

Proverbs Reveal Culture Diversity

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Abstract

Through the analysis of property of culture and proverb, it can be known that proverb can help one to understand a culture. The way proverb reveals culture diversity can be connected with the patterns of value dimension, which conveys the information of a culture's deep meaning. From the perspective of uncertainty-avoidance, it can be seen that although Ireland and America both are low-uncertainty-avoidance cultures, they mainly have different life attitudes, because that Americans put more emphasis on competition. From the perspective of high-context and low-context, the text provides the concepts of non-verbal communication and two layers of meaning of silence. And under this background, the paper analyzes several culture patterns, especially America and Japan. From the perspective of power-distance, it reveals the different views on equality between Arab and America, and analyzes the reasons of culture tradition. However, although culture diversity mainly reveals the culture difference, there are common aspects between cultures.

Key words: Culture and proverb; Culture tradition; Culture diversity

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INTRODUCTION

A lot of efforts have been made towards the role of proverbs in intercultural communication study. And among all the papers and books which are written to

reveal the relationships between proverbs and cultures, much more emphasis were put upon the role of proverbs either in the sphere of comparative study between two specific cultures or the translation field, while there is relatively few study on the general role of proverbs in revealing culture diversity. This paper tries to show the role of proverbs in revealing culture diversity through the analysis of proverbs in different cultures. Thus it provides perspective to know the specific characteristics in different cultures and may stimulate the interests of people who are curious in culture diversity and get a better way in cross-cultural communication.

1. CULTURE AND CULTURE DIVERSITY

1.1 Understanding Culture

The word culture has numerous meanings. An early definition was provided by E. B. Tylor (1967), who treated culture as a complex whole of social traditions and as prerequisite for one to be a member of the society. Culture can be a set of fundamental ideas, practices, and experiences of a group of people that are symbolically transmitted generation to generation through a learning process. Culture may as well refer to beliefs, norms, and attitudes that are used to guide one's behaviors and to solve human problems. Moreover, one can look at culture from an interpretative and performance perspective by viewing it as a system of expressive practices and mutual meanings associated with one's behaviors.

Maybe Geert Hofstede, researcher in intercultural communication, provides a clearer concept; he refers to culture as "the software of the mind." Culture is like Dos or UNIX or Windows. The metaphor of windows very appealing to describe culture: culture can be thought of as a mental set of windows through which all of life is viewed. These windows vary a bit from individual to individual within a society, but they share important,

useful characteristics with all members of a society. Thus, the omnipresent quality of culture leads Hall, another researcher in intercultural communication, concludes that “there is not one aspect of human life that is not touched and altered by culture.”

Although the concept of culture seems complex, culture is learned. And because human behavior is culturally based, culture deals with the way people live; all need to do is learning culture through different elements or aspects of culture.

1.2 Proverb and Culture

A proverb is like a swift horse

—The Yoruba of Africa believe that people are not qualified to take part in communal discussions unless they are able to quote the proverbs relevant to each situation. The “swift horse” proverb simply underscores the importance of proverbs to this culture.

A proverb is a saying that expresses a common truth. It deals with truth simply and concretely and teaches the listener a lesson. It can help to understand a culture and can help to determine if it is a group- or individual-oriented culture. It may also help in understanding what is desired and undesired as well as what is considered correct or incorrect in the culture. (Ferraro, 1990)

In nearly every culture, proverbs, communicated in colorful and vivid language, offer an important set of instructions for members to follow. These “words of wisdom” endure, so that each generation learns about what a culture deems significant. As Seidensticker notes, “They say things that people think important in ways that people remember. They express common concerns.” Hence, “proverbs are compact treaties on the values of culture.” (Steidensticker, 1987). So if a culture symbol is a word or an object that represents something in the culture, then we can see proverb as a certain kind of culture symbol.

1.3 The Necessity of Culture Diversity

*Know thyself, know thine enemies;
One hundred battles, one hundred victories.*

—Sun Tsu, Chinese martial philosopher

The words above reveal the importance of knowing diversities in human interactions when in battle. It seems important in nowadays also. Somehow we need to learn, in Edward Hall’s words, to “accept the fact that there are many roads to truth and no culture has a corner on the path is better equipped than others to search for it.” We can learn more with Hofstede’s advice: “The principle of surviving in a multicultural world is that one does not need to think, feel, and act in the same way in order to agree on practical issues and to cooperate.” We can agree to be different and to allow for diversity. We can celebrate our own culture in terms of how it is or is not like another, and celebrate other cultures because they are different or are not. The more we know about other cultures the

more we will know about our own. And, especially when confronted with another view of the universe