

Attention to Cultural Imperialism beneath Discourse Implicature in International Business Communication

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Abstract:

Based on case studies of the author's first-hand experience, this paper calls attention to the awareness of cultural imperialism by the exploration of discourse implicature in business context across cultures. It is assumed by analysis that the cultural imperialism exists verbally, textually or non-verbally through the behavior of individual interlocutors, who preserve an outdated awareness of cultural-goods against cultural-humble. The cultural awareness serves as the dynamics for the production of communicative behavior and discourse implicature. The effective communication to get rid of such cultural imperialism relies on three major elements, i.e. a sober cultural understanding, a mastery of both source and target languages and an appropriate communicative behavior.

Key words: cultural imperialism; discourse implicature; business context; intercultural communication

0. Introduction

This paper explores verbal discourse implicature, textual discourse implicature and non-verbal discourse implicature in search of effective communication in business context across cultures. The so-called discourse implicature refers to the intention of interlocutors inferred in verbal expressions, textual versions or non-verbal behavior that are rooted on specific cultural awareness. It is assumed that in business context across cultures, the interlocutors are influenced to some degree by their cultural backgrounds. Those who preserve an awareness of cultural-goods intentionally or unintentionally impact their cultural values upon their counterparts. The so-called cultural-goods refers to the priority consciousness of one's own culture over others. On the contrary, those who preserve an awareness of cultural-humble attempt to meet the interest of their counterparts without their conscientiousness. The so-called cultural-humble refers to the deteriorate consciousness of one's own culture against others. The international communication in business context replays the procedure of intelligent contests or psychological conflicts between interlocutors from different cultures. Virtually, the contests or conflicts are rooted on the cultural awareness of individual interlocutors.

It presents in *the humanity nature of languages* that "interpersonal interaction means cultural interaction and so does interpersonal communication"(Yu 1997). In a real context, no communicative behavior can isolate itself from the influence of its culture. During the course of interaction, interlocutors exhibit their intentions and make their decisions to some extent with the help of their cultural awareness. The cultural awareness can be extracted from verbal expressions beneath discourse patterns, in particular when the communicative environment is dominated by a negative awareness of cultural-goods against cultural-humble. As culture is widely classified into the Material Culture, the Relationship Culture and the Spiritual Culture, the cultural awareness is assumed as the essence of the Spiritual Culture, which is embedded in interpersonal consciousness. The cultural awareness thus built predominates a specific communicative behavior, which, in turn, rebuilds interlocutors' discourse patterns in a given context. A specific interlocutor with a unique personality helps build a concrete communicative behavior and concrete discourse implicature.

This assumption is in agreement with the claim by Прохоров(1996) that the uniqueness of personality possesses "two major cultural connotations", i.e. "culture-reserve and knowledge-reserve" (Zhao 2003:148). The *Applied Linguistics in Cultural Studies* interprets that culture-reserve "refers to the

understanding of other cultures" and the "knowledge-reserve" refers to the mastery of a target language" (Zhao 2003:148). Thus, it can be drawn that effective intercultural communication relies largely on the professionalization of the interlocutor in intercultural communication. Interlocutors as such are necessarily equipped with sufficient culture-knowledge and a mastery of the target language. Scollon supports that "successful communication is based on sharing as much as possible the assumptions we make about others mean" (Scollon 1995:12). He also believes that "effective communication requires study of cultural and discourse differences on the one hand, but also requires a recognition of one's own limitation" (Scollon 1995:15). In order to do so, a sober awareness of the unique cultural awareness of individuals is essential for effective communication. To interlocutors from third world countries, courage and wisdom are also needed in meeting psychological challenge of cultural prejudicial stereotypes. Hereinafter, let us deal with a series of case studies in business context across cultures to explore the awareness of cultural-goods against cultural-humble behind discourses to find ways for effective communication.

