

## **Talking About Interpretation In n Intercultural Context --A Case Study of Chinese Humbleness and Modesty**

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### **Abstract**

*An interpretation is an important work for people to communicate with other people from different cultural background. An interpreter not only translates a sentence or an idiom but also provides the equivalent sentence or an idiom in the target language. Meanwhile, the interpreter should go in the cultural adaptation and gives mutual understanding and comprehension in an intercultural context. Thus, the author takes a case as an example to show that no one can easily and effectively act as an interpreter. The paper analyzes and discusses the relationships between language and culture, intercultural communication and interpreter. And then the author points out that any successful interpreter must be good at both target languages and cultures, he or she needs to interpret the meaning with acceptable cultural elements of the original speech, and so as to be a qualified interpreter for intercultural communication between different people from different cultural backgrounds.*

**Keywords:** interpreter, interpretation, intercultural context, intercultural communication competence, Chinese culture, American culture, humbleness, modesty

### **1. Introduction**

An interpretation is an important work for people to communicate with other people from different cultural backgrounds. And an interpreter not only translates a sentence or an idiom but also provides the equivalent sentence or an idiom into the target language. Meanwhile, the interpreter should go in the cultural adaptation and can give mutual understanding and comprehension in an intercultural context. Especially, the Chinese people's humbleness and modesty are always a polite way to manifest their good wishes and their respect for the others, but if improperly interpreted in an intercultural context, some misunderstanding can also occur.

Due to the different cultures and values placed on individuals in the east and in the west, people from the two cultures will also use some formulaic politer expression common in type with marked differences. Maybe, the Chinese people think humbleness and modesty are favorable, but may be regarded as disrespectability and dishonesty in the west thanks to improper translation.

No doubt, interpreting is hard work and may require some abundant knowledge of intercultural communication and different kinds of expertise. If not, the results of interpretation may be embarrassing and amusing. Thus, the author takes a case as an example to show that no one can easily and effectively act as an interpreter. Any successful interpreter must be good at both target languages and cultures, so as to be a qualified interpreter for intercultural communication between different people from different cultural backgrounds.

## **2. A Case**

One boss from one Chinese company came to America to set up one new firm and held a dinner for his Chinese and American friends in the restaurant. Before dinner, the Chinese boss made a speech in Chinese because he did not speak English fluently. Hence, the Chinese boss invited one Chinese student who was studying in the United States of America, but only stayed for a few months as an interpreter. The boss wanted to express his hospitality for his American and Chinese guests and friends, he delivered a warm welcome speech. In his Chinese speech, he firstly represented his thanks to his friends and guests from both China and America. The interpreter, a young student, could translate what the Chinese boss said into English quite fluently. Finally, the Chinese boss said some things about the food and his hope in a Chinese traditional way. It was as follows:

“今晚，菜不好，请慢用！”（Jin wan, cai bu hao, qing man yong!）

After the Chinese boss finished the last sentence, the interpreter translated what the Chinese boss said as quickly as possible.

“Tonight the food is not good enough, would you please eat them slowly?” The interpreter translated it like this.

Suddenly, the Chinese boss' friends and guests heard of the interpreter's translation, most of the friends and guests especially who were not Chinese, were astonished at the interpretation and did not know why the Chinese boss wanted to offer bad food to them, and asked them to eat bad food slowly. The guests just looked misunderstanding and surprising on their faces. Keep silent for a little while, No thanks and applause came.

Fortunately, at that time, one of the Chinese boss' friends, who had stayed in the United States for a long time and had known difference between American and Chinese cultures quite well, could not help himself stand up and burst into laughter. He hurriedly added and explained.

“Everyone knows our boss just came from China. Just now our boss only use traditional Chinese way to express his humbleness and modest for tonight's dinner. And the interpreter misunderstood what the boss really expressed and made a quite wrong interpretation. I think the real meaning of our boss' speech is like this: Tonight, I have prepared the delicious food to you all. I wish everyone here would really enjoy them very much.”

Finally, great laughter from friends and guests came to the restaurant. Every friend and guest really felt happy and gay, but both the Chinese boss and interpreter were embarrassing.

## **3. Analysis and Discussion**

From the above case, the last sentence of the Chinese boss is considered impolite and misunderstanding in the American culture due to the mistake made by the interpreter, however, it is regarded as politeness in Chinese culture embodies the values of humbleness and modesty. The value of a particular culture leads to a set of expectations and rules prescribing how people should behave in that culture.

Thus, culture appears invisible, yet it is pervasive and can be experienced everywhere since it has a profound effect on us human beings. As we go about our daily lives, we may not be overtly conscious of our culture's influence. (Chen, 2012)

Needless to say, it is necessary for us to analyze the relationships between language and culture, and between pragmatics and interpretation. And then we may clearly realize how to be an interpreter in an intercultural communication context.

