ความสำคัญของวัฒนธรรมภาษาพูด
口語文化的重要性
The Importance of the Spoken Culture

Chamaipak Maiklad[1]

บทคัดย่อ:

    บทความนี้อภิปรายความสำคัญของการเรียนวัฒนธรรมของภาษาพูด โดยเฉพาะในการเรียนภาษาที่สองหรือภาษาต่างประเทศ ทั้งนี้ได้มีการ เสนอตัวอย่างของความแตกต่างระหว่างวัฒนธรรมของผู้พูดภาษาจีนและ วัฒนธรรมของผู้พูดภาษาอังกฤษที่นำมาจากนวนิยายอังกฤษและอเมริกัน สมัยใหม่

คำสำคัญ: ภาษาพูด วัฒนธรรม ภาษาที่สอง

摘要：這篇文章著重于論述學習口語文化的重要性，尤其 是在學習第二或者外國語言的經驗中。一些現代英美小説 中出現以中文為母語和以英文為母語的説話者之間在對話

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中發生的文化差別與誤會。在此以該現象為例。

關鍵詞：口語；文化；第二語言

Abstract: This article discusses the significance of learning the spoken culture of a target language in second/ foreign language learning. Specifically, a few cases of discrepancies between the culture of Chinese speakers and English speakers apparent in contemporary British and American fictions are given as illustrations.

Keywords: spoken language; culture; second language

Introduction

For decades, those involved in language teaching and learning (i.e. educators, and researchers in language-related fields, language teachers, and language learners) have made significant efforts in figuring out effective ways to learn a foreign language. There has been a general assumption that mastering another language is particularly difficult when the learner's native language and target language consist of more different, than similar, linguistic features. This belief is prominent in many Asian settings; therefore, the fact that speakers of each language have been nurtured to understand the world around them has not been given much attention.

As English is still apparently the most recognised global language, the world's most widely used lingua franca, this article aims to discuss possible reasons why Asian learners of English (with a focus on

Chinese learners) are often unsuccessful in international communication, in relation to some theoretical accounts concerning the different cultures of spoken languages. It also intends to suggest possible ways to promote success in learning to communicate in another language.

Why are Asian learners of English often unsuccessful in international communication?

There seem to be various reasons why Asian learners of English can fail in intercultural contact where English is normally used as a medium. The first and foremost reason is believed to be the fact that most Asian languages and English belong to different language families. English, which is in the Proto-Germanic branch of the Indo-European family, is related to Swedish, Danish, German, and Dutch. Asian languages, on the other hand, can be broadly classified into a number of language families: Old Indo-Iranian (e.g. Hindi, Bengali and Persian); Sino-Tibetan (e.g. Mandarin, Cantonese, Japanese, Korean, Burmese, to name but a few); and Austronesian (e.g. Malay, Tagalog and other languages in the Pacific islands) (Finegan, 2004).

As a language in the Sino-Tibetan family, Chinese (with its numerous dialect groups - Mandarin, Cantonese, and so on) consists of various characteristics which do not exist in English, a Germanic language. Chang (2001) identifies a number of areas where structural differences between the two languages are found: phonology; spelling, reading and writing; grammar; and vocabulary.

Regarding phonology, differences between English phonemes

and Chinese phonemes are huge; partial resemblance that occurs tends to cause confusion rather than facilitation. Also, as Chinese is a tonal language, word meaning changes according to tones, causing intonation to be an unfamiliar concept. Concerning spelling, reading and writing, Chang (ibid.) assumes that Chinese learners make mistakes due to the fact that Chinese spelling patterns are based on ideograms, and are not alphabetic like the English language. These dissimilar patterns also cause Chinese learners to read at a slow speed.

Grammatical differences are believed to be the largest area of problems. For instance, English parts of speech are clearly distinguished. Inflection does not exist in Chinese; additional adverbs, word order and contexts marks areas which are inflected in English (i.e. tense, singularity, plurality). Other grammatical diversities are tense, verb forms, auxiliaries (in questions and negatives), modals, pronouns, countability, articles, gender, number, relatives, passives, subjunctives, word modifiers, postmodifiers, position of adverbials, conjunctions (in compound sentences) and prepositions. In terms of vocabulary, problems lie in English and Chinese words that have overlapping meanings, but actually do not refer to identical items or concepts, e.g. *until* and *zhidao* (直到); and phrasal verbs or verbs with prepositions that do not exist in English or vice versa.

