



A Comparative Study of Chinese and Western Greetings from the Perspective of Politeness Principle

Xiaochen Zhang 

University of Science and Technology of Beijing; Beijing, China.

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Xiaochen Zhang /0000-0001-7981-7264

ABSTRACT

A greeting is a common polite behaviour that also helps to build a relationship. Knowing the difference between Chinese and western greetings will help communicate better with foreigners in the future, and help Chinese and western cultures communicate better with each other. This paper looks at the differences in greetings between Chinese and western cultures and societies and explains why these differences exist based on economy, culture, and society. Furthermore, this paper also suggests that to achieve a better expression result, it is important to pay attention to these differences in communication.

Keywords: politeness principle; greeting language; difference between Chinese and western

1 Introduction

Greetings play an essential role in everyday conversation routines. For example, it is a start of a conversation. What's more, greetings are a recognition of interpersonal communication in the real world, they can show our attitudes toward other people.

As foreign language learners, in order to better feel the local cultural atmosphere, we will use various communication software to chat with foreigners, such as "AC" and "Hello Talk" (both are apps for chatting in English). In the process of chatting, We found that their daily oral communication was quite different from what we were taught in books, and now most college students' English is still "dumb English", so it's hard to avoid some embarrassing moments in real communication. And communication really needs some skills.

This paper focuses on the differences between Chinese and Western greetings to reduce misunderstandings when we open conversations, and it can show politeness in real communication. The second aim is to help people know what causes differences between Chinese and Western greetings and let people have the right attitude towards the differences and cope with them properly.

This paper consists of 7 sections. The first part briefly introduces the background and purpose of this article.

And the second section summarizes the previous research from home and abroad on the topic of greetings, which includes its definition and categories. The literature categories are summarized from the perspective of linguistics, sociological, and anthropological.

The third section states the methodology of this paper. Then, in the fourth section, it explains what is politeness principle, which is the theoretical basis of this paper. The author takes Brown and Levinson's politeness principle as an example.

In the fifth section, this paper compares different aspects between Chinese greetings and Western greetings. Moreover, based on greetings in daily conversation, the author divides greetings into salutations, appellations and farewells.

In the sixth section, this paper lists some reasons for greeting differences, such as economic reasons, social reasons, ideal reasons and so on.

In the seventh section, the author gives ways to cope with greeting differences, so that people can talk

happily in real communication. And it has a whole conclusion of this paper.

2 Literature Review

People also regard greeting language as a kind of meeting language, which means people often greet when people first meet. Tang Xuening (1994) explains, from the perspective of social culture, that greeting has the following characteristics: First, it is the unity of indifference and simplicity. In greetings, there seemingly is no semantic content or rational meaning. For example, the greeting sentence “Have you eaten?” function was simply to perform the communicative act of greeting. The message was merely a polite gesture, not a real desire to know whether you’ve eaten or not.

American sociologist Erving Goffman (1971) believed that greetings are the mark and recognition of communication, and they can create or finalize interpersonal relations, which is a ritual behaviour. He thought greetings consist of two types: passing greetings and engaging greetings. Anthropologists connect greetings with the cultural influence of the whole country. E. Goody (1972) studied the use of greetings in Ghanaian. He pointed out that greetings were used to start everyday communication. He got conclusion that greetings had the function of establishing and consolidating the interlocutor’s social identity and status and giving a kind of regulation to interpersonal relationships to some extent.

The researches of the above scholars obviously indicate that greetings language can reflect interpersonal relationships, the minds of the inhabitants and even the cultural custom of the whole country, and the study of greeting language is very important for the understanding of cultural diversity and promoting better communication between different countries.

When it comes to studying the differences between English and Chinese greetings, Duan Xuelian (2008) stated that privacy, the concept of time and appellation will cause misunderstandings in Chinese and Western communication. Lin Li (2007), believed that the factors affecting greetings differences between Chinese and Western countries include living conditions, people’s faith and historical allusions.

