

Non-verbal Behavior in Intercultural Communication

----- The Difference of Spatial-temporal system Between America and China

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Abstract: With the further development of the globalization, the contact between people with different language and cultural background is increasing. Intercultural communication is a necessary part of human communication. However, people often pay too much attention to language itself, neglecting non-verbal communications. Even worse, time and space, which is an important part of communication, are rarely mentioned. The neglecting of time and space will lead to communication failure. This article is intended to help people to enhance people's culture awareness, reduce the effect of negative transfer and help people communicate successfully.

Key Words: non-verbal communication; spatial-temporal system; inter-culture communication

Introduction: As for foreign language learners, transfer is a common learning strategy and communication strategy. The so-called transfer is a method that using the native language structure and usage to study the target language or to communicate. However, not all of the mother tongue can play a positive role in target language learning. According to the role it played in language learning, transfer can be divided into positive transfer and negative transfer. This strategy still plays an important role in intercultural communication. Positive occurs when target culture is identical with native culture, conversely, when target culture is different from native culture, negative transfer occurs. Positive transfer will promote language learners' intercultural communication ability, while negative transfer might lead to communication difficulties, misunderstanding and hatred. As a result, it is very important to shift negative transfer to positive transfer. Negative transfer has two levels: surface culture level and deep-structure culture level. The former emphasizes material or physical level while the latter lays stress on psychological level. As the main part of intercultural communication behavior, time and space will produce psychological level negative transfer. However, by understanding the difference of spatial-temporal system between America and China, negative transfer can be shifted to positive.

2. The difference of spatial-temporal system between America and China

America and China have different time orientation and space connotation. Different spatial-temporal systems will lead to misunderstanding and culture conflict; therefore to understand the differences is very important to intercultural communication.

2. 1 The difference about time

The difference about psychological time: it refers to how much attention people have paid to the past, the present and the future. Based on this understanding, psychological time has three kinds of orientation: past, present and future. As far as Chinese culture is concerned, the psychological time give priority to past orientation. Chinese value their past, it is reflected in all aspects of life, such as, much of the city's ancient buildings, respect the old man, and so on. And the characteristics of American culture orientate to the future.

The difference about informal time: The informal time rule is not learned but works through people's subconscious. For example, we made the reaction on time deeply rooted in our culture. All cultures believe that their time system is the best, so misunderstanding is inevitable. In United States, as is known to all, boss can be late to the meeting, but the secretary's late will suffer severe blame. The doctor can be late for a long time while the nurse can't. In China, being on time is important in formal occasion, but if you can, the earlier the better, it is viewed as a kind of respect. In informal occasions, China and the United States have different attitude about the time. In china, arrive early shows respect to the host while Americans are not used to see the guests arrival in advance.

The differences between Mono-chronic Time and Poly-chronic Time:

The comparison between Mono-chronic Time people and Poly-chronic Time people

M-people

do one thing at a time
 concentrate on work
 be punctual (deadline, schedule)
 less talking, more information needed
 commit to work
 comply with plan
 do not bother others, respect privacy
 respect private property, few borrow
 emphasize on promptness
 be used to short-term relation

P-people

do many things at a time
 easily distracted, easy to be interrupted
 don't keep time, achieve purpose
 more talking, enough information
 commit to interpersonal relationship
 easily change plan
 concern relatives, disrespect privacy
 easy to borrow money or else
 base promptness on relationship
 have trend for long-term relationship

From above we know that American culture is M-culture. As Hall says, the western especially the Americans believe time is fixed, is something around us that is inescapable or a part of the environment, like air. (Hall, 1959) For example: in social activities, westerners believe that making appointment is a good manner. Americans are against to be notified in the last seconds. If the Americans were invited to a party at the last moment, they will consider it is insincere, they are just substitutes. So they usually will not accept the invitation no matter how attractive it is. To visit others without an appointment also is impolite unless emergency, because you may disrupt others' schedule. People with this time orientation don't like to be interrupted. People with P-culture can do lots of things and contact with many people at a time. They often break appointments which make Americans puzzled. For example: in traditional Chinese culture, people often say: come to visit my house if available, which means they welcome the friends' visit anytime. In addition, the feature of China's P-time system is many things happening at the same time, they do not stick to plan but emphasize on change. For example, two poly-chronic time Chinese would rather late for next date but terminate their conversation before its finished.

2. 2 The difference about space system between America and China

Different attitudes about space reflect different values and thinking mode. As the main part of non-verbal communication, space refers to the communication between interpersonal distance and the spatial position. Forston (1968) defines it as communication by constructing the micro space, that is, people consciously keep the distance when they are communicating with others.