Apart from the technical reasons above, another key factor that makes it hard for Chinese speakers to deal with English-medium communication is disparities between the Chinese spoken culture and the English spoken culture. This second reason, which has hardly ever been emphasised in Asian language classrooms, is to be discussed in

relation to theoretical frameworks of different spoken cultures in the following section.

Different cultures of spoken languages

> *Every language is a temple in which the soul of those who speak it is enshrined.*

(Oliver Wendell Holmes, *The Professor of the Breakfast Table*, Ch. 2)

The above saying implies that language does not just carry linguistic mechanisms, but communication among speakers of the same language requires shared social reality acquired through the prolonged process of acculturation. This conforms Kramsch's (1998: 3) proposition that language in use 'is bound up with culture in multiple and complex ways'. These complex ways result in three possible forms of relationship between language and culture. Language *expresses* cultural reality in that speakers of a particular language reflect their attitudes, beliefs, and points of view through their language use. Language *embodies* cultural reality, as its speakers create various experiences or meanings through language. Language *symbolises* cultural reality, as language is a system of signs with cultural values, and is a symbol of social identity.

To conduct a successful conversation in a foreign language, one is not only required to recognise linguistic similarities and differences between his or her native language and the target language. Having knowledge of the target culture is not of any less importance, as

ignorance often results in uneasiness, resentment and even sorrow on both sides. Kramsch (2001) specifies that learning different spoken cultures helps with understanding communication situations *(roles, norms of interaction and interpretation, sense of reality)*; stereotypes; non-verbal and paralinguistic features; saving one's own face and others'; societal attitudes, beliefs, and values; and the use of speech to perform actions and so on. Theories related to different spoken languages and cultures generally discuss the following issues (Kramsch 1998):

- *social deixis*

    : indicators of where the speaker stands regarding time, place and status given to the listener, e.g. *Mr. President, President Bush, or George*
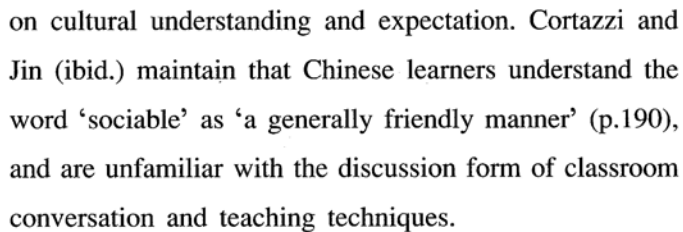
- *social positioning*

    : roles the speaker adjusts to suit listeners through the use of dialects, pronouns terms of address, and sequencing of who should speak first. E.g. The Japanese culture obliges juniors to speak before seniors in order to prevent face loss (ibid.).

- *protecting face*

    : rules of preventing face loss, studied in relation to social positioning. Cortazzi and Jin (1996), for instance, reveal that a common reason behind the fact that Chinese learners do not ask questions in class is 'face'. Asking foolish questions is likely to bring shame and face loss.

- *conversational and narrative styles*

    : various styles of conversation and story telling depending

on cultural understanding and expectation. Cortazzi and Jin (ibid.) maintain that Chinese learners understand the word 'sociable' as 'a generally friendly manner' (p.190), and are unfamiliar with the discussion form of classroom conversation and teaching techniques.

When one or more than one of the conventions above is violated, unsuccessful communication between speakers from different spoken cultures is likely to occur. Cases between Chinese speakers and native speakers of English may be illustrated in some famous fictions. Amy Tan's bestseller, *The Joy Luck Club*, comprises various scenes reflecting bitterness caused by different conversational styles. Take for instance a conflict between the mother of an Americanised daughter *(Waverly)* and the daughter's boyfriend *(Rich)*. Below is Waverly's narration:

But the worst was when Rich criticized my mother's cooking and he didn't even know what he had done. As is the Chinese cook's custom, my mother always made disparaging remarks about her own cooking. That night she choose to direct it toward her famous steamed pork and preserved vegetable dish, which she always served with special pride.