1. Awareness of cultural imperialism beneath verbal discourse implicature

James Paul Gee who joined applied psycholinguistics at Boston University and the University of Southern California for years regards discourse as a social interaction in his *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis: Theory and Method*. Through his studies, he believes that "language has a magic property: when we speak or write we craft what we have to say to fit the situation or context in which we are communicating" (Gee 1999:11). This assumption shows that words cannot express exactly what they mean, and words can express meanings beyond verbal existence. The exact meaning exists in its given context. So, on one hand, we need to be careful about the real meaning behind words. On the other, we can employ words to hide the real meaning that cannot be expressed directly. Let us further our analysis by observing the following business interaction between a Chinese and an American firm.

One day in March 1985, at the conference room of Geo-space Corporation (the United States of America or the USA for short), a discussion was under way between the corporation and a firm under the Ministry of Petroleum Industry (the People's Republic of China or the PRC for short). The discussion was on the wording of an item in a drafted joint venture contract as follows:

The Chinese Party shall be responsible for the sale of the said products in the market within the PRC and the US Party shall be responsible for the sale of the said products in the market within the USA The Chinese Party shall not be allowed to sell the said products to North Korea.

As Gee claims, "language-in-use is everywhere and always political"(Gee 1999:1). This contract with this item goes beyond its business intention. Politically, it interferes with the relationship between China and a third country. Economically, the sales right is restricted only to the Chinese firm, implying that the American firm can sell products to the said country. Therefore, this item is equal neither politically nor commercially. The representative of the Chinese firm declared a necessary revision and the representative of the American firm revised the item as follows:

The Chinese Party shall not be allowed to sell the said products to any third countries without permission of the US Party.

With regard to the wording itself, the representative of the American firm seems to be cooperating since the political intention has been avoided. But, with this revision, the American firm could gain more sales rights and could control the rest of the world market outside China. Consequently, the sales right of the Chinese firm is limited within the PRC, which is what the representative of the American firm expects beneath the words of the contract. The so-called political matter is serious to the Chinese firm but makes little sense to the American firm. So the representative of the American firm attempts to play the political card for more sales right. But, the Chinese delegates refused this revision and contributed their modification as follows:

Either Party shall not be allowed to sell the said products to any third countries without permission of the other Party.

The representatives of the American firm opposed this revision, declaring that it restricted their sales rights. The delegates of the Chinese firm stated that equality was the presupposition for business collaborations. Due to the fact that the restriction was binding both parties, the item was equal and acceptable. At this moment, the representatives of the American firm proposed to break the negotiation for legal consultation. To save the face of their counterparts, the delegates of the Chinese firm agreed. One week later, both parties reached the agreement on the item as revised by the Chinese firm.

In the business context above, both parties challenge each other by means of words and words really make sense. Without words communication could not take place. However, it is thoughts or ideas that animates words in interaction. Without ideas or thoughts, language would make no sense and real communication would not happen. It is declared by Liu Shouhua (1992) and Ding Hengjie (1994) that "either material culture or spiritual culture is the result of the creative power of human beings, which results from personalization" (Zhao 2003:21). To put it precisely, the interlocutors are controlled by their ideas or thoughts, which are in turn influenced by their personality. In the case above, the human creative power in wording is exhibited to the full in the conflict between the two sides. In meeting conflicts, interlocutors have the capability to set a favorable environment through positive communicative behavior. Only in this way can an interlocutor keep the communication process running effectively.