From the perspective of the politeness principle, many scholars hold the view that the traditional Chinese politeness principle limited the use of Chinese greetings. Li Tianxin (2006) made a comparative study of English and Chinese greetings based on Gu Yueguo’s politeness principle and made the conclusion that Chinese greetings focus more on how people feel about the conversation rather than the appropriateness of a particular word. However, western greetings give expression to a sense of equality and friendliness and show more dependence on the environment.

Unlike previous studies, this paper has categorized greetings and combined them with politeness principles. According to the factors that cause the greeting differences, this paper also put forward the methods to solve misunderstandings in communication.

3 Methodology

Using the qualitative research method, this paper collected greetings from people in everyday communication. With a corpus of oral communication, mainly from Chen Hongyu (2007) *Practical Chinese Conversation*, this paper tries to find out the differences between Chinese and Western greetings from the perspective of polite language. And it compares the positive politeness and negative politeness of

Chinese and Western greetings based on the politeness principle.

4 Theoretical Basis

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), politeness is deemed a universal variable that occurs in every culture, mostly because every people want to be appreciated and respected. What's more, the counterpart of positive politeness is the positive face, which means "my request makes your actions acknowledged or approved." In order to achieve the purpose of this expression, there are generally three general principles: (1) Emphasize the common position (common interests); (2) Emphasize that we are partners; (3) Satisfy your partner's need.

Here are some examples from Brown and Levinson:

You are wearing new pants today, aren't you? They are so beautiful!

You are right. I'll think it over.

You make such a delicious cake! How did you do it?

Moreover, negative politeness strategies are intended to avoid giving a sense of offence by showing deference. In interpersonal communication, the opposite of negative politeness is the negative face, that is, the expression of my request will not interfere with your freedom of action. These strategies include apologizing, hedging, and presenting disagreements.

For example:

Do you know where Oxford Street is?

I'm sorry I didn't mean to upset you. But that's a fact.

I wouldn't buy that if I were you.

Secondly, the face threat theory is known as verbal acts that threaten the self-image of the other person in the conversation. According to He Ziran (1992), behaviours that threaten the listener's negative face mainly include when the speaker asks the listener to do something that makes the listener feel pressure, such as orders, requests, and warnings. And the positive face is threatened by acts that disapprove of one's wish. This type of behaviour implies that the speaker is not concerned with the feelings, interests, or needs of the listener.

5 Differences between Chinese and Western Greetings

5.1 Salutation Greeting is a kind of greeting used when meeting someone.

In daily greetings, most Chinese people use "Have you eaten?", "Where are you going to?" And "What are you up to?", "Are you going to work?", "Are you off work now?", "Are you going shopping?", etc. These questions asked are very detailed, which reflects a sense of intimacy between people.

But for westerners, this kind of greeting can be awkward or even unpleasant, because westerners will regard these questions as a kind of rudeness, feeling that a person who is not very familiar to them is prying into their personal life. In Western countries, they only say "Hello" or depending on the time they will greet as "Good morning!", "Good afternoon!", "Good evening!".

The most common greetings used by westerners can be classified into two categories: the first one is to talk about the weather or some natural scenery. For example, when British people meet, they will say: "It's

a nice day!", or "What good weather!". The second one is to talk about the recent situation in his life. But avoiding getting too personal, they will say, "How are you?". When you meet someone for the first time, you can usually say something like "Nice to meet you."

Greeting friends meet often, the topic can be casual. Such as "What brought you here?", "Why are you so sad today?", "How is your business?" In conversational greetings, some specific topic can be seen in a particular situation.

Greeting friends meet less often, the first greeting may be "Hi, Jack, long time no see!", "I hardly know you," or "What a pleasant surprise! I haven't seen you for a long time." and so on.

For example, imagine Lilei and Joe are good friends and they meet again years later:

Lilei: Hi, Joe, is that you? Long time no see!

Joe: Hi, Lilei, what a pleasant surprise! I haven't seen you for a long time! How about you recent years?

