

Exploring the Impact of Culture in Five Communicative Elements

Case of Intercultural Misunderstandings between Chinese and American

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Abstract

Previous studies provide general and generic interpretations on cultural differences when interpreting misunderstandings in intercultural communication. In light of performance theory, a five-element model is proposed as a practical tool to analyze how cultural differences lead to misunderstandings. Supported by cases of misunderstanding in Chinese-American communication, this model shows that five key elements in intercultural communication: roles, place, time, audience, and scripts, are all involved in the construction of meaning and each of the elements has culture-bound divergent meanings. Failing to recognize the underlying discrepancies in these elements between cultures will result in misunderstanding.

Keywords: *intercultural communication, misunderstanding, culture, model*

Introduction

Misunderstanding in Intercultural Communication is generally considered as the consequence of cultural difference (e.g. Hall 1973, 1990; Agar 1994; Scollon&Scollon 1995; Gao& Ting-Toomey 1998; Ting-Toomey &Oetzel 2001; House 2006; Kim & Hubbard 2007; Beebe &Mottet 2010). Previous studies have observed two major categories in the powerful effect of culture that might cause misunderstandings: 1) the discrepancy in communication styles; and 2) the different cultural values and beliefs.

First, the difference in communication styles influenced by culture is recognized as one major cause for misunderstanding in intercultural communication. Anthropologist Hall (1976) proposed the concept of High Context (HC) and Low Context (LC) communication. In HC societies, most of the information is either in the physical context or initialized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. While in LC societies, the mass of information is vested in the explicated code. This concept has been borrowed by numerous studies to explain the misunderstandings or miscommunications in intercultural communication (Yousef 1978; Ehrenhaus 1983; Gao& Ting-Toomey 1998; Korac-Kakabadse et al 2001; Hu 2007). House (2006) compared the communicative styles preferred by speakers of German and English and proposed five different dimensions in communication norms which might cause misunderstandings: directness and indirectness, orientation towards self and orientation towards others, orientation towards content and orientation towards addressees, explicitness and implicitness, ad-hoc formulation and verbal routines. These results are confirmed in a large amount of misunderstanding studies (Luchtenberg 1994; Gao & Ting-Toomey 1998; Watts 2003; Merkin 2009).

Second, the influence of culture on communication is also reflected in different cultural values, attitudes and beliefs, which are utilized as another explanatory category of intercultural misunderstandings. Hofstede (1980, 2001) proposed five dimensions of cultural variability: individualism/collectivism (I/C), power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity/femininity, and short/long-term orientation. Among these dimensions, I/C is the most common value utilized to explain misunderstandings and miscommunications between cultures. Based on this different orientation between individual and others, numerous implications for misunderstanding are pointed out (Westin 1985; Ting-Toomey 1988; Triandis, Brislin, & Hui 1988; Young 1994; Gudykunst 2003; Martin & Nakayama 2004; Chong 2006). Recognizing the cultural similarities and differences in face needs and concerns that drive conflict behavior, researchers also apply the concept of face to analyze misunderstandings (Ting-Toomey 1988, 2005; Gao&Ting-Toomey, 1998; Oetzel& Ting-Toomey, 2003; Park & Guan 2006). Recently holism has been introduced as another primary cultural value distinguishing the East and the West and used to

interpret intercultural communication misunderstandings (Lim et al. 2011; Kim 2012; Lim 2009; Lim & Giles 2007). Cultural schema recognizes that cultural experience are frequently instantiated and embodied in linguistic expressions, providing another useful tool in the studies of intercultural communication (Rice 1980; Shore 1996; Strauss & Quinn 1997; Sharifian 2001, 2008). Sharifian and Jamarani's (2011) study suggested that unfamiliarity with the cultural schemas that speakers draw on during intercultural communication could be a potential source of discomfort and misunderstanding.

The aforementioned studies have been content to deal with the issue of misunderstanding at a macro level for the most part. However, those findings are too general and too vague to provide intercultural practitioners with useful guidance in understanding the concrete discrepancies between cultures to avoid or reduce misunderstandings in specific communicative events. The reason of saying this is because every case of intercultural communication is situation-dependent. The factors contributing to the occurrence of misunderstanding are too complex to be interpreted by one-in-all principle. In this sense, the aforesaid analyses of cultural differences are over-generalized. Other than this, the discrepancies between cultures are not clear-cut between societies. Even House (2006) who proposed the five contrastive dimensions in communication norms pointed out that "It is important to note that the dimensions displayed above are not to be mistaken for clear-cut dichotomies, they simply display tendencies." Furthermore, when cultures and individuals are presented in black-or-white terms, it will "not only cloud our understanding of them, but it inevitably leads to our making good/bad comparisons" (Kim & Hubbard 2007, p.232).