2. Awareness of cultural imperialism beneath textual discourse implicature

The American scholar Ron Scollon and his colleagues spent over 20 years in research of intercultural intra-organizational communication in North America and East Asia, including China, Japan, South Korea, etc. Based on their research, it is concluded that "effective communication is based on sharing as much as possible the assumptions we make about what others mean" (Scollon 1995:12). Failure in understanding each other and sharing each other's assumptions will ruin potential collaboration. In January 2004, at the conference room of an institution in south China, a discussion is going on between a Chinese institution and an Australian institution on the following items:

- ① *For the purpose of interpretation, the English content of this contract should take precedence over the Chinese translation.*
- ② *The Chinese Party must not infringe any of the Intellectual Property Rights of the Australian Party and must not use in undertaking any of its duties under this agreement any Intellectual Property Rights without the prior consent in writing of the Australian Party.*
- ③ *The Chinese Party must not copy, reproduce, duplicate, or produce derivative works from any of the Course Materials in any form.*

In accordance with Item-①, the version in English language takes effect if ambiguity appears in textual wording, or misunderstanding arises between the two versions in the two languages used. This is a typical case of prejudice of one language over the other. Linguistically no language is superior to others. The Chinese language is rooted on a long history and the largest language in terms of population. The PRC that takes Chinese as her official language is one of the standing members of the United Nations and her GDP stands among the first six or five nations in the world in recent years. Anyway, the Chinese language should not be stereotyped. It is known that the European Union is composed of 25 countries up to now and no language takes precedence over others. According to *Survey on EU*, "there are 11 working languages" (Guan 2002:64) for EU communication and any papers are produced with all languages to meet the need of its member nations. This is a sound example for all nations to follow, which symbolizes the progress of the human society. Therefore, the item should be revised as follows:

This agreement is written in both English and Chinese and both languages shall take the same precedence.

According to interactive social-linguistics, miscommunication "arises from language ambiguity" and that "language remains inherently ambiguous at the level of discourse as well" (Scollon 1995:9). Apparently, ambiguity is a common problem in language understanding. The Australian Party notices it and takes a negative measure in its own favor. Since it is a sacrifice to the Chinese Party, this item will fail in operation. The use of languages of both parties in producing a common contract can best reduce

ambiguity. During the process to prepare a contract, both sides would carefully check the meanings and inference in either language so as to avoid possible misunderstanding before it goes into operation. The contract should be drafted in the interest of both parties for effective cooperation.

Item-② is concerned with property rights, which, as a universal rule, is required to be followed by both parties instead of one upon the other. In the line of the draft, an awareness of prejudice against its counterparts prevails. This will hurt the feelings of the other party. No party or culture should be regarded as superior to the other. Thus, "The Chinese Party" should be replaced by "either party" and "The Australian Party" replaced by "the other" as follows:

Either party must not infringe on the Intellectual Property Rights of the other and must not use in undertaking any of its duties under this agreement any Intellectual Property Rights without the prior consent in writing of the other party.

Item-③ is ridiculous and not feasible. Suppose that The Chinese Party not be involved in reproducing teaching materials, the Australian Party would accomplish it by sending its staff or all teaching materials including necessary hard copies and hand-outs by mail to the PRC. In fact, the Australian Party needs assistance from the Chinese Party. When the representatives of the Australian Party become aware of it, they agree to modify this item as follows:

The Chinese Party must not copy, reproduce, duplicate, or produce derivative works from any of the Course Materials for use such as publication or marketing other than teaching in accordance with the agreement.

During the negotiation, the Australian Party once showed its cards by declaring that this was the contract they had signed with another Chinese institution. It is known in cultural studies that "it is dangerous to infer or predict communicative behavior with different cultural backgrounds in accordance with cultural stereotyping" (Scollon 1995: F15). In practice, the value of a culture does not acknowledge all the people. In other words, not all people follow the generalized cultural value. In an open society as we are experiencing today, people tend to accept values from different cultures. Individuals are unique in characters and psychology. To take intercultural communication as a profession, it is important to acknowledge that stereotyping will distort intercultural communication.