Lilei: I'm ok, how about you and everybody at your house?

Joe: They are all fine. Tell me anything interesting happened in these years!

...

The greeting differences between Chinese and English can be used as the basis for choosing different strategies of politeness principle. People often think English speakers are a little bit conservative, they dislike being very intimate except between good friends. And they are sensitive to negative greetings, they think greetings like asking for privacy are uncomfortable and unacceptable. That's why their greeting expressions are somewhat neutral, for example, the weather is a good topic.

Fortunately, with frequent cultural exchange and a better understanding of foreign cultures, people become more and more understanding of what international friends say.

5.2 The difference between Chinese and English greetings in the forms of address

An appellation is just a way of addressing someone, but how to address others properly is a considerable problem because people's relationships are quite complex, especially in China. Due to the differences in habits, there are many diversities of appellations between English and Chinese, which deserve our attention and consideration.

In Chinese kinship appellation terms, there is a very strict distinction between blood relatives (consanguineous relatives) and in-laws (relatives formed by marriage), clan (patrilineal relatives) and non-clan (maternal relatives).

However, there is no such division for kinship appellations in English. For example in English-speaking countries, Chinese words like "Bo Fu, Shu Shu, Jiu Jiu, Gu Fu" are all called "uncle"; "Bo Mu, Shen Shen, Jiu Ma, Gu Gu, Yi Mu" are all called "aunt"; "Ge Ge or Di Di" are all called "brother"; "Jie Jie, or Mei Mei" are called "sister"; "Tang Xiong, Tang Di, Tang Jie, Tang Mei, Biao Ge," are called "cousin"; "Zhi Zi, Wai Shen" are called "nephew"; Zhi Nv, Wai Zhi-nv" are called "niece"; "Sun Zi, Wai Sun" are called "grandson"; "Sun Nv, Wai Sun nv" are called "granddaughter".

Non-consanguinity kinship appellation has the nature of simulating kinship appellation, and it is also a generalization of kinship appellation. It mainly refers to those who do not have a consanguinity relationship,

which aims to express kindness and respect to others, and also to narrow the distance between each other. The concept of “collectivism” is deeply rooted in Chinese people’s thinking, and they are accustomed to regarding individuals as a part of the collective. Therefore, the generalization of kinship terms is very common in Chinese.

We choose the appropriate appellation words according to our age, identity, occasions and so on, such as “aunt” is used to greet women younger than our mothers. We can add an aunt behind surname or professional class, such as “Zhang a yi” or “salesperson aunt”. These words are quite good for breaking up the strangeness and making the conversation continue smoothly.

Foreigners will not understand this kind of address. A western friend who is studying Mandarin said: “In China, people can call someone by a relative’s name. But westerners don’t understand it and think it’s rude to call someone that way without asking permission. They also misinterpret these terms as “the speaker” may be relative to the talking object. In a word, it is hard for them to think that the interlocutors may not know each other.

The generalization phenomenon of kinship appellation in English is far less common than that in Chinese. Some more traditional families may address their non-relatives as “uncle” and “aunt”, for example, “aunt Mary”, “Uncle Jack” and so on. However, in English, non-family members still rarely use kinship titles to address each other. Most children call people they know by their names, but they usually say “Ms.” or “Sir” when they meet people they don’t know.

Thirdly, if we meet a person, and we know his or her social status and profession, we also can call his or her professional title. Chinese words contained a number of such addresses, such as “Shi Fu (master)”, “Yi Sheng (doctor)”, and “Lao Shi (teacher)”. Nowadays, the term “Shi Fu (master)” and “Lao Shi (teacher)” has been adopted not only to greet a school teacher but also by many people of other professions, such as worker, driver, cook and so on.

