

A Comparative Study on the Forms of Address in Chinese and English

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Abstract

Address plays a very important role in the intercultural communication. How to choose the proper address is one of the most important intercultural communicative skills to a speaker. This article presents a system comparison between the Chinese and English address forms. From the similarities and differences we can have a deeper understanding of the culture differences between Chinese and English, and then make a better cross-cultural communication.

Keywords

Address; Social Relation; Intercultural Communication.

1. Introduction

Address forms are common phenomenon in human verbal communication in daily life across cultures. They make up of the most important parts of language word systems and reflect the speaker's role and identity, family and social status, intimacy or remoteness of their relationship as well as their likes and dislikes. Address forms are the prelude to personal association and their proper use is the prerequisite to achieve the aim of personal contract. They also play an important role in intercultural communication. In many circumstances, address forms are the very first message conveyed to the addressee. Sometimes a simple address form can take place of a long sentence in conveying a profound meaning. Addressing is a systematic, variable social phenomenon. Different nation has its own unique addressing system. Address forms are important as well as frequent in social interactions all over the world. Appropriate addressing behavior is crucial for his establishment and maintenance of interpersonal relationships.

2. Classification of Address Forms

2.1. Classification of Address Forms in Chinese

While classification of address forms is a bit more complicated in Chinese than that in English, they are divided into various categories by scholars from different perspectives.

According to Tian Huigang, address system is divided into four groups that is kin term system, social address form system, names of address system, and pronouns of address system for the purpose of comparison between Chinese and other languages.

Zhu Wanqing has classified address forms into two parts: to address somebody face to face, and to refer to a third person.

However, most of the Chinese and English researchers classify address forms into two categories: kinship terms and social address terms. This classification is the type characteristics of address generality of the majority of languages in the world (曲彦斌). Generally speaking, Chinese addressing words can be classified into two systems. One is kinship appellation system. Terms from this system are mainly used among people who are kin. The other is social

appellation system. Terms from this system are chiefly used among people who are not kin, that is, used in social communication” (马宏基, 常庆丰)

2.2. Classification of Address Forms in English

Fasold has pointed out that there are two kinds of address forms: names and second person pronouns. Names are further divided in two kinds of terms, which are reference and summons for the convenience of studies.

Hudson divides address forms into vocatives and referring names in order to show that Power-solidarity relationship is central to the grammar.

Firedrake Braun has generally divided address forms into three categories, namely Pronouns of address, verb forms of address and nouns of address in most cases, only nouns of address forms are intended.

3. Comparisons between Some Main Relationships in Chinese and English Address Forms

No matter in daily life or on formal occasions one cannot avoid using address forms in communication. Appropriate use of address forms is of vital importance to the success of human communication. Yet, even though address forms exist in almost every language system, there are great differences between address forms in different language. If we do not know their differences, it's inevitable to make mistakes in using them and even cause misunderstanding and unhappiness by improper use address forms in human interactions. Therefore, it's not only necessary but also significant to contrast and analyze address forms of different language. The use of address forms is variable from culture to culture. English and Chinese derive from different cultural: surely great differences exist in their respective address form systems because of the different emphasis in the two cultures. In this part, I will contrast the different address form systems of English and Chinese from the perspective of pragmatics in great detail.

3.1. Comparison of Kinship Address Forms

Chinese has more kinship terms used as address forms than those of English; the kinship terms in Chinese are much more complicated than that in English. This part will give us a discussion of differences between Chinese kinship terms and English kinship terms in details as followed. Chinese kinship terms are used with their distinctive characteristics. There are separate terms for addressing younger and elder brothers, and for younger and elder sisters, so that the seniority of the same generation is also reflected. But in English “brother” can mean both “哥哥” and “弟弟”. Likewise a “sister” may be referred to either as “姐姐” or “妹妹”. Moreover, in English, “uncle” and “aunt” include “伯父, 叔父, 姑父, 舅父, 姨夫” and “伯母, 婶母, 姑母, 舅母, 姨母” in Chinese. “Nephew” can be either “侄子” or “外甥”. “niece” can be either “侄女” or “外甥女”. These words only show that the persons being described belong to the same generation, but in English there is no distinction of seniority within the same generation. We should note that the Chinese kinship terms are always used in the coordination with the word of seniority. On account of patriarchy, seniority is a compliment in China. We often prefix such words as “大, 二, 三, 四” before the kinship terms like “大姐, 二姐, 三姐, 四姐” or “大舅, 二舅, 三舅, 四舅”, for “大” means the first and the coordinated term is the respectful form.