### **3.1 Language and Culture**

An interpretation involving a foreign language is a translation involving a foreign culture, and foreign language learning is simultaneously foreign culture learning. To some extent, though language and culture are by no means the same, neither of them could survive without the other. Metaphors can be employed to vividly describe the relationship between language and culture. Some people say that language is the mirror of culture, which means that people see a culture through its language. Others consider that language and culture together form the iceberg. The visible part is the language, with a small part of culture standing out above the sea surface while the greater part, lying hidden beneath the surface of the sea, is the invisible aspect of culture. Still others say that language and culture make a living organism, by which they mean that language is flesh and culture is blood. In a word, language and culture, different as they are, form a whole. To put in another way, language is a symbolic guide to culture, as Sapir(1970) says, and is considered as the keystone of culture. Without language, culture would be impossible. On the other hand, language is influenced and shaped by culture and it reflects culture. In the broadest sense, language is the symbolic representation of people, and it comprises their historical and cultural backgrounds as well as their approach to life and their ways of living and thinking (Deng & Liu,1989).

Language and culture are interdependently and inseparably related. They constitute an integral whole. Without culture, language would be dead and without language, culture would have no shape (Jiang, 2000).

Culture, however, is more expansive. It consists of all the institutions, all the behavior, in fact all the man-made aspects of a very large group of non-homogeneous people (Cullen, 2000). Hence, for a qualified interpreter, he or she should not only learn a foreign language, but also learn its culture. That means the interpreter needs to learn to think, feel and behave in new ways, and “to develop a broader worldview, a more global psychology, and the cultural skills necessary for building relationships and solving problems across cultures” (Davis, 2010).

At the same time, culture is embedded deep in people’s minds. Understanding another culture is an ongoing experience that can last a lifetime. However, sometimes, some interpreters have only a short time to prepare to do interpretation in another country. How can a brief amount of time best be spent to yield the greatest understanding? As Edward Hall pointed out in *Beyond Culture*, the closer something is to seeming true, the less aware we probably are of its cultural origin. People’s own culture seems normal to them, seems just the way things are. One way of asking questions is to notice that another culture goes about something differently from the way you expect.

In the interpretation, linguistic mistakes are usually very easy to put right, but cultural errors, especially those that have to do with their cultural features including values, beliefs and concepts, require a great deal of work before they can be put right. To a great extent, cultural errors are the more serious “mistakes” than pure linguistic ones because native speakers tend to be intolerant of those cultural errors as they consider them as “violations of rules of speaking” and interpret them as “bad manners” (Wolfson, 1983).

Therefore, in order to reflect different cultures the first thing interpreters must do is that they need to have good understanding of cultures represented by both source language (second language) and target language to eliminate intercultural misunderstanding. Also, the interpreters should know how people with target language think about some things and express themselves then interpret the actual meaning with second

language's cultural characteristics by using the proper expression of target language. From the above case, we may easily understand that language is part of culture. Culture, in turn, enriches and influences language. Different cultures generate different languages. Chinese Mandarin only exists in the background of Chinese culture." (Wang and Che, 2013) The last words of the Chinese boss speech, they are generally accepted that the boss said this to express his humbleness, modesty and welcome. Their Chinese friends and guest may then admire his dinner and welcome. Nevertheless, some of the Chinese boss' guests from America might end up thinking in this way. "The Chinese boss regards us not to be good enough to get well – prepared dishes?"

Hence, the interpreter should know very clearly that the same is true in other languages. A symbolical – abstract language is the dominant sign of any culture. The language of any group is directly connected to the culture of the group. When people from different societies interact, it is natural that some cultural differences may exist, including language differences. The origin of Chinese culture is different from the origin of American culture. China has a long history with more than five thousands of years. Most of the Chinese people lived in villages and the rest in small towns. A community generally consists of families descended from one ancestor, bearing the same surname and obeying the dictates of a patriarch. In the community, people know each other well, keeping track of each other's lives, being aware of happenings in each other's households and having a genuine concern for each other's well-being.

Therefore, familiarity, consideration for each other's comfort and health, and an interest in each other's business and activities are found in the life of the Chinese people. That is why when Chinese people treat others, they always are humble and modest to say that, "The dishes are not good enough, enjoy yourself." In this way, it will show the people's respect for the others. And the others respect the people who showed their humbleness and modesty in the society. At the same time, the humbleness and modesty exist everywhere in the Chinese daily lives. But in America, people always talk about some things and express their opinions or attitudes very frankly and straight to the point. This fully indicates the characters of American people and the features of American culture.