Moreover, the Chinese word “Xiao” which means little, also can be added before the young people’s family name, such as “Xiao Zhang, Xiao Li”, they are used by the old or superiors to greet the young to show their closeness to them. Generally speaking, there are fewer greeting rules for the older or superior to the young, it’s more common to call their names, and both surname and given name are acceptable. Perhaps in the eyes of the Chinese, “Lao” shows respect and politeness for the elderly, and “Xiao” shows care and kindness to the young. And this is positive politeness. But westerners can’t accept it at all, because westerners don’t want to be seen as either “old” or “young”. In Western values, there is no age difference.

Finally, the appellation between couples is also different, some words are very popular in China. Such as “Lao Po, Xi Fu, Fu Ren (wife)”, “Lao Gong (husband)”, “Ta Ba (child’s father)”, and “Ta Ma (child’s mom)”. While in English, there are no such words, “wife” or “husband” also can be said, it usually appears in introduction occasions. In the opening of western society, people are used to calling their lover “Darling”, “Sweetheart,” Baby” or “Honey” and so on. But if a Chinese person calls his or her lover in these words, the listener will be shy, but it can prove that they have an intimate and harmonious relationship. With the opening up of society, young couples are also using nicknames to greet each other.

5.3 Leave-talking difference between Chinese and English greetings

There are many different expressions of farewell in Chinese and Western languages. Firstly, Chinese people are used to attributing the reasons for saying goodbye to the other party. When the guests are ready to leave, they often say, “You are so busy, so I shouldn't bother you anymore.” or “I'm afraid you should have a rest, so I'll leave you first.” However, in countries where the English language is spoken, such farewell words will give hosts a relatively rude sense. On similar occasions, according to Qian Housheng (1996), people in English-speaking countries often attribute the reason for leaving to themselves, or find a reason for leaving that has nothing to do with the other person they are communicating with, such as “Excuse me, I must leave now, my wife is waiting for me”. The British and Americans think it is more proper to say so. But in China, this kind of farewell is generally not used.

Secondly, in the last paragraph, it mentioned the expression “I'll go first” as a farewell phrase. In Chinese language habits, the guest is used to saying “I am going to go” when he leaves the host, while the guest who leaves first is accustomed to saying “I'll leave first” when many people visit one host at the same time. But such an expression can be very confusing to English-speaking chatters. In their language conventions, both “I am leaving” and “I will go first” are seen as information supplements. They can not be used as farewell words. In Western countries, guests who want to leave early, they just simply say goodbye to their hosts and leave quietly without disturbing other visitors, who have nothing to do with their departure. Influenced by the traditional etiquette culture, the Chinese farewell is a way of expressing respect and politeness.

Thirdly, in China, hosts often say “Be safe on the road” and “Go slow and be careful” to the visitors, which expresses the host's concern for the guests. However, it is generally not normal in English-speaking countries to use the tone of elders to send off guests. They will think it unnecessary and too polite. The proper farewell on such occasions is a simple “Goodbye”, or “See you next time” is acceptable.

In a word, Chinese farewells tend to be positive politeness, which hopes their behaviour can be affirmed and approved by others. But Western farewells tend to be negative politeness, which means they want their freedom of movement to be unimpeded by others.

6 Factors Influencing Greeting Differences

6.1 Economic Condition

Throughout the changes in greetings, it is not difficult to see that people's daily greetings are restricted by economic conditions. Due to the limitation of the economic level, the problem of food and clothing has become the focus of people's attention. “Have you eaten?” has become a common greeting in interpersonal communication, which reflects concern among people. After the reform and opening up, with the improvement of social productivity, the problem of food and clothing for most people has been solved. “Have you eaten?” is still used as a greeting in everyday life, but its meaning has changed to confirm whether you have eaten or not. At this time, such greetings as “Where are you going?” “What are you doing?” “Are you going out?” appears.

With the deepening of communication between China and the West, greetings such as “hello” and “good morning”, which do not involve details of personal life, also appear in daily life. In the 1980s, with

the deepening of the reform and opening up, greetings increased, and people's thinking patterns changed a lot, the idea of attaching importance to agriculture and business was the most prominent part. People paid more and more attention to business. "Where are you going to make a fortune?", "How was your recent business?" these greetings were filled with strong commercial meaning.

