

A Contrastive Study of English and Chinese Taboos

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Abstract: Taboo refers to special culture or what is abandoned in life such as thoughts and behaviors. Traditionally cultural concepts have a belief that behavior of violating the taboos would not only give rise to destruction and disturbance to the society but also cause injuries and deaths. Recently, with the rapidly speedy development of economy, China and western countries are getting more and more contacts which bring into the economic opportunity as well as the cultural conflicts. It is necessary to have a contrastive study of English and Chinese taboos, in order to reduce the unnecessary disputes.

1. Introduction

In today's society, economy and information are getting more and more globalized. Communication among people from different countries, different nations and different races are becoming more and more frequent. People, from different cultures, inevitably encounter obstacles in the process of communicating, of which the main reason is the diversity of languages and cultures.[1] The diversity of Chinese and English taboos is the most essential problem which is often neglected in the cross-cultural communication. Therefore, getting acquaintance with others' taboos and customs and respecting them usually lead to a successful result.[2] Otherwise, it may cause obstructions in communication even a deadly failure.

The word "taboo" originally means things of "sacred", "untouchable" and "must be careful"[3]. In 1777, an English navigator James Cook made explorations into the South Pacific and when he reached islands of Tonga, he had found many amazing and marvelous social phenomena about taboo which includes two aspects. On one hand, respectfully supernatural beings can not be randomly used while disdained chaff should not be touched casually. On the other hand, people had adored certain kind of special miraculous things of language as well as some squalid and contemptuous words prohibited to use. Taboo represents certain social ideology and system culture. In the middle ages of the west, religious banned rules are more than needed so the feudal apologist had put words about sensitive parts of the body into the restricted zone of language while in China taboo also has had a long history. Lots of the taboo has been preserved as forms of propriety by the archon. In today's modern society, concepts of taboo have become more extensive than before. From the vertical perspective, the components of religious superstition in taboo have relatively reduced while the components of spiritual civilization in line with the trend of the times have comparatively increased. Besides, from the horizontal perspective, as the increasingly frequent communication with eastern and western countries, taboo customs mutually affect each other and the similar or analogous constituents are getting more and more increased.

2. Difference of English and Chinese Taboos in Appellation

Most of the taboos belong to the verbal taboos. As we know, people can not always say what he really thinks about in the normal communication, even there exists some sensitive topics we can not discuss. In a specific culture, people will avoid some words and topics, as they have planned it in advance, because they are prohibited from long ago. Thus, taboo as a social phenomenon appears. No matter where you are, Chinese or western countries, the scope that verbal taboos involved is more than extensive, from personal life to the whole family even the society, being nothing more than everywhere. Verbal taboos are divided into three categories-taboos of appellation, taboos of vocabulary and taboos of topics[4].

In primitive time, when it is the time that science is underdeveloped, human beings took their names as something transcendent and sacred for they thought that a person's name was related to his body and soul. On account of the scared psychology and sense of self-protection, it is generally accepted that one's name should be taken holy as a taboo. But it is different when it comes to the attitude of taboos of appellation to Chinese and western society. The development of taboos of appellation is unique and distinctive. In Shang Dynasty, there was a system called "birth name and death taboo". After Han Dynasty, this taboos gradually expanded on people alive. Thus, these special taboos of appellation formed which means we can not directly call the names of the monarch and the elders, and ordinary people couldn't use the words similar to the monarch. The prevalence of this system owes to not only the advocating of the ruling class but also the widespread social environment and cultural accumulation. It is the tradition that Chinese always deeply respect and highly esteem their ancestors and religions. So far, Chinese children are still abandoned to call parents' names directly and impossible to name their kids with the senior's names. However, in western nations, there is no such taboo like that. In the USA, it is nothing unusual to call their parents' names, even name their children with the ancestors' names for honoring them which is related to them attaching importance to the sense of self-value. They do have taboos of appellation in names of religion. Western countries are deeply influenced by Christianity so even people have no faith in ghosts or gods, they wouldn't use words not respectful to offend god, and instead, they will try their best to avoid the gods' names. Some Chinese textbooks misguide the students to express surprise with "my god" or "Jesus" which dissatisfy amounts of English and American people. They think that these names is too holy to violate, only in certain condition such as formally dignified situation can the pastor use it, rather than any other people. Otherwise, it would be taken as blasphemy and violation to god of Christianity. From this it appears that there exists much difference between Chinese and western taboos on appellation. To understand that and to get familiar with it, western people will not get puzzled about the all-street around "uncle" and "aunt" in China while Chinese students will not be embarrassed to call the foreign teachers' names directly[5].

