t want to tell you. Just shut up!

The consequences of this kind of misunderstanding often go in the wrong direction, because people feel offended by the lack of understanding of the local culture. At the extreme this kind of misunderstanding can be very serious offenses.

A:What a beautiful dress you have!

B:No,it’s just an ordinary, a plain dress.

This kind of praise is a kind of affirmation to each other’s ability and achievement. A misunderstanding like this can be awkward and confusing, not entertaining or seriously offensive, so it’s somewhere in the middle.

Speakers express their ideas with their own regional culture, while receivers understand with their own unique regional culture, which is the process of processing social information based on regional culture. Because it comes from different regional cultures, cognitive bias occurs in the process of social information processing, which directly leads to misunderstanding.

3. Conclusion

From the analysis of the process of cultural processing of social information, it can be seen that the cause of misunderstanding in cross-cultural communication is mainly attributed to the lack of understanding of cultural differences in different regions. Regional and cultural differences lead to differences in social information processing of the same event in different countries, and the cognitive biases caused by such differences eventually lead to interesting misunderstandings, very serious offenses and other misunderstandings of different degrees. In this way, in the process of communication, students can actively and consciously eliminate the local cultural interference, avoid cultural misunderstanding, and create a mutually accepted and harmonious communication atmosphere.

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