In the 21st century, people have entered a well-off society and the problem of adequate food and clothing has been basically solved. More and more people begin to pursue a higher level of life, "Where do you want to travel in winter vacation?", "Where do you work?" These greetings about life enjoying are becoming more and more common.

The economy of western society depended not on farming, but on the handicraft industry and commerce. As early as in the ancient Greek period, the ancient Greeks learned the skills of commerce and developed the ability of navigation. As a result of overseas expansion, the open culture made commerce and the handicraft industry rise to the dominant position in the late 7th century BC. Western people were not settled in a fixed area for a long period of time. They were mobile and competitive, so they have a weak concept of consanguinity, which is corresponding with features of the industrial and commercial economy.

6.2 Thoughts and Values

"Every nation has its own unique cultural mode. Language is the carrier of culture, and its application mode embodies the cultural characteristics of its own nation" (Meng Jian'an, Fu Yuanbi, 2000). China is a "land of ceremonies" and attaches great importance to etiquette. Therefore, acquaintances usually greet each other when they meet, so as to reflect the friendship and concern between them.

The traditional ethical thought of eastern culture pays attention to the relationship between human beings. People are usually not considerable about the law. In China, "ethics first" has always occupied the core position of people's thoughts. Therefore, it follows the order of "sentiment, reason and law". Therefore, Chinese greetings are mostly about caring for each other. On the contrary, western people despise traditional customs, only respect the rules and systems, and follow the order of "law, reason, sentiment". The law is the criterion of action, that is, everyone is equal before the law. There is no distinction between men and women. Therefore, westerners have a weak sense of hierarchy and identity, and they are more casual and frank in communication. They express their problems candidly and feel uncomfortable with the euphemistic expression in China. In interpersonal communication, the principles of communication are self-interest, confrontation, competition, equality, independence, and so on.

Different values also affect the expression of greetings. The value orientation of "altruism" has a long history in China. The core of the Confucian concept of "benevolence" is "love", which means to love others. Chinese people emphasize group values since ancient times, which is also closely related to Confucianism. It strongly advocates the order and harmony of society and advocates the loyalty and responsibility of individuals to the group. Confucius once called for that "every man is responsible for the rise and fall of the world", which indicates that Chinese culture is a group culture and emphasizes that unity is strength. For western countries, after experiencing the darkness of the European Middle Ages, the Renaissance movement with humanism as its guiding ideology advocated individualism. It tried its best to satisfy its desire through personal struggle, achieve personal success and reflect personal value. In short, western

traditional values emphasized individualism, and the government must protect individual interests as the premise of decision-making.

6.3 Social Environment

The status relationship between people has strong relevance to selecting appropriate greeting forms. To enhance formality, there are also phrases used to have acquaintances of higher rank with more respectful greeting expressions. Besides, social distance is another important factor that affects greeting expression, and it is also concerned with the relationship between participants. Social distance can range from intimate to distant.

Logically the two participants with intimate social distance usually exchange the first name in English and the given name in China. The two persons with distant social relationships usually call titles with the last name in English or full name in Chinese. This is very useful in emphasizing how well we know someone. If the social distance changes, we must change the way of greeting.

The geographical environment also has a great impact on ways of greetings. China is in a semi-closed continental geographical environment. The climate is mild with changing seasons, and people live a subsistence farming life by the weather, and the land is sufficient to meet their needs. So, an agricultural civilization developed in our country step by step. People worked together and shared the fruits of their labour. On the one hand, traditional greeting reflects the ancient Chinese people's dependence on the land. By contrast, most of the countries in Britain and the United States are island countries. Take Britain island as an example, it is surrounded by the sea and has a temperate Marine climate. The winds from the Atlantic, driven by westerlies, make the weather unpredictable. So the weather is the most important thing people care about.