3. Difference of English and Chinese Taboos in Vocabulary

The vocabulary of taboo has close relations to the nation's language, words, traditional customs and national psychology. Chinese language is abundant and plentiful as well as the English language, so the taboo of this aspect involves every field such as life and death, old and birth. Both Chinese and western countries have taboo about pregnancy and giving birth to a baby. Nation Han attach great importance to reproducing posterity, as the old saying that "the most critical fault is not having posterity", thus giving birth to babies is the greatest things to a family. However, owing to the relevance of pregnancy and sexual behavior as well as some superstitious feudal ideas that puerperal is ominous, it should not be discussed straightly about the puerperal or pregnancy rather

than adopting euphemism such as “have been a bun in the oven” or “in an interesting condition” or “in the family way” and so on. On the contrary, western countries can freely and openly discuss female pregnancy even the puerperal herself will state outright about it. But in American, as the rapidly growing quantity of unmarried mothers, people tend to be unwilling to say that so they use euphemism to replace it such as “trick baby”, “in the mistake/ trouble” or “have an accident” etc.

No matter in eastern culture or western culture, people all bears strong fear to death and they are even very unwilling to mention the word “die”. In Chinese culture, “die” is the most unpopular word because people usually avoid discussing death when they communicate with others. According to *Dictionary of Chinese Euphemism*, there are four hundred and eighty one euphemisms about death among Chinese language while there are more than four hundred euphemisms about death in English. The difference is that, euphemism about death in English has close relation with Christianity but in Chinese, euphemism about death is usually influenced by Buddhism and Taoism.

Getting ill is taken as a kind of misfortune for it bringing uncomfortable feeling and pain to human beings. Both Chinese and western countries are so sensitive to talk about illness that the patients tend to keep secrets and not want others to mention it. In American, patients have rights to know how serious his condition is. If the patient asks, the doctors have to tell him the truth. In contrast, in Chinese culture, when the conditions of patients are really serious, doctors and family members tend to conceal the real condition, in order to reduce the patients’ psychological burden.

Words about sex are both sensitive to Chinese and western people, just distinguished by ways and extents. We Chinese people are comparatively conservative, on matter where we are, public occasions or daily lives, words about sex are in a black lists of taboo. In English speaking countries, education of sex has been carried out very early so their attitude towards sex is relatively open, but even though in such condition, some words are abandoned still. For instance, “homosexual” is rarely used but “gay” or “queer” is still in use.

As far as taboo on figures is concerned, Chinese culture differs a lot from western culture. The English speaking countries extremely disgust the figure thirteen with which is said that is related to Judas, the thirteenth disciples of Jesus. However, taboo on figures in Chinese culture is not very obvious as well as fixed. Most regions have a tradition to avoid the figure four because it sounds like “die”.

4. Difference of English and Chinese Taboos in Topics

In our daily life, whether it is formal conversation or chatting, there are substantial contents in people’s conversations besides conventional greeting and phatic communion. The ideas people want to express usually unfold in the form of topics, which, as a result, is the core of communication. People will, depending on different relationship with others, choose or transfer different topics in different situations. However, it has usually happened that in the cross cultural communication among people from different countries and cultural background, communicative frustration, failure and misunderstanding widely exist, as well as the conditions causing the deterioration of relations. Many scholars have analysis on the structure and category of topics from the perspective of pragmatic functions and cognition. McCarthy considered that topics can be defined as continuous conversation around given subjects or verbal labels [6]. Longman Dictionary of language teaching and Applied Linguistics written by Jack C. Richards has defined topics as “what is talked or written about” meanwhile it points out that different language communities have their own rules about the topics can be discussed or can not be discussed which reflects the innate character of topics[7].

Generally speaking, no matter what kinds of culture it is, there must be some topics that can be freely discussed in the communication. For example, western culture usually allows people to talk about the weather, their jobs, their hobbies and local or national events etc. Especially for

Englishmen, the traditional topic is to talk about the weather, resulting from the reasons that people's normal lives are directly influenced by the changes of the weather which is given rise to the maritime climate and special geographical environment of this country. So talking about the weather is a neutral topic and a good beginning to break a deadlock when you chat with an Englishman.