In contrast, English counterpart can not be preceded by such modifiers as first, second, third, and fourth, etc. It is unacceptable to address like First Uncle, Second Uncle, Third Aunt, or Fourth Aunt. Age matters nothing. However, Chinese people stress the importance of the order among family members.

The fictive use of kinship terms refers to the use of kinship terms to address those who are not the relatives of the addresser. It means the extension of kinship terms. In English, kinship terms are used as address terms, but these kinship terms are limited and not as popular as in Chinese. While western people seldom extend kinship terms to non-kinships. Even in calling parents' good friends, the English children still use the social titles of address forms such as "Mr., Mrs., or Miss + Surname". When the relationship between two pairs of parents is very intimate, "uncle or aunt + first name" may be used. The fictive use of kinship terms in China is very common and the extension of kinship terms is one of the most typical features of Chinese address forms.

3.2. Comparison between Friends in Chinese and English Address Forms

In Chinese, when used in this group, address forms especially can reflect the interaction between the two sides of social relationships, emotional relationship and communication type, which involved in each other's position, identity, age, gender intimacy and etc. For peers to good friends, classmates, colleagues, in Chinese we often directly call names to show the familiarity with each other. To friends, neighbors and other acquaintances, we often use "小+surname" to call those who is younger, which contains the love and care. Using "老+surname" to call the older people and the qualifications to show deep respect and superior.

However, students to the teacher, the lower to the superior, directly call names or "老+surname" are not acceptable. In this case, the identity and status of both sides are in the unequal position. Traditional Chinese think "a day for the teacher, life of father", and this will make teachers, regardless of their age, gender, equivalent to the elders of the students; Supervisor is the leadership, the "fathers", and his issuing is higher than the lower. In traditional Chinese thinking, there is a strict boundary between the positions. Also, we Chinese can call the teacher and one at a higher level by "surname + position/title", which embodies the respect of the speaker and modesty and implied the distance between the both parties. On formal occasions, however, even having the most closely relationship between friends, addressing with "surname + position or title" is the most proper.

In English, between good friends, classmates, and close acquaintances, addressing by calling name is common, and it is friendly natural and equality. In informal situations, students can call teacher's name, and the teachers are also willing to be called like this, especially in the United States. This also shows the harmonious and intimate relations between the teachers and students. But on formal occasions; the students should call their teacher with "title or position + name". It shows the speaker's courtesy and respect. It is also reflecting the positions. To the superiors and subordinates of the different social roles, the social status is different, so the lower to the superior, addressing with "title or position +surname" is of proportion, and the superior can call the lower's name, and this is the same as Chinese. Address in English in this group, therefore, focuses on the social relations, the two communicating parties' distance, and the occasions.

3.3. Comparison of Professional Titles in Chinese and English

Professional titles used as addressing terms are only employed to those who are engaged in some special professions, such as "Professor", "Doctor", "lawyer" and so on. These titles can be used alone or together with last name, but titles of this type are much restricted in English, as compared with their Chinese equivalents.

According to Ervin-Tripp (1972), only "Judge", "Doctor" (a physician or a Ph.D.), "Professor", "Father" (priest) can be used independently without a last name, and the majority of professional or post titles cannot be used this way. Professional titles of service like waiter, porter are acceptable address forms in English, but they are normally used only when the addressee is performing the duty. Professional titles are not heard in English so often as in Chinese. Except for in some special situation, people would rather address others with names

or social titles than professional titles. Many college students call their professors by their given names. The professors do not regard this as a sign of disrespect, but rather, as an indication that they are considered affable. This, of course, runs quite counter to Chinese custom.

If one has his or her official titles, you should use the official titles to call him or her. Such as minister, generals, bishop, etc. And you can call the senior officials (men or women); you can deeply say "Your Excellency" to show your honor. But some European and American countries such as Germany, the United States, Mexico, etc are often referred to "Sir" and don't say "your ~". Chinese often feel uncomfortable using a Westerner's given name, feeling that it indicates too close a relationship. Westerners, on the other hand, may feel that if a Chinese insists on using his or her surname, it indicates an unwillingness to be friendly, and it maintains a gap between them. So the use of forms like "Mr. Andrew" or "Lewis" may be a Chinese form of compromise.

