A Comparative Study of Social Address Terms in Chinese and English

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Abstract

The system of address terms is an indispensible part of human communication. Social address terms are subordinates of all the address terms humans have. They are used to denote people other than family members. Compared with kinship terms, the usage of social address terms is much more complex and flexible. First, the actual choices of social address terms are determined by the complex social relationship and social roles rather than blood relationship. Besides, the social address terms are unstable and subject to change. As the social structure and cultural values change, social address terms that denote interpersonal relationship will change accordingly. As a result of these features, social address terms are more likely to cause problems in communication because a person has no definite address terms in a society. Chinese and English social address terms bear great differences due to the huge cultural differences. In this paper, a comparison of Chinese and English social address terms is made and the cultural differences behind them discussed. It is hoped that the paper is of some help to cross-cultural communication and those who concern with the investigation of address terms.

Key words: Social address terms; Comparison; Culture

INTRODUCTION

During the last several decades, especially with the publication of the pioneering works of Brown and Gilman (1960), and Brown and Ford (1961), studies of address terms have become the focus in the field of sociolinguistics and inter-cultural communication. Addressing is a universal phenomenon, but every culture or society has its own rules or norms governing the choice of address terms that are appropriate for use between the people involved in linguistic communication, that is, address tenors and the rules of their usages are culture-specific. The larger the cultural differences are, the larger the differences in address terms will be.

The system of social address terms is a subdivision of the whole address-term system and is quite complex, because as multi-faceted individuals, human beings are involved in many social relationships, have many roles to play in the society, resulting in an emergence of a range of social address terms. For instance, a male may be a son to his parents, a husband to his wife and a father to his children. He may also be a colleague to the people working with him, a doctor to his patient, a teacher to his students, an employee to his boss, a supervisor to his subordinate, and a customer to the shop assistant. The former series of roles are what he plays in the family, while the latter are the rest possible roles he plays in the society. How he addresses others and is addressed while playing different roles often reveals his social and interpersonal relationship with others; conversely, the relationship between he and others restricts the choice and employment of social address terms.

Chinese and English social address terms bear great differences due to the huge cultural differences. The differences between social address terms in Chinese and English undoubtedly constitute some hindrance in

understanding different cultures and thus influence cross-cultural communication. In this paper, a comparison between social address terms in Chinese and English and an analysis of the cultural differences behind are made. It is hoped that the paper is helpful in understanding the different social-address-term systems and respective cultures of the two languages and have some implications for cross-cultural communication.

1. DEFINITION AND CLASSIFICATION OF SOCIAL ADDRESS TERMS

To define and classify social address terms, a first review of the definition and classification of address terms is necessary. Basically, address terms are the words speakers use to refer to the person they are talking to in communication. According to Tian (1998), address terms, in a broad sense, include terms for all human beings, animals and objects; in a narrow sense, they only include terms for human beings. Braun (1988) defines the address terms as a speaker's linguistic reference(s) to his/her interlocutor(s).

Fitch (1998) classifies address terms into five categories: second-person pronouns, proper names, kinship terms, titles, and nicknames and adjectival terms. Second-person pronouns consist of all the ways to address one or more persons as "you." Proper names include first name (FN), last name (LN), second name (N2), first name plus second name and full name (Full N). Kinship terms include terms that suggest biological relationship. Titles, opposite to kinship terms, reflect non-kinship relations or positions. Nicknames and adjectival terms are derived from first name or last name, or items referring to personal ability, characteristics, or physical appearance. Fitch's classification can be concluded into two subsystems, the system of kinship terms and that of social address terms. Of the two systems, the system of kinship terms is the more basic and important one since it concerns the blood relationship between humans. However, social address terms also play a very important role as they are commonly used in contact with members of the society in which one lives.

It is then easy to define social address terms as those terms used by people when they interact with persons other than family members. Under such circumstances, individuals are considered members of a certain society group. As to the classifications of social address terms, generally they are the following categories: the general terms, relation address terms, post and rank address terms, honorific address terms, intimate address terms, and fictive kinship terms (Wang, 2005).