5. Difference of English and Chinese Taboos in Body Language

Different scholars have different definitions for nonverbal taboos, which refers to the effect in the communication by not only words but also the uncomfortable and improper nonverbal behaviors[8]. Because nonverbal taboos are described in various aspects by different scholars, general agreement in classification is not reached yet. Nonverbal taboo is formed by every improper signaling system that don't use words" such as body modes, proxemics, voice modulation and granting behavior taboos and everywhere in the world you can find the existence of nonverbal taboos which can be stretched back to the primitive times. In general, nonverbal taboos are universal, temporal, context-reliable and unique. As to the functions of nonverbal taboos, it can not only guide person and make them avert the harm but also help to maintain the social order as well as free people from awkwardness and failures.

Gestures, body movements and body behaviors all belong to body language which is the expressions and behaviors to pass on the social information. Body language, as Fast put forward, is the reflex action or non reflective action of the whole or parts of human's body, whose function is to exchange feelings and communicate with others. According to one estimate, there exist 270000 kinds of gestures and movements that can be done by human bodies, which far more than the sounds that human body makes. In such a large number of body language, their implication is too complex to have an exact classification-some are explicit and specific while some are indistinct and vague; some are used to communicate while others to be express themselves. Body language and verbal language are a mixture to be as the carrier of culture[9].

The sitting position is divided into serious position and casual position. The former is usually used in formal condition. Male's standard sitting method is to sit upright with slight apart of feet to show one's confidence and vigor while Females' is to sit upright with knees close together to show a lady's dignity and modest. But as to the casual position, some one just needs to act at ease. For example, teachers can sit on the platform or walk around the classroom when he/she teaches; managers and the boss can sit in his office with their feet on the tables. When visiting the seniors Chinese students will sit on the chairs all the times while English students will stand with great respect for a while under the same circumstance.

People of western countries are not accustomed to squatting position, taking it inelegant and indelicate. If possible, they prefer to kneel or sit on the floor especial when it comes to the situations that girl wears a skirt. She will pull her skirt down and cover her knees instead of placing the skirt in between the legs, like Chinese women did. In China, kneeling position expresses devotion, respect, humble station, yield, obedience and so on while in west; people only kneel down in wedding ceremony. It has long been stamped out in social communication conditions[10].

English men seldom take a deep bow while the behavior of bowing to each other when people meet is a typical Japanese characteristic. When responding to a curtain call, western actors continue to say "thank you" with arms up or throw a kiss to the audience, so long as they heard a burst of applause. The speakers do nothing other than nodding or upping arms to express his appreciation and thanks. When mourning some one dead, they just stand in silent tribute and pray in a low head.

Nodding is the most common polite movement in English countries, usually used when greeting with others. Friends met everyday, colleagues and acquaintances also greet in that way as well as

when saying goodbye. But in French and Russia, the way of welcoming the guests is to kiss lightly on the cheeks. At the same times, in many countries, nodding represents “yes” and shaking one’s heads represents “no” but that is contrary when it comes to the regions of Iran, Bulgaria and Greece.

Kissing and hugging is also the common etiquette in western country which is the extremely intimate movement to show relationships with people you know. But this etiquette differs a lot when the sexuality and relation is different. For instance, the place where you kiss has strict distinction for the different relations. The elders kiss the cheeks of the juniors; the adorers kiss the hands of noblewomen; kiss relatives’ forehead and lightly on your friends’ mouth. Only the couples or lovers can kiss mouth-to-mouth. But in China, kiss, as well as hugs, is too close for friends and acquaintance, owing to the traditionally conservative ideas. We greet only with verbal language.

6. Conclusion

The cross-cultural communication mainly refers to the communication, in which there exist diversity in the aspect of language and culture among different people. So far, in the cross-cultural communication, people’s understanding to taboo is still in a deficiency more than ever as well as being short of enough acquaintance to its significance. In fact, offending the taboo may give rise to more a disastrous consequence than making wrong use of the language, which, more often than not, leading to the deterioration of the communication conditions, even worse, conflict of communications, that is, the disagreements and friction created by the incomprehension and misconception. Thus, it would eventually result in the failure of the communication.

In today’s globalization of knowledge and information, cultures of every country and every nation constantly permeate and influent each other. Taboo, though as the most important carrier of cultural information, can not be gotten rid of the possibility of mutual influences of different cultures. Some floors of buildings and numbers of the room avoid “thirteen” in some cities in China, apparently affected by the western taboos. At the same time, taboo itself has in a ceaseless development and changes that some belongs to taboo in the past but not nowadays while some are not taboo previously but now it is. Taboo should be hold properly in the dynamic state and be better used to service the cross-cultural communication, ultimately, to make the results of communication more fruitful rather than a stumbling block.

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