"Ai! This dish not salty enough, no flavor," she complained after tasting a small bite. "it is too bad to eat."

This was our family's cue to eat some and proclaim it the best she had ever made. But before we could do so, Rich said, "You know, all it needs is a little soy sauce." And he proceeded to pour a riverful of the salty black stuff on the platter, right before my mother's horrified eyes.

(Tan 1989: 178)

Another example is a situation from Tony Parson's British

contemporary novel, *The Family Way*, in which a young Chinese interpreter *(Simon)* unintentionally disturbs a young British couple *(Paulo and Jessica)* while showing them around a Chinese city:

Simon:	What do you do? What do you do in England for job?
Paulo:	*(Signed, staring grimly out of the window)*
Jessica:	He sells cars, Simon. *(She shoved to Paulo.)* There's no need to be rude.
Paulo:	Well, it's like Spanish Inquisition with this guy.
Simon:	How much money make? *(As innocently as if he was asking how they liked the weather)*
Paulo:	None of your bloody business!
Simon:	*(Turns to Jessica)* You marry? Or boyfriend-girlfriend just partner.
Jessica:	We're an old married couple. *(Smiles, lifts her left hand displaying her wedding ring)* See?
Simon:	Tiffany. Very good quality. Cartier better though. How long marry?
Jessica:	Five - no six years.
Simon:	*(Nods thoughtfully)* Where the baby?
Jessica:	No babies.
Simon:	Six year no baby?
Paulo:	Jesus Christ! Not here too. We're on holiday, mate.
Jessica:	*(to Simon)* That's right. What a pair of freaks, right?...

(Parson 2005: 300-1)

It can be seen from both cases that frustration caused by linguistic mistakes is not evident: therefore; imperfect linguistic structures are not considered a major hindrance of the communication. The failure in the stories results from a lack of awareness of each other's spoken culture.

In the first case, the Chinese conversational convention was disobeyed by the American guest. The story suggests the Chinese

norm requires its speakers to show humility no matter how proud they feel. Those participating in this spoken culture need to show appreciation and give compliments. Thus, aggravation occurred when the American guest, who was unaware of this norm, said and performed an action the Chinese host considered humiliating due to her lack of familiarity with the straightforward American spoken culture.

The British couple in the second example, on the contrary, presented a lot of discomfort caused by the Chinese speaker's unawareness of their spoken culture. The Chinese generally establish or maintain social interaction through such expressions as *'Have you eaten?'*, *'Where are you going?'*, and *'You have come.'* (Chang 2001: 321). The conversation also reflects the Chinese norm of asking quite personal questions, felt by the western couple as too personal, intrusive, and disturbing. This is because expressions in English that serve this purpose are much more impersonal, i.e., *'How're you?'*, *'Isn't it cold?'* or *'Nice day, isn't it?'*. Fox (2004) examines 'whether-speak' is used as simple greetings, and ice-breaking expressions, and fillers in conversations.

Discussion and conclusion

From the problematic interactions discussed so far, blame is not to be put on any particular party. Apparently, all the speakers of both situations were totally unacquainted with each other's spoken culture, and thus failed to comply with acceptable conversational styles.

To prevent awkwardness and unhappiness in cross-cultural

contacts, learners of a new language (in this case Chinese learners of English) should be introduced to the target language's spoken culture. Though it seems that young Chinese learners of English have more exposure to western culture through foreign teachers, movies, and satellite television, and should be familiar with western spoken culture, this does not guarantee success due to different degrees of learner motivation. The target language's spoken culture, therefore, should be further promoted in class by emphasising more learner-friendly environment, small class sizes, and workshops that stimulate exchanges of different spoken cultures. This will help raise learner awareness that the particular target language has its own subjective reality different from their mother tongue.

The most importantly, successful learners of any new language are those who always keep their minds open!

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