2. A COMPARISON OF CHINESE AND ENGLISH SOCIAL ADDRESS TERMS FROM DIFFERENT CLASSIFICATIONS

2.1 Popular Address Terms

Popular address terms refer to the general terms which can be applied to any member of the same social category regardless of professions, posts and ranks, and even ages. In China, the mostly used popular address terms include, "Tongzhi" (comrade), "Shifu" (master), "Xiansheng" (Mr.), "Niishi" (Madam), "Taitai"(Mrs.), "Xiaojie" (Miss), etc. While "Tongzhi" and "Shifu" are neutral words used to address anyone, "Xiansheng" is used to address the male; "Niishi" "Taitai" and "Xiaojie" can only be used to address the female.

In English, the popular address terms are "Sir", "Madam", "Miss", "Mr.", "Mrs." and "Ms." "Sir" is for the male, "Madam" for the female and "Miss" for the unmarried female. "Sir" and "Madam" are always used alone to show a relationship that is not intimate. The most widely used address form is "Mr./ Mrs./ Ms./ Miss +LN" such as "Mr. Smith", "Mrs. Johnson" and "Ms. White". "Mr." can be applied to any male regardless of his age or marital status. "Mrs." is only used for the married female, while "Miss" for the unmarried female or those divorced and single regardless of her age. Those who are over 80 can also be called "Miss" as long as she is single. The feminist movement in the West resulted in a new term "Ms." which can be applied to any female regardless of her marital status, but it has never been as popular as "Mr.", "Mrs." and "Miss."

2.2 Relation Address Terms

Relation address terms are used to indicate the social relationship which, normally, is not very specific. The commonly used terms in Chinese are: "Laoshi" (teacher), "Tongue" (classmate), "Shifu" (master), "Laoban" (boss), "Laoxiang" (fellowman), "Pengyou" (friend), "Yisheng" (doctor), etc. These terms can be applied directly to addressees. Sometimes they reflect the real relationship between the addressers and addressees, and sometimes they do not. For example, in China, a student calls his// her teacher "Laoshi", which indeed reflects the teacher-student relationship. But many students would also call those who are working in school but are not teachers "Laoshi", which does not show the real relationship. These terms can also be used together with the FN, LN or Full N to form compound address terms such as "Li Laoshi" (literally an address for a teacher with the LN Li), "Dongmei Laoshi" (literally an address for a teacher with the FN Dongmei) and "Wang Tianming Tongxue" (literally an address for a student with the Full N Wang Tianming).

Compared with so many relation address terms mentioned in Chinese, the relation terms in English are only "Doctor", "Father" and "Boss". "Doctor" is used for the patient to call the doctor; "Father" is used for the religion followers to address the priests; "Boss" is used for the employee to address the employer only if they are close in relationship. Even though, "Boss" is seldom used in direct addressing.

2.3 Post and Rank Address Terms

Post and rank address terms are quite popular in China. They include profession and title terms. Only those professions which are regarded as respectable can be used as address terms in China, such as "Laoshi" (teacher), "Yisheng" (doctor), "Gongchengshi" (engineer), "Jingli" (manager), "Jiaolian" (coach), "Jizhe" (reporter), "Liishi" (lawyer), etc. Those manual professions such as "Siji" (driver), "Chushi" (cook), and "Lifashi" (barber) will not be used to address people in general. In Chinese, titles capable of being used as address terms include official titles, professional titles, academic titles, and military titles. For example, "Zhuxi" (chairman), "Shuji" (party leader) and "Zongli" (Prime Minister) are official titles; "Jiaoshou" (professor), "Yanjiuyuan" (research fellow/ researcher) and "Gaogong" (senior engineer) are professional titles; "Boshi" (Doctor) is an academic title; "Jiangjun" (general), "Shangwei" (captain) and "Zhongwei" (Lieutenant) are military ranks.

In comparison, post and rank address terms are much fewer in English. The commonly used forms are, "Doctor", "Father", "Professor" and "Boss", which can be used alone; "Mr. + official title", such as "Mr. President", "Mr. Ambassador", "Mr. Senator", etc.; "Mr. + military title", such as "Mr. Major", "Mr. Colonel", "Mr. Captain", etc.; "Professor + LN" such as "Professor Thompson", "Professor Brown" and "Professor Wang", etc.; "academic title + LN" such as "Dr. Stevenson", "Dr. Smith" and "Dr. Thomas".