3. Awareness of cultural imperialism beneath non-verbal discourse implicature

Barnlund highlights that "many and sometimes most, of the critical meanings generated in human encounters are elicited by touch, glance, gesture, or facial expression with or without the aid of words" and that "every harmony or disharmony of signals guides the interpretation of passing mood or enduring attributes"(Barnlund 1968:536-537). In a real business context, non-verbal communicative behavior sometimes serves as an aid to linguistic communication, and other times as the sole way to pass on thoughts or feelings. Now, let us observe how intercultural communication is damaged by non-verbal communicative behavior in a business context:

One day in February 1985, at the conference room of Gray Tool Company, in Houston, Texas, the USA, the Company was negotiating with the delegates from the Mechanic Department of the Ministry of Petroleum Industry of the PRC for a joint venture project in manufacturing wellhead equipment. When conflict arose on financial matter, Mr. Schmitt, a representative of the company raised his feet and put them on the table pointing directly towards the head of the delegation from the PRC. The head of the delegation was an outstanding specialist in the area of petroleum industry and was entitled as "Founder of China's Petroleum Machinery". The rude behavior elicited no response at this moment. Nothing seemed to happen and the negotiation went on.

A few minutes later, the young interpreter of the Chinese delegation raised his feet and put them on the table at the other side. Then, the conference was stormed with a spell of stirring. Almost all representatives from both parties turned their heads toward the young interpreter. Their eyes sparkled with astonishment or fury. The interpreter raised his right hand and pointed to the other side. A senior American representative noticed it and made a gesture in the same direction. Mr. Schmitt withdrew his feet reluctantly. The Chinese interpreter followed. Peace returned to the conference room.

During the incident above, interlocutors of both sides employed "feet" as their communicative means to charge each other psychologically. To show respect to the elders or superiors is maintained as a norm of virtue in Chinese culture, particularly in social contact. The rude behavior performed by the American challenged the norm of the traditional Chinese value. As we know, American people believe in equality. The rude behavior is a contradiction to the beliefs held by Americans and a violation against the Chinese cultural norm. To maintain identities and self-esteem, the Chinese interpreter raised his feet in return.

In *Communication Between Cultures* Samovar puts forward that "to be effective in intercultural communication it is essential that you know not only your own culture's rules but also the cultural rules of the person with whom you are interacting" (Samovar 1998:177). The American who first raised his feet lacked this common knowledge for professional communication. He reserved neither the Chinese cultural norm to respect the elders nor the American cultural value concerning equality. His miscommunication behavior resulted in an awkward situation for representatives of both sides. After a short silence of endurance, the Chinese interpreter employed the same way to protest against the rude behavior and maintained self-esteem and self-respect for his delegation and culture.

Thus it can be seen that in certain contexts interlocutors can exhibit their thoughts, social status and identities through non-verbal behavior. In the process above, the American shows his awareness of cultural-goods through the action of raising his feet and the Chinese interlocutor shows his courage against cultural prejudice by the same action.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, arguments and even conflicts often prevail during the process of business contexts across cultures due to the fact that interlocutors on either side are seeking for their potential ultimate profits and maintaining their own cultural values. To promote intercultural communication, scholars in the fields of cultural studies, psychological social-linguistics, discourse analysis, interactive social-linguistics, etc. are involved on research from different perspectives into possible solutions. In *Communication for a Global Economy*, Smith Ed. states that

the most effective firms in the global arena fall into the category whose employees not only understand the world economics and global competitiveness but also have the ability to communicate effectively with international counterparts (Smith 1995:25-28).

Obviously, to have such employees is vital rather than necessary for business firms to meet new challenge in the era of globalization. The case studies in this paper also show that effective communication is a profession rather than an expectation. To be involved in intercultural communication needs professionals with communicative skills or strategies rather than somebody who can speak a foreign language.

Briefly, effective communication relies on mutual understanding and the avoidance of misinterpretation, which can be summed up in three major respects, i.e. sufficient cultural reserve (Προχορβ1996), deductive competence of the target language (Scollon 1995:F20) and positive cultural awareness of individual interlocutors. As for the third respect, which is the contribution of this article, it refers to the courage and wisdom against cultural prejudice or stereotype and it also refers to the positive attitude to treat counterparts equally.

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