What is needed, then, is a model that can practically and efficiently pinpoint the concrete discrepancies between cultures that lead to misunderstandings. Such a model should take into consideration all the key elements that could trigger misunderstanding in an intercultural communicative event, and it must be an easy-to-implement model that can be applied to most of the cases to interpret how and why the intercultural misunderstanding occurs. In the following section, a five-element analytical model is proposed and illustrated to respond to these issues.

Performance Theory and a Five-element Analytical Model

An essential feature of most human communication is the expression and recognition of intentions (Grice 1969). In the process, "one person (a source) intentionally encodes and transmits a message through a channel to an intended audience (receivers) in order to induce a particular attitude or behavior" (Samovar, Porter & Jain 1981:13).

Since intention is a particular type of mental state and it is not visible in communication, people impose intentionality on entities that are not intrinsically intentional (Searle 1983: viii). When two people communicate, they "interact with and through symbols to create and interpret meanings" (Wood 2004:28). By interpreting the meanings of these entities or symbols, people get each other's intention.

Because of the similarities between interpersonal communication and stage performance that both express intention/meaning through symbols in a specific situation, performance which is originally referred as a typical theatrical activity has been used as a critical metaphor and analytic tool in exploring the elements of interpersonal communication (Hymes 1972; Bauman 1977; Carlson 1996; Hargie 1997; Walker 2000). Walker (2000) introduced this concept into foreign language teaching and described performances as "conscious repetitions of 'situated events'" which are defined by five specified elements: 1) place of occurrence; 2) time of occurrence; 3) appropriate script (or program or rules); 4) roles of participants; and 5) accepting and/or accepted audience.

In each performance, these five key elements are explicit to both participants: place, time, scripts, roles and audience, which set up the frame for both sides to establish or interpret each other's intentions in a communication event. In a communicative event, the speaker needs to recognize both his and the hearer's roles in the interaction, identify the place and time, consider the acceptance of audience, and select appropriate scripts to communicate. The hearer, then, tries to recognize and interpret the speaker's intention by taking into considerations all relevant elements. If all the elements are interpreted the same as or close to what they are understood by the speaker, it is called a successful understanding. However, if one or more of the elements are interpreted differently, a misunderstanding, or pseudo-understanding will follow.

As the foregoing implies, a five-element-analytical hypothesized model is proposed in this paper attempting to interpret how a misunderstanding occurs in intercultural encounters, as shown below.