2.4 Honorific Address Terms

Honorific address terms are used to show respect for the addressees. In Chinese, "Lao" (literally meaning "old" in Chinese) can be attached to the FN, the LN, the Full N or "Tongzhi" to show respect for the addressees since seniority enjoys some prestige in China. So such terms as "Laoli" (literally Lao + LN), "Lao Tongzhi" (literally Lao + Comrade), "Ye Lao" (literally LN+ Lao to show respect for a person with the LN Ye), "Sheng Lao" (literally Middle Name + Lao to show respect for a person with the middle name Sheng) are always heard. In addition to "Lao", "Gong" can also be used with the LN to address people to show respect such as "Zhougong" (literally LN + Gong to show respect for a person with the LN Zhou). In addition to "Lao" and "Gong", there are some special honorific terms such as "Xiansheng", "Laoshi" and "Furen". "Xiansheng"is applied to those respectable and learned scholars in universities or research centers, such as "Qian Zhongshu Xianshen"

(the famous writer and scholar in China who was also a professor), "Yangjiang Xiansheng" (Qian Zhongshu's wife, who is a famous researcher, translator and also a professor). To address those who are not in fact teachers but with some talent, "Laoshi" shows respect for them. For example, Bi Fujian is one of the most welcomed anchors. In his popular entertainment show Xing Guang Da Dao, he is always addressed "Bi Laosh" by audiences. "Furen" is more polite than "Taitai". For example, "Jiang Furen" (literally Madam Jiang) is more welcomed than "Jiang Taitai" (Mrs. Jiang) because "Jiang Taitai" does not indicate the social status.

In English, the main honorific terms are "Sir", "Lady", and "Lord", etc. "Sir" is used alone and is used only for the male indicating the seniority or social status; "Lady" is for the female; "Lord" is used to refer to the noble with the form "Lord + LN", such as "Lord Swift", "Lord Carrington" and "Lord Smith". To address a noble in his face, it is usual to address him by "My Lord" or "Your Lordship". The term "Lady" is employed to address his wife, such as "Lady Swift", "Lady Carrington" and "Lady Smith". And in her face, it is required to address her "My Lady" or "Your Ladyship".

2.5 Intimate Address Terms

Intimate address terms are used among those with close relationship to show intimacy. Chinese intimate addresses are quite complex and the forms to show intimacy are FN or Full N; "Xiao" (indicating younger age) + LN"; "Da" (indicating higher degree of height and body bulk) + LN"; "Lao" (indicating older age or same age) +LN"; nicknames and some special terms to show the same intimate feeling. For example, "Dongmei" (FN), "Zhang Dongmei" (Full N), "Xiaoli" (Xiao + LN, for a younger person), "Dali" (Da + LN, for a tall young person), "Laozhu" (Lao + LN, for someone with older or similar age), "Xiaohuozi" (young man), "Xiaopengyou" (child), and "Pangzi" (fatty) if the addressee is fat.

In English, FN, pet names or nicknames are used to show intimacy such as "David" "Jack", or "fatty", "skinny", "lippy", etc.

2.6 Fictive Kinship Terms

To address people without any kin relations by kinship terms is unique and characteristic of Chinese language. Fictive kinship terms are used to refer to this phenomenon. According to Pan (1998), there are about 16 main fictive kinship terms in current Chinese language and they have a lot of varieties according to different addressees, occasions and purposes. Some examples of the fictive kinship terms are, "Ye" (honorific term for the male of the same generation and approximate age of the grandfather); "Nainai" (honorific term for the female of the same generation and approximate age of the grandmother); "Bo" (honorific term for the male of the same generation of the father but older than the father); "Shu" (honorific term for the male of the same generation of the father but

younger than the father); and "Bomu" (honorific term for the female of the same generation and of about the same age of the mother).