2. 2. 1. Distance

Distance has different connotations in different cultures. Therefore acceptable space distance changes as culture changes. American anthropologist, Dr Edward· J· Hall, divides the distance between humans into intimate distance, in which communicators have very close relationship, as husband and wife, lovers, mother and son, who keep distance from body contact to 18 inches; Personal distance, refers to general relationships as acquaintance, friends, colleagues, their body distance range from eighteen inches to four feet; Social distance, refers to the distance between strangers in general social occasions , the distance range from 4 to 12 feet; The public distance, such as in public lecture hall and class, the distance range from twelve feet to any audible distance. There is certain relation between interpersonal psychological distance and physical distance, so it is an effective method to improve the people's psychological distance by adjusting the physical distance. Hall described the boundaries to above four distances. Intimate distance: (1) blurred vision (2) can embrace the other one (3) can see many details (4) look through each other (6) easy to smell each other or can feel the heart beat. Personal distance: (1) keep privacy (2) the relation is close (3) can talk about personal things. Social distance: together with the people they don't know, keep their social distance, for example: colleagues. The public distance: not very close to each other; easy to go away if necessary; to speak not shout. Generally speaking, in public occasions, the Americans don't want to be close to others, because it made them very uncomfortable, neither do they want to keep too far, they may feel very embarrassed. Chinese do not have mature results about the boundaries of four distances. But researches show that, other than similar boundaries in public distance and intimate distance with Americans', the other two are significantly different. Both Chinese personal distance and social distance are very close, people almost smell each other. So it is easily attacked by each other's saliva. In order to avoid such scenes, some Chinese cover their mouth by hand but expand the distance between them, such an action often makes the Americans misunderstood and disgust. In order to avoid misunderstanding, foreign language learners should pay attention to the use of nonverbal behavior in intercultural communication.

2. 2. 2 Space

Spaciousness, crowd, space violence and space respect have different connotations in different cultures. Our attitude to space reflects our attitude to privacy. Americans, who advocate individualism, put personal space and privacy in the first place. They respect other people's privacy, try to avoid infringed. So, the Americans give their children separate bedroom to protect their privacy. Even parents need to knock for their children's permission before entering the room. However, in China, parents entering children's room without knocking. Chinese parents don't think this is infringement, instead they think it's their right. Obviously, Americans ask for more private space than Chinese, for example: when waiting in line, Americans keep a certain distance from each other while Chinese are close to each other. Americans are so sensitive to other's space that they would say sorry if keep 5-11 inches apart to other people. The usage of space is most important element in American culture.

Our different experiences and cultural traditions determine different space attitude. Americans' straightforward, privacy respected has something to do with their national geographic characteristics. In China, we have large population density and crowded housing conditions. In this condition, it is difficult to provide your child with independent room and privacy protection become impossible. In addition, when space and privacy are infringed, different attitude also lead to different spatial-temporal system. Individualistic Americans are likely to take a positive attitude, and collective Chinese will take passive backward attitude.

Americans bring their same individualistic privacy into the office and public occasion.

3. Inspiration to foreign language learners

Basic communication ability is composed of verbal ability and nonverbal ability. To be exact, it includes written communication ability, oral communication ability and nonverbal communication ability. In intercultural communication, it includes verbal ability, non-verbal ability and adaptability to different cultures. So the nonverbal communication is a very important part of intercultural communication. In order to improve the foreign language learners' intercultural communication ability, teachers should focus on the nonverbal communication.

In order to use of nonverbal behavior better, foreign language learners should acquire a culture background that consistent with a specific cultural tradition. So foreign language learners should not only focus on the pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and should also pay attention to the nonverbal behavior learning. They have to change the traditional learning methods and contents in order to improve their intercultural communication ability. To change the traditional study methods, first of all, foreign language learners should be aware that the important role nonverbal behavior played and the importance to acquire target national cultural background. In addition, students should actively participate in intercultural communication course and cooperate to promote intercultural communication competence. Furthermore, as far as methodology is concerned, foreign language learners should create a genuine, natural, interesting learning environment by using modern facilities, in which people can imitate nonverbal behavior and compare differences.

4. Conclusion

The nonverbal behavior is supplementary and deepening to speech act. American scholars Loretta ·A· Malandro and Larry Barker summarized three functions of nonverbal behavior: complementing verbal messages, substituting for verbal messages, accenting verbal messages. Speech act and nonverbal behavior interact and supplement to each other. In different culture background, nonverbal behavior has different cultural connotation. So, non-verbal communication is a very important part of intercultural communication. Foreign language learners should also put culture understanding and cultural comparison as the key point of the target language learning, being aware of the target language country's social system, ways of thinking, customs, values, and our differences, and finally intercultural communication. To improve foreign language learners' intercultural communication ability, it is necessary to make comparison about our nonverbal behaviors of different culture backgrounds. It is more practical for us to combine foreign language learning and nonverbal behavior research.

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