Another common Chinese form of address is the use of a person's title, such as "张局长", "李校长". But one seldom hears English speakers addressing others as "Bureau Director Smith", "Principle Morris", etc. In English, only a few occupations or titles are used such as Doctor, Judge, Governor, Mayor, Professor, Nurse and ranks in the armed forces like Captain.

4. The Factors Influencing English and Chinese Address Forms System

4.1. Cultural Background

Chinese feudal society has strict patriarchal system. There is strict hierarchy not only in the society but also in the family. Father and son are close, there are righteous monarchs, couples are different, seniority and friends need faith, and this "Five Code" has proved the Chinese norms sufficiently. In the family relative's appellation terms are ranking clear, and strictly distinguish between blood and in-laws, families and the families. And the appellation terms have been clear about the personal right status, rights and obligations. In China, we often use the relative addressing terms to address who do not have blood relations in order to get closer. And this culture connotation really reflects the social psychology of Chinese people. Address reflects not only the interpersonal relationship but also the social relations. The Confucian thought has the profound influence of Chinese society, at the same time, restricted by the social system and the feudal moral, address also reflects the Chinese people on interpersonal relationship attitude, especially for the attitude of the relatives.

And in English the address forms reflect the commodity economy society and the corresponding ideas of freedom, democracy and equality. The former, as agricultural economic mode and concept of the product, pay more attention to the blood relationship related with the feudal elements. It also reflects the charm and characteristics of Confucianism. While the latter pays more attention to the individual freedom and respects for the freedom, for the western countries have always been pursuing them.

4.2. Family Structure

In terms of the structure of the family, the ancient Chinese usually has the big family. In other words, generations of Chinese people live together, and three or four generations lived in a big house is not uncommon. The ancient Chinese are in favor of various kinds of kinship, relationship which are very clear. Compared with this, the western countries are associated with "core family", parents and their children are often two generations living together. Only the relationship between parents and children is commonly clear, and other relative is fuzzy kinship. Simple example is the usage of the uncle and cousin. In the west, inheritance is only a two-way street, and namely paternal and maternal relatives have inheritance. But in Chinese feudal society, women are not qualified to inherit.

Patriarchal family relatives are closer than the mother of the family, such as someone in China will feel closer to 叔父、姑母 more than 舅父、姨母, although judging from blood relations between them are the same. A powerful example is as follows: calls to the patriarchal family include 祖父、祖母、孙子、孙女、堂兄弟姐妹, etc. but the relations of mother include 外祖父、外祖母、外孙、外孙女、表兄弟姐妹 (表 usually means 外), etc. And “外” refers to far distance, etc. Some begin with “外”, and expressed “far” itself. In English, however, it is not so clear. For example, grandfather, grandmother, grandson, granddaughter, nephew, niece and cousin can not only refer to the relatives of the family can also refer to the maternal family, there is no clear distinction.

4.3. Different Value Orientation

The differences of Chinese and English values also lead the difference of the address forms. Chinese people's value of the self-judgment is usually in the form of depression. Now, that is to say, we own the value of the review is often low; this is the characteristics of Chinese traditional culture. “Inferiority and honor other”, there is fresh and clearly reflect in titles. For example, we usually call ourselves filled with disparagement and humble address. We Chinese people often call ourselves 鄙人, our little brother 舍弟, and so on. And we call other part with raised honor as 您, 令尊 (other part's father), 令郎 (other part's son), and so on. Contrary to the Chinese nationality, the west people are paying more attention to individualism, and advocate self-affirmation and self-expression. Paying attention to personality and affirming self-value make English people tend to survive in the competition and develop, and take more emphasis on themselves. These consist of the different value orientation of Chinese and English address forms.

5. Conclusion

We have talked much about the differences and the similarities in Chinese and English address forms above. Do you have a clear understanding about the address form or the cultural gap? Do you realize the importance of knowing the differences of two kinds of languages in cross-cultural communication? And I think you must have known the factors that influence the differences, and you may have known more about the western culture. Address forms are the prelude to personal association and their proper use is the prerequisite to achieve the aim of personal contract. They also play an important role in intercultural communication. In many circumstances, address forms are the very first message conveyed to the addressee. Sometimes a simple address form can take place of a long sentence in conveying a profound meaning. So, we should know more about the differences between Chinese and English address forms.

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