Fictive kinship terms are widely used in China because they seem to include others in the same family circle, and thus the distance between people is shortened and a harmonious atmosphere is created. In English, only on a few occasions shall kinship terms be employed to non-relatives. Influenced by religion, Christians may call each other by terms like "Sister" or "Brother". A child may call his/her parents' friends by "Aunt" or "Uncle" if they are close to each other, but this form of addressing is only confined to children.

3. CULTURAL FACTORS CAUSING THE DIFFERENCES OF SOCIAL ADDRESS TERMS IN CHINESE AND ENGLISH

The relationship between language and culture has long been a focus and studied in the domain of human sciences. Language and culture are intertwined, that is, culture, in its broadest sense, permeates every aspect of the society; language, as one of its important parts, is shaped and conditioned by culture (Samovar, Porter, & Stefani, 2011).

In the world, the diversity of cultures results in the differences in languages. Address terms as an important part of language, therefore, are influenced by culture and reflect culture. The greater the cultural differences are, the greater the differences in address terms will be. Chinese language has far more address terms than English, which reflects that Chinese culture attaches more importance to address terms and the social order behind them. Just as Shen (2000) puts it, "Generally speaking, those which are more important to one culture may have more detailed language fragmentation" (p.5). Therefore understanding differences between cultures is essential to the understanding of language, i.e. social address terms in this paper.

3.1 Differences in the World View—the Unity of the Universe and Man vs. the Division of the Universe and Man

The study of the universe (Heaven) and man is one of the primary themes of Chinese philosophy. Many scholars such as Confucius, Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi all devoted great effort to the exploration of it. Confucius made a study of the nature of Heaven. He held that Heaven was something without will and its nature was like the changes of the four seasons and the endless growth and development of everything. Therefore, man's survival must be based on his own hard work. Lao Zi, the founder of Taoism, believed that the nature of Heaven was natural. According to him, "being natural" is the theoretical summary of all natural phenomena and is known as Tao. Heaven, Earth and Man are all natural beings unified within Tao. Zhuang Zi inherited the tendency of Lao Zi's thought, believing that Heaven was the largest of all the perceivable things in the universe. He maintained that by acting against the law of nature, Man would lose the freedom of action.

So the Chinese orientation of world view sees the world as a unit, and to apply this world view to the real life, Chinese people would like to maintain a harmonious relationship with others. The harmonious relationship that Chinese people seek to build is based on the fulfillment of the obligation and responsibilities ascribed to each member of the society according to his/her social position. In this light, the reciprocity is asymmetrical in nature. Knowing the unity of the universe and man may help us understand why Chinese people attach so much importance to the relationship and thus get some idea about the Chinese address terms.

The western world view is rather a dualistic view, that is, it views mind and body as separate, as well as God and human kind, people and nature as separate. Westerners believe that human beings are composed of numerous individuals. Each individual is comprised of body and soul. Each soul is distinct from that of others. Therefore with the soul as the core part, an individual thus has its own independent personality and is independent of others. Westerners also believe that the highest level of this world is God, and the lowest is the material nature such as the mountains, rivers, and animals. In the middle exist human beings. So human beings are the creation as well as the servants of God and the owners of the nature. These beliefs make people believe that a person's existence bears no relationship to others. They are often regarded as the philosophical basis of western individualism.

3.2 Hierarchy/Power/Authority vs. Solidarity/ Equality

The Chinese social structure is basically hierarchical or vertical in nature. Accordingly, in terms of interpersonal relationship, authority and power relationship are highly valued in daily interactions. In China, power includes such aspects as age, education, social class, gender, social positions, ranks and family relations. Under the influence of hierarchical concept, post and rank terms are very popular in China.

Independence and equality enjoyed in the western society lay foundation for the establishment of solidarity relationship as the main relationship in the social interactions in the west. Here, solidarity refers to the equal and informal relationship as well as the desire for the setting up of equality, intimacy and common interests, etc. Therefore, solidarity, as an embodiment of equality and the result of individualism, is no doubt a dominant value in the western culture. Under the influence of solidarity concept, people tend to address each other by the communicative appellations rather than post and rank appellations and reciprocal addressing pattern is more frequent.