In terms of greetings' dependence on the environment, in communication activities, relatively speaking, greetings in the English context is more direct and less dependent on the environment. And in different communication situations, people's greetings do not show much difference. Moreover, people are used to using body language to greet others. However, in the Chinese language environment, the transmission of greetings has a strong dependence on the environment.

In a word, under different situations, the ways of greeting will show certain differences. For example, in the process of communication, the greetings of the younger generation to the elders, the greetings between peers, the greetings between people in different industries, the greetings between people of different statuses, etc., all will show certain differences. Besides, it can be seen that the degree of dependence of Chinese and English greetings on the communicative environment is different. The degree of dependence of English greetings on the environment is low, while the degree of dependence on Chinese greetings is high.

7 Suggestions and Conclusion

7.1 Suggestions on Coping with Differences

In the development and transformation of Chinese and western societies, under the influence of national history, geographical or social environment, ethnic thoughts and values and other factors, Chinese

and western countries have formed their own cultural traditions, which have also created different language habits. Chinese polite greetings basically follow the principle of debasing oneself and respecting others.

To learn to use polite language correctly and appropriately to communicate with people from different countries, we should not only pay attention to the language itself but also study and understand the culture of the country seriously while learning a second foreign language. As for the study of polite language, I think the following points should not be ignored:

Firstly, in order to understand the language of politeness correctly, we must study the etiquette and custom of the country carefully at the same time. And to understand the reasons why people say that and what is the real meaning of his words. For example, modesty and concern are two important principles in polite communication among Chinese people. Without understanding the politeness principles of the Chinese language, one cannot correctly understand the Chinese polite language, let alone use it appropriately.

Secondly, Polite speech acts often vary with cultures. We should not ignore the cultural differences in polite language, let alone measure and judge Chinese polite language with the culture and etiquette norms of one's mother tongue.

Therefore, in intercultural communication, it is necessary to have a certain understanding of the cultural traditions of the country where the communication object is located, and the communicative language used should conform to the linguistic norms of the communication objectives and the cultural norms of the country in which it is located. Only in this way can mistakes in intercultural communication be reduced to the greatest extent, thus better promoting the development of communication activities and providing a good guarantee for the realization of their communicative purposes.

7.2 Conclusion

This paper mainly shows the difference between Chinese and English greetings from the perspective of salutations, addresses and leaving talks on the basis of the politeness principle.

To start with, according to this paper, the author found that there are at least three differences between Chinese and Westerners in greetings:

1. Chinese people like to greet others by asking about their personal information to show their care for them, while westerners avoid asking about others' personal information.
2. Chinese people like to greet each other by stating the facts as they see them, while westerners do not regard this greeting as a meaningful statement of truth.
3. Chinese people like to greet people by "calling his name", and they like to raise others up to show their respect when greeting. Westerners not only don't have this way of greeting but also feel uncomfortable with it.

What's more, differences in address between China and the West are as follows:

1. Chinese people like to address others with titles that show their social status to show their recognition of their status. Westerners, on the other hand, prefer to call each other by their first name to show the closeness of the relationship.
2. Sometimes, Chinese address each other by gender only considering age, such as "aunt" or

“uncle”, and pay attention to respect each other; While the key in addressing Westerners is to distinguish between gender, avoid talking about age, and they do not want others to see themselves as old people.

3. Chinese people like to use kinship to call people who are not relatives, to show their closeness to others. Westerners are very clear to address others, not relatives can not use kinship to address others, because others will think it is impolite.

Then this paper talked about ways how to cope with the differences. We need to study the etiquette and custom of the country and make it clear what people’s greeting habits are in different places.

It is often said that language is a cultural carrier. Different cultures and different living habits affect people’s greetings content. In the cultural communication between Chinese and English, we should know the differences in greeting expressions and analyze carefully the social, environmental and psychological factors that influenced the differences so as to overcome the cultural barriers and learn to accept and respect the other side’s cultures and customs. At the same time, we should adopt the best politeness strategy to promote successful intercultural communication.

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