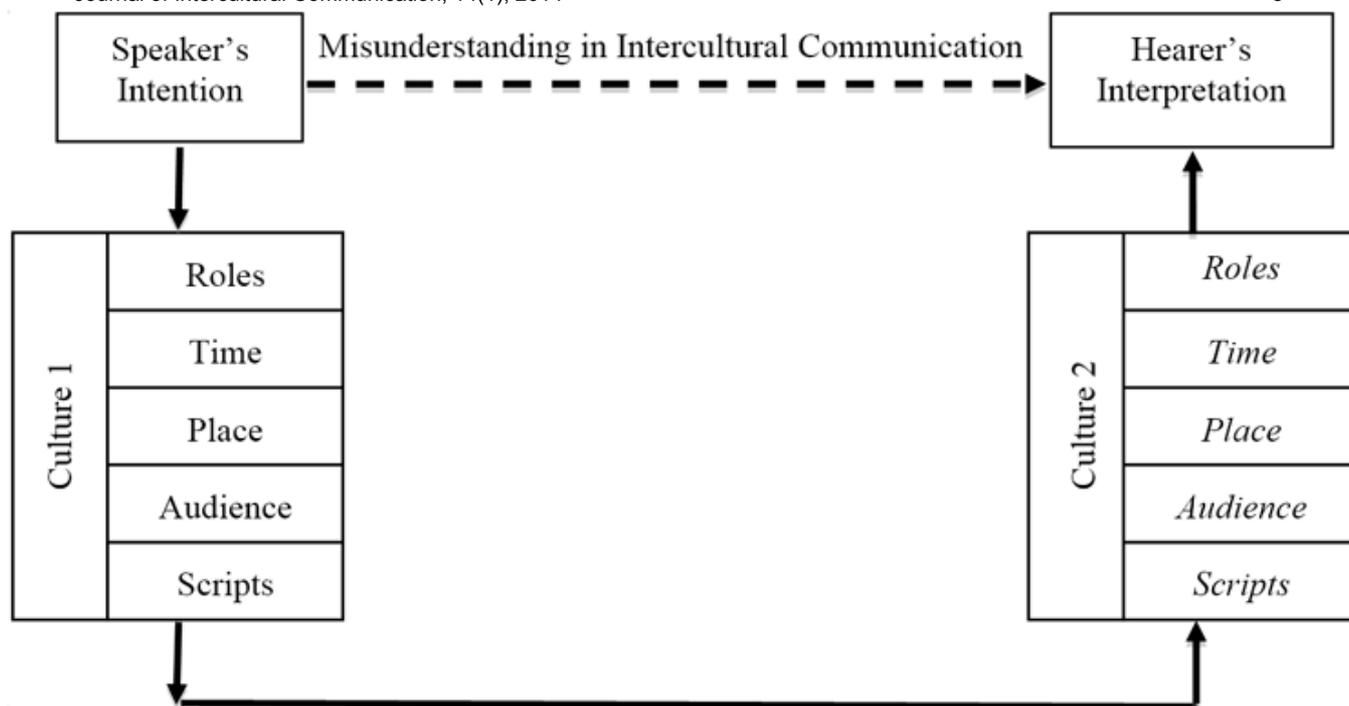


Figure 1: Five-Element Model in Explaining Misunderstandings in Intercultural Communication

As shown in figure 1, when a misunderstanding occurs, it seems as simple as merely the speaker's intention is misinterpreted by the hearer. However, detailed examination indicates that this process is much more complicated than it looks superficially. In reality, the intention of the speaker from Culture 1 is first conveyed by the five elements: roles, time, place, audience and scripts. Then, the five elements are interpreted respectively by the hearer from Culture 2 to derive the intention of the speaker. However, the meaning of each of the five elements in culture 1 may be different from that in culture 2. To make it worse, these discrepancies are often neglected by both interlocutors due to the superficial similarities between these elements. Thus, the distortion of one or more of the key elements will eventually lead to a misunderstanding.

In the following section, the validity of this model will be testified with cases of misunderstanding in intercultural communication to demonstrate how culture affects each of the elements.

Methodology

The cases of misunderstanding in this study are collected from real-life interaction through shadowing 20 American learners of Advanced Chinese when they were participating in a study abroad program in China.

Participants

The twenty participants were enrolled into a well-established Chinese MA program in a Midwest American university during that period. Of the 20 American students, 5 were female and 15 were male. Their ages ranged from 21 to 28. All of them had learned Chinese for 3 to 5 years and most had visited China for more than once. Their Chinese speaking proficiency level was between intermediate-mid to Advanced-high according to the ACTFL OPI criteria. They are among the relatively small number of Americans who are capable of communicating with Chinese people in Chinese language. Being devoted to achieving successful understanding in Chinese-American communication, these students constitute the ideal subject pool for this study.

The Chinese who interacted with those Americans include the American students' Chinese teachers, mentors, internship coworkers, roommates, classmates and other native Chinese speakers. All of the Chinese communication partners were born and raised in mainland China. Most of them know little or no English, and they understand American culture even less. Also they were not required to make any accommodations to the American students.

Role of the researcher

In this study, the researcher is a Chinese native speaker and served as those American participants' Chinese instructor. She interacted with these participants and observed their communication with Chinese people on a daily

basis. All participants were very cooperative and supportive of her observation and interviews. As their teacher, it was her duty to point out their misbehaviors and misunderstandings that might lead to communication breakdowns. Her knowledge of Chinese culture and experiences in interacting with Chinese people benefit these American students by improving their communicative and cultural competence. Therefore, they were free from feeling embarrassed when telling their most awkward stories which they usually would not share with others. One disadvantage of doing the backyard research in one's native culture is that the perspectives of the researcher are restricted by the preformed cultural assumptions since the researcher herself is also a product of culture. To avoid or prevent researcher-induced bias, the researcher consulted many other Chinese natives on the cultural analysis for each case of misunderstanding.

Data collection and analysis

The major methods of data collection for this study include participant observation, document analysis, and interview.

Participants were first asked to "keep a daily journal recording what cultural differences they observed or experienced the when interacting with Chinese people in order to cultivate your cultural awareness" (cited from the assignment instruction). The purpose of this study was not revealed to the students and the term "misunderstanding" was not used in the journal writing assignment in order not to restrict their observation and writing scope. Out of 2,100 entries of cultural journal, about 500 cases of misunderstanding were then identified and selected for further analysis. One point needs to be noted is that these selected cases were based on American participants' observation and filtered through their cultural perspective. Cases of misunderstanding that were perceived by Chinese are not analyzed in this study.

One-on-one follow-up interviews were conducted by the researcher more than five times per participant. Participants were asked to talk about the details of the selected cases of misunderstanding as well as their reflections and interpretation to those events. Questions were completely open-ended and varied depending on the particular participant.

English language was used in both the cultural journal writing and the interviews so that American students could express their ideas more clearly and more deeply in their native language. In addition, all participants have given their permission to be part of this study and pseudonyms are used for them to protect their identity and privacy.

Findings and Discussion

All these cases of misunderstanding were carefully examined and categorized into different groups of the five elements. In the following, the explanatory force of these five elements for intercultural misunderstanding will be testified in turn by those cases.

Roles: Same role, Different Social Expectations

The world is often likened to a stage on which everyone is performing his role like an actor. In each society, people assume different roles in social life and everyone is living in a social network. The view has been proposed by numerous researchers that each person in everyday social interactions presents himself and his activity to others in the similar way as an actor presents a character to the audiences (Goffman 1959; Cooley & Schubert 1998).

Social role expectations are formed gradually by learning in the process of continuous interactions with people in a certain society. Conditioned by culture, these expectations are deep-seated and hard to slow-down. With these relatively stable social role expectations, people living in the same community are less likely than foreigners to be surprised by their fellow countrymen (Hsu 1981:3).

When entering into another cultural community, one assumes the same social roles and builds up the same interpersonal relationships with people as he does in his own culture. Although social expectations to the same role might have some overlaps between cultures, the rules and behaviors of certain roles prescribed in one culture do not apply to another culture neatly. Furthermore, due to some superficial similarities, the discrepancies on the social role expectations are often neglected by the intercultural interlocutors. Therefore, when the natives interact with non-natives, misunderstandings will arise if both follow the social role expectations and rules of their own cultures.

For example, the hierarchy of teacher-student relationship in Chinese culture is revealed more explicitly than that in American culture. As researchers and most American students have observed, it is not rare to see that Chinese

teachers use humiliation and scolding to keep their students in line while the students always keep quiet and never argue back. For most American students, they obviously have less tolerance for this. Below is an excerpt from the American student Catherine's cultural journal when she served as an assistant of a Chinese teacher.

In one week I have been called a useless child, a careless child, a lost child, a child who wants to be an adult, a knucklehead, a brickwall, and threatened with assault if I was disobedient by the professors and surrounding administrators (from Catherine's cultural journal).

Another American student, Gina, who was doing her internship in a local Chinese newspaper, recalled an incident between her and her internship mentor: One day, when they were invited to a banquet, her mentor barked at her, criticizing her for a faux pas in front of many others. Gina said that she felt humiliated because "the mentor was talking to me like a mother would talk to a child." And she did not expect her mentor would talk to her in such a way since they even did not know each other very well. Later her mentor explained that she saw their relationship as teacher-student and that was why she said those words to her.

Although Chinese teachers have a lot more personal power over their students, they often have a closer relationship with their students than that in the U.S., the American student Ryan recalled his time when he was teaching English in a rural Chinese area:

American teachers almost never give out their cell phone numbers to students. But Chinese teachers all do.. Maybe the biggest difference is that in China, it is ok for students and teachers to meet outside of school. My students invited me to play video games, go out to lunch, or other things all the time. Also, in the U.S., a student would NEVER go to a teacher's home, but they would go there for tutoring all the time at my school. Sometimes students would also just stop by to visit me (from Ryan's cultural journal).

Time: Same Time System, Different Time-Use Pattern

Time is one of the fundamental bases on which all cultures rest and all activities revolve. There are 365.25 days in a year and twenty-four hours in a day, which is the same among all cultures in modern societies. However, it is not guaranteed that you can always handle time in another culture as successfully as you can in your native culture because the meanings of specific time and the ways that cultures handle time vary greatly between cultures. According to Hall's (1973) observation, some cultures do not have the concept of past, some do not have clock time, some never make schedules and some do not understand the concept of Sunday. Levine (1997) studied the use of time in 31 different cultures and found the pace of life varies greatly. Therefore, misunderstandings are the likely outcome when the concepts of time or time-use patterns clash in intercultural interactions.

In this study, Prof. Zhou was one of the Chinese teachers of these 20 American students. Students enjoyed taking his class but they had two complaints about him, both of which were related to time. The first one was that he never had a weekly schedule for the students and students had no idea what to expect and how to prepare for next day's class. The second one was that Prof. Zhou always held his class overtime.