3.3 Differences in Dominating Values—"Ren" and "Li" vs. Individualism

The discussion of the difference in dominating values between China and western countries is based on a discussion of their respective historical backgrounds. Unlike western culture, it is believed that in Chinese culture, there is no such a system of beliefs that can be called a religion under which a range of values can be formed. Rather, Confucian philosophy provides the mainstream traditional Chinese values permeated throughout history with its morals and political ideals playing dominant roles in most of ancient Chinese dynasties. These values are still very influential in shaping the ethics and outlooks of Chinese people.

The core concepts of Confucianism are "Ren" and "Li", which complement each other in nature. "Ren" is how to conduct oneself. More specifically, it is the standard by which a man of virtue and high learning should live. "Li" serves as the norm or means for people to achieve ideal manhood or good relationships. It defines almost all the norms or rules for the appropriate conduct and behavior for every social member according to his or her social position. "Li" specifies five constant relationships that constitute the warp and woof of the Chinese social life. The relationships are those between ruler and subject, parent and child, husband and wife, elder sibling and junior sibling, elder friend and junior friend. These relationships are asymmetrical. Rulers should be benevolent, subjects loyal; parents be loving, children reverential; elder siblings gentle, younger siblings respectful; husbands good, wives obedient. "Li" advocates the hierarchical relationships and its essential is to build and maintain the social order upon this hierarchical relationship.

"Ren" and "Li" in fact is a system of moral codes in the Chinese society in which relationship is complementary, asymmetrical and reciprocally obligatory. Under the influence of "Ren" and "Li", the core concept of Confucianism has ruled over China for several thousand years.

The western traditions stemmed from the ancient Greek or Rome, which developed sea navigation and trade four thousand years ago. To survive the massive sea and explore more territories, they developed the spirit of adventure and expansion. The ancient Athens witnessed the earliest establishment of democracy and the flourish of science, philosophy, literature, and art. The Romans had a lot in common with the Greeks. Both nations had traditions rooted in the idea of citizen-assembly, hostile to monarchy and to servility. Following the decline of the ancient Greek civilization, Christian feudalism dominated the western world. However, the Renaissance in the 15th century, by asserting the greatness of human being, freed man to discover and enjoy the world in a way not possible under the medieval Church's dispensation. And the following Reformation gave the feudal theocracy a fatal blow and paved the way for the capitalism.

In the late half of the eighteenth century, the Industrial Revolution began in Western Europe, which profoundly modified much of human experiences. The Industrial Revolution also helped ordinary people gain a higher standard of living as the widespread poverty of the pre-industrial world was gradually reduced. In Britain, the Industrial Revolution simplified the class structure and pushed the middle class (the industrial and commercial classes) to the dominant position.

The above historical background of western countries, the Renaissance, the Reformation and Industrial Revolution, etc. helped boost the value of individualism, which praise competition, equality, independence and the greatness of every single person. Such a value inevitable influences social address terms. In English, fewer honorific and intimate address terms can be found.

CONCLUSION

Addressing can be regarded as the art of human communication. The address terms used reflect certain relationship between the addresser and the addressee. Social address terms are used to address people other than family members. Compared with kinship terms, social address terms are determined by the complex social relationship and social roles, and thus are much more flexible and complex in usage. A comparison of social address terms in Chinese and English from the classification of social appellations reveal many differences of the rules and norms governing the social-address-term systems in the two languages. The causes can be best explained from cultural point of view since the system of social address terms is an inseparable part of language, and language is inextricably linked to culture.

The cultural differences between Chinese and English can be best summarized by Liang (1993), who concludes that in the western society, group and individual are just two entities and they influence each other directly. It seems that family is almost non-existent. On the contrary, Chinese people extend the family relationship to the society and organize the society by "Ren" and "Li", so the group and individual are offset. In cross-cultural communication, if people from China and English-speaking countries do not have the knowledge of the different social appellation systems, misunderstandings will easily occur. Only when a thorough investigation of the different cultures is made can one wish a better understanding of the differences of social-address-term systems in Chinese and English and find fewer difficulties while involved in the communication.

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