### **3.2 Intercultural Communication and Interpreter**

Nowadays, the economic shifts to globalization inevitably change the contours of the world of work and bring in new consumers, new corporations, new knowledge, and new jobs (O'Hara – Devereaux & Johansen, 1994). Because the new consumers spreading throughout the world are difficult to be concentrated, the global market represents a great challenge on almost every aspect of human society, including technology, management, culture, language, etc. The coming of new corporations indicates the challenge to the structure of organization that requires a new corporate culture to adjust to the new environment (Chen, 1999).

Thus, more and more international companies and businesses hire interpreters or translators in order to overcome the intercultural communication problems created by the multitude of languages spoken around the globe. According to the Department of Labor, translators and interpreters are expected to be among the 15 fastest – growing occupations in the United States. The Bureau of Labor Statistics expects the employment of translators and interpreters to increase by 22 percent between 2008 and 2018. (Rubine, 2014)

However, increased contact with other cultures in the contemporary world makes it imperative for us to understand and get along with people who may be vastly different from us. The increased awareness and understanding of other cultures and people who may not share our view, beliefs, values, customs, habits and

lifestyles will eventually enhance our ability to coexist peacefully with people of other cultural backgrounds and to help resolve international conflicts.(Samovar, Porter & Stefani, 2000)

Meanwhile, an interpreter's job is to bridge the gap of the languages and cultures. No doubt, interpreters are also missions of intercultural communication. "The interpreter must decode what the speaker says and then encode the message for the listener. Businesspeople who are new to international business often assume that the interpreter understands all the signals that are being sent and decodes them appropriately as intended. This requires that the interpreter be both linguistically and culturally fluent in both languages and cultures. (Varner and Beamer, 1995)

In addition, an interpreter wants to be a qualified one and meets the need of business or any other field in the society. He or she needs to develop very strong intercultural communication competence. "Intercultural communication competence is considered, very broadly, as an impression that behavior is appropriate and effective in a given context. Normally, competence is considered an ability of skilled behaviors. However, any given behavior or ability may be judged competent in one context, and incompetent in another. Consequently, competence cannot inhere in the behavior or ability itself. Instead, it must be viewed as a social evaluation of behavior, and is composed of two primary criteria that include both appropriateness and its effectiveness. (Tou, 2011)

To some extent, this requires any interpreter to have the prerequisites for intercultural communication competence as Marian Wiseman offers that three key factors, that are knowledge, motivation, and skills or actions. Knowledge means an awareness or understanding of requisite information needed to be intercultural competent. A knowledgeable interlocutor must be equipped with information about the people, the rules and etiquette, etc. Motivation is the set of feelings, intentions, and drives related to the anticipation of or actual engagement in intercultural communication. Skills refer to the actual and goal – oriented performance of proper behaviors in the communication context. (Liu, 2008)

For any interpreter with intercultural communication competence, and interpreter with a bi – cultural or multi – cultural understanding will be able to tactfully handle the situation and help bring the visit / journey to a success. While any interpreter accumulates his or her effective or successful intercultural experience, he or she must also anticipate possible failure events. Before any one depart, anticipation of failure events may help interpreter build up his or her readiness to handle possible difficult situations where you may be engaged in acts that are unintentional inappropriate, or incorrectly executed. In this way, an interpreter will become a qualified one in intercultural context and will successful finish one's own interpretation for any visiting or business task. Finally, the interpreter will build up a bridge among China and other foreign countries.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In the current globalization process, although intercultural contact is inevitable in the world today, we can find that it is not always successful. The communicative behaviors of different cultures frequently disturb us. The languages and behaviors of people from other cultures may seem strange and perhaps odd to us.

Different people with different cultural backgrounds have different traditional virtues. Being humbleness and modest is one of the traditional virtues of the Chinese people. They are humbleness and modest when communicating with others including foreign guests in the public. Also, the Chinese often decline praise to

show their humbleness and modesty. They often speak or reply with peasant humbleness and modesty, when they are praised for their dishes from above the case, even if their dresses, appearances, etc. in intercultural communication. Thus, any interpreter or any people from other cultural background should understand both the Chinese culture and other country's culture well, can easily know how to effectively communicate with one another in the intercultural context.

As a result, we have finished our analysis and discussion, we have clearly known that an interpreter should have to learn to make one's own interpretation successful and communicate effectively with people from other cultures in such an intercultural context. And they should be ready to learn from the mistakes that they made, and from above case, they need to interpret the meaning with acceptable cultural elements of the original speech, and master both language and culture from different countries.

At the same time, for an interpreter, the most important thing is to cultivate an intercultural communication competence. Only in this way, the interpreters will have a deep understanding on the cultural system of the two different languages to avoid intercultural misunderstanding as much as possible. And then the interpreters also need to use different expressive techniques like explaining, paraphrasing, literally interpreting, replacing and borrowing to represent the different from another culture or the combination of these two different cultures in interpretation. Needless to say, during any interpersonal and international communication, interpretation would play an indispensable and important role in connecting different cultures and different nations.

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