For the first complaint, Prof. Zhou told me that he "does not have the habit of planning classes that far ahead" and "cannot determine the teaching content until the night right before classes", and even by then it is still subject to change later. Given this, how could he know what to put in his schedule one week in advance? For the second complaint, he explained that it is common for a teacher to hold the class overtime in China, and this would normally mean that the teacher really loves and cares about students. He felt many American students were ungrateful for the effort and enthusiasm he put into his teaching. He said that whenever class went overtime, some students would leave without asking his permission. And there was even once a student proclaimed loudly "it is time to end the class!" Prof. Zhou said he felt both awkward and insulted. In contrast, below is an American student's complaint:

When the teacher goes over time, for me, it seems like the teacher just wants the people to hear more what he has to say. He does not respect the students' time. And if he could not fit what he needs to say in two hours, then, it means he is not organized (from interviews with John).

Prof. Zhou's case clearly indicates the differences in time management between the two cultures. In the U.S., people get accustomed to working out intricate schedules days or even weeks in advance. Hall (1966) stated that Americans think of time as a road or a ribbon stretching into the future, along which one progresses. The road has segments or compartments which are to be kept discrete ("one thing at a time"). Most Americans never question

the fact that time should be planned and future events should fit into a schedule. People who do not schedule time are looked down upon as impractical. However, the situation in China is quite different. Daniel recorded in his journal that it took him quite long time to find a planner for a new academic year in China. Most people he asked did not even know what a planner is. Then he noticed that few people use planners in China while it is almost a must for anyone in school or at work back to his home country. Another American student John who had been working in a small Chinese company for one year gave up using planners in China.

When I worked in the U.S., my boss would say, 2 o'clock we will have a meeting and I put it on my calendar. But in China, we would not have a meeting time. If the boss wants to talk to you, he just comes by and says it. For example, he gave me a project and asked me to do it while I was busy doing another project. I have to divide the time into different parts by myself. There is no real time table in my company (from interviews with John).

Place: Same Place, Different Cultural Meaning

When growing up in a certain culture, one knows exactly where to go to do certain things and gets accustomed to the expected behaviors in those places. However, when entering into another culture, these seeming similarities in the basic notions and functions of these places are misleading because culture exerts tremendous influence on every aspect of these places: who comprises the regular group in a certain place, when people usually go to these places, and what are appropriate or inappropriate behaviors in these places. Therefore, place implicates intentions in a silent way and the implicated intentions vary in different cultures, which makes it another major source of misunderstandings in intercultural communication.

One American student recorded in his cultural journal that he couldn't understand why Chinese always like offering him something to eat every time he took the train in China, which made him very uncomfortable. From the time he was a child, his parents keep telling him not to eat food offered by strangers.

This misunderstanding is mainly because of the different cultural concepts of train between the two cultures. Presently most rail transport in the United States is for freight shipments. Except for some large cities, Americans usually drive or take flights for traveling. On the contrary, China has an extensive railway network which is the most common means of intercity travel. For Chinese, the train is a social place, especially in the hard seats area where four or six people sit face to face. It is kind of awkward if nobody talks.

Chinese can change the train into a home within a few hours. Passengers greet and talk with each other. They open their bags and share each other's food. It is like they are having a party. But on a train in the U.S., passengers won't talk with each other. At most they might just say hi to each other (from Terry's cultural journal).

Misunderstandings can be found not only in the places that have explicit differences like trains, but also the places that look almost the same like McDonald's where American students believe they are more familiar with. The following is a misunderstanding occurred in a McDonald's in Eastern China.

One day, several of my Chinese friends wanted to go to McDonald's for lunch. For some reason, one of my best friends first said he did not want to go. Then I pushed him to go with us. When we got there, I ordered and paid for my food. When it was his turn he said he was not hungry at all and did not buy anything. Later on I was told by another good friend that I was supposed to pay for his lunch because, 1) the boy is poor and he would not eat at this kind of place unless it is other's treat; 2) I pushed him to go with us which implied that I invited him so I should pay for him (from interviews with Alex).

For most Americans, their first impression about McDonald's is that it is not an expensive place to eat. As the American student in the above story said, "when I persuaded him to dine out with us, I was not even thinking about whether he could afford it or not because eating in McDonald's in the U.S. is very cheap." However, eating at McDonald's in China is more expensive than eating in a regular Chinese restaurant. It is a place for middle-class people to eat in China.

The second impression about McDonald's in American's mind is that it is one of the commonplace fast-food restaurants. The food it provides is standardized and rarely changes. As the rise in obesity in Western nations, McDonald's is widely criticized for providing unhealthy junk food. Therefore, Americans will very rarely select this place to treat their friends or expect to be treated there. However, in China, McDonald's is a symbol of American or western culture. Its food is exotically foreign enough to whet Chinese people's curiosity about the

outside world. And many people believe that McDonald's food is both healthy and nutritious since it comes from one of the most developed countries in the world. It is a popular place where young people treat each other, or parents hold parties for their kids.

Given that, it is clear that McDonald's in China has been endowed with new cultural meanings. But apparently in the case mentioned above, the American students encoded the meaning of McDonald's in American culture while the Chinese student interpreted it in Chinese culture and neither realized the discrepancies covered by the seemingly similarity.

Audience: Same Audience, Different Roles

A number of misunderstandings in this study can be explained by the different cultural meanings of audience.

First, Chinese and American cultures have different ideas on whether or not an audience is expected in a certain communicative event. The presence or absence of audience actually contributes specific meanings to the communication. For example, almost all American students have the experience of being scolded or compared with their fellow classmates by the Chinese teacher in front of the whole class, as the American student Ashley experienced,

Today my Chinese teacher said "you are not creative at all" to me in front of the whole class. This made me very mad. I argued back, "so who do you think is creative in our class?" The teacher pointed to another student and said, "He is more creative than you and you should learn from him." I felt as if he was trying to humiliate me in class. I cannot understand how he could say that as a teacher (from interviews with Ashley).

When I interviewed Ashley's Chinese teacher, the 60-year-old Chinese professor, he told me that Ashley was actually one of the best students in the class and he thought she was very smart and creative. However, for those good students, he believed that public criticism could better motivate them to study hard and make progress while compliments would make them conceited and self-satisfied, thus leading to less progress.

Similarly, just like scolding students in class, another student Amy noticed that Chinese parents like to punish their children in public. In American culture, if a child misbehaves in public, the parent usually take the child out of the area to punish them. The intention is to avoid public drama of the parent scolding the child. By contrast, traditional Chinese culture encourages parents to scold their children in public if they misbehave to show the audience that they are not spoiling their child.

It can be seen that it is determined by culture whether an audience is expected or not in a communicative event. The presence of audience when criticizing a student in Chinese culture is intended to urge him to progress by humiliation, while the absence of audience in American culture is intended to protect students' privacy and dignity.

Second, the role that an audience plays varies between Chinese and American cultures. Imagining the scenario where the couple of your neighbor erupts into a family dispute, what would you do? Most American students answered they might call 911 to ask the police to see what is happening rather than get themselves involved directly. But for most Chinese people, as Hu and Grove (1999) observed, they are very likely to come in to mediate. In Chinese culture, the neighbor plays the role of a middleman. And in many cases, the neighbor's mediation does help to calm down the dispute and will be highly appreciated by their neighbor. However, in American culture, the neighbor does not have such a role to play because their involvement will be viewed as encroaching upon their neighbor's personal prerogatives and privacy.

In the above case, the audience was playing the role of a middleman, which is observed more often in Chinese culture than in American culture. Issues such as price negotiation, complaints, or criticism which could bring awkwardness or intensity of interpersonal relationship are usually conveyed through the middleman. However, this Chinese face-saving strategy often annoys the Americans who believe that direct consultation without an audience between the two key parties is more likely to achieve their goals, as Tom reflected what he experienced,

Ms. Zhang was one of my Chinese teachers and she wanted me to tutor her son English. One day she invited me to dine out to talk about the details of tutoring like the time, price and other arrangement. When I arrived at the restaurant, I was surprised to see another teacher, Ms. Wu, whom I was more familiar with was also there. I was a little confused why she would be here. And I got more confused and annoyed as the conversation went on because Ms. Wu kept interrupting the conversations and talked most of time. At the end, I was so upset that I yelled at Ms. Wu that it was not her business why

she would like to be involved so much. Ms. Wu got embarrassed and also very angry. She left the table immediately and never talked with me since (From Tom's cultural journal).

Scripts: Same scripts, Different Meanings

Basically, scripts refer to what is said verbally and non-verbally in a communicative event including utterances, gestures, facial expressions and so on. People have learned and memorized a number of scripts in given situations through socializing in their base culture since their childhood. Scripts that are common and normal to the natives might sound irrational or make no sense to the people from another culture, because what to say and the meaning of the scripts are determined by culture. Cases of misunderstanding caused by scripts are abundant in this study. The major reason lies in the complicated relationship between the literal meaning of the scripts and the actual intention it embodies.

On one hand, the same meaning may be conveyed by different scripts. For example, many American students feel uncomfortable or confused when their Chinese friends meet them and ask questions such as “吃了没? [Have you eaten?]”, “去哪儿呢? [Where are you heading for?]”, “干什么去? [What are you going to do?]”. They do not understand why Chinese people are so curious about others' private lives and feel like their lives are under observation. Other times when their Chinese friends say words like “你在看书呢 [you are reading]”, “你在学习呢 [you are studying]”, they feel funny when Chinese describe the obvious fact and do not know how to react. However, these scripts will not surprise any Chinese because all these expression variations convey the same intention: it is different ways of greeting, just as Americans ask each other “how are you” which is rarely answered with precise information about one's well-being. Similarly, direct answers are not expected to these questions since they are not genuine questions.

On the other hand, the same scripts in different cultures might have different meanings. One typical instance is the meaning of “no”. The American student Carlos wrote his story about asking directions in China,

I have asked for directions to different places in Chinese hundreds of times. I have noticed that if a Chinese person does not know how to get somewhere they will still try and tell you. It usually turns into them saying: “go down the street, take a right, and ask someone there.” I have often been told to go a direction that is in the total wrong direction of my destination. My favorite experience was when I asked a man directions once, and he waved his hand in an all-encompassing arc and said “go that way” I have no idea why Chinese people cannot just say, “I don't know” (From Carlos's cultural journal).

Juefei Wang is an educational researcher from China and he compares the responses between Chinese and Americans when being asked to participate in his study. His findings show that some Vermonters would simply decline with a “No thank you, I'm not interested.” or refuse to answer certain questions saying, “I don't know.” However, in China, he never had any direct refusal for cooperation.

The frank American way of saying “I don't know” would not be acceptable by most Chinese...they would always try to save faces for me by not refusing me, yet they can always find a way not to give me anything valuable or anything at all (Wang, 1995, p.2).

Hu and Grove (1999) also mentioned that Americans would plainly say “I don't know” or “I cannot do that” like it is even when they know that a straightforward, truthful response will not be emotionally pleasing to the other person. But for Chinese, it has been observed that the word *no* is not only restrained but also avoided at all costs (Pye 1992; Ma 1996; Gao& Ting-Toomey 1998). The meaning of rejections, refusals, or denials is suggested in other words. For example, in business negotiations, the word *possible* was shown to denote *no* (Pys 1992). *Wen tibu da* (问题不大; “no big problem”), *yanjiuyanjiu* (研究研究; “we will consider it”) are examples of other ways of saying *no* in Chinese culture (Gao& Ting-Toomey 1998).

A Case Study in Applying the Five-element Analytical Model

Below is a typical misunderstanding case selected from the data and I will apply the model to analyze how this misunderstanding has occurred from all the five elements.

The Case

After having learned Chinese for three years in America, Jack went to a Chinese Professional Sports Team to practice martial arts, where he got to know one of his Chinese teammates, a 17-year-old Chinese girl named Fengying. Fengying came from a rural area of China and was a few years younger than him. After talking almost daily and dining out several times during the first several months, they became quite comfortable with each other. The following conversation took place when they were talking about a friend's wedding in a small restaurant.

[Chinese]	[English translation]
1. 美国人: 你有男朋友了吗?	1. Jack: Do you have a boyfriend?
2. 中国人: 没有, 我还太小。	2. Chinese: No. I am too young.
3. 美国人: 真的吗? 美国的高中生, 16,7岁开始约会非常正常。	3. Jack: Really? It is normal to begin dating at the age of sixteen or seventeen in the U.S.
4. 中国人: 在我们队里, 教练不准谈恋爱。	4. Chinese: Our coach won't allow it.
5. 美国人: 真的吗? 但教练	5. Jack: Really? But how could he know and why would he bother?
6. 中国人: 杰克, 我想我们最好还是只做朋友吧。我还太小, 不想谈恋爱。	6. Chinese: Jack, I would like us just to be friends. I am too young.
7. 美国人: 哦, 是吗, 我同意。	7. Jack: Yeah, I agree, I think so too.

In the interview, Jack said he merely picked up a topic for chatting. He did not realize that the Chinese girl misunderstood it as he was trying to develop a romantic relationship with her until the end of the conversation. Detailed examination of this conversation indicates that this misunderstanding is mainly caused by the different cultural meanings of the roles and scripts while the other three elements also contribute to the misunderstanding.

Application of the Model

First of all, the roles in this communication event are a young man and a young woman. The social restrictions and expectations to the appropriate behaviors of interacting with opposite gender vary greatly between the two cultures. First, in American culture, talking about romantic relationships is an acceptable topic between classmates with different gender, but it is sensitive and intention laden in some areas of China. Therefore, the topic is misleading between a young American man and a young Chinese woman. Second, in America, it is common for classmates of opposite gender to dine out or spend time together in pairs, and not have it mean they are in a romantic relationship. However, this is less common in China. Young people hang out together but usually in groups. A simple act in an American's eyes as inviting an individual to go for a walk or joining one for a cup of coffee may be fraught with implications in a Chinese person's eyes. As Jack reflected his previous interactions with the Chinese girl, "Sometimes other kids would smile at me when they saw the two of us talking together", "two or three times she and I even ate dinner together. Sometimes I thought others might think it strange we were going out together, but I didn't really pay attention to this idea as I was happy to have a friend."

Second, the scripts have different cultural implications. Asking the question "你有男朋友吗(Do you have a boyfriend)" happens to be a common way for a young man in China to express the intention of making amorous advances towards a young woman. Chinese people are more conservative and cautious in developing romantic relationships. Being turned down is considered to lose face. Therefore, compared to asking directly, this inquiry leaves more room for both sides to decide the next move. Meanwhile, all the three lines of the Chinese girl were actually expressing the same intention: trying to repel the American's "court" with different speech strategies. The first two lines, *I am too young* and *our coach won't allow it* were commonly used strategies to turn down a young man's advances. Saying one is too young or is not allowed by their family or other authorized persons are among the common excuses in Chinese society. Giving such excuse means to save the man's face by implying that her unavailability is not because she is not interested in the man but because of the external restrictions. The guy is supposed to understand this and stop. However, these scripts will never be used as excuses in American culture because of the different socio-cultural customs. Therefore, the American man had no clue how to get the true meaning behind the scripts. The American man only grasped the meaning of the last line from the girl, *Jack, I would like us just to be friends*, because this script has the shared underlying meaning in the two cultures: I would like us to be friends, but I do not want to be your girlfriend.

Third, there is no audience in this communication event, which makes the scripts more intention-laden and indirectly contributes to the misunderstanding. The script of asking whether one has a boyfriend can be interpreted as either proposing a romantic relationship or initiating a casual chat. However, not having an audience makes it more private and ambiguous. If there would be a third party present or the conversation was among a group of friends, the girl might have interpreted it as a casual chat since it is not common to propose a romantic relationship publicly.

Fourth, the time of the conversation is when they were talking about a mutual friend's wedding, which is also open to different interpretations. For the Young American man, it is good timing to initiate the topic of love, but in the mind of the Chinese girl, it is good timing to propose the romantic relationship.

Fifth, the place where the misunderstanding occurred is in a restaurant. Eating in a restaurant rather than the students' dining hall on campus is more expensive and more formal, which makes it a perfect place for romance to happen in the Chinese girl's mind. However, the young American man thought it is common to dine out due to their different socio-economic levels and eating habits. If the place would be in the school library or a more academic environment, this topic might not have led to a misunderstanding.

It is clearly indicated that the aforementioned misunderstanding is caused by the collective influence of all the five elements, but it does not mean that all the five elements always simultaneously and equally trigger misunderstanding in every case. One element might be more prominent and contribute more than other ones in some cases. Moreover, in everyday interactions the five elements potentially generating misunderstanding interact, either reinforce or cancel each other. A common joke between Chinese people might lead to a misunderstanding when it is between a Chinese and an American. A misinterpretation of the time or place can be automatically corrected by the close relationship between interlocutors. Changes of any of the five elements might lead to different communicative result. Therefore, all the five elements should be taken into consideration comprehensively when analyzing intercultural misunderstanding cases.

Conclusion

As can be seen from the above discussion that all the five elements in an intercultural communication event are involved in the construction of meaning and each of the elements has culture-bound divergent meanings. In intercultural communication, it is often those seemingly same while actually different elements that lead to misunderstandings. Failing to recognize the underlying cultural divergences and interacting with each other according to one's base cultural norms is the major reason for misunderstanding in intercultural communication. By taking all these issues into consideration, this five-element analytic model highlights the key elements in a communicative event and provides intercultural practitioners a practical tool to analyze the complicated reasons caused by culture in intercultural misunderstandings.

Although the five-element analytical model provides a new perspective to examine the causes of misunderstanding, this study has some limitations. First, it is a generalized framework for the analysis of misunderstanding. To make it a more solid work, deeper examination of the influence of culture on each of the five elements with more cases in wider communication contexts is needed. Second, while the twenty American participants provided a large amount of cases of misunderstandings for this study, the varieties in their age, gender, personality, and background information and the impacts these varieties exert on communication were not given detailed analysis. Future studies could select fewer participants for deeper and more comprehensive analysis. Third, cases of misunderstanding collected in this study are those perceived by Americans when communicating in Chinese language with Chinese people. Future research can also gather cases of misunderstanding that are perceived by Chinese when communicating with Americans in order to reveal the cultural differences between Chinese and Americans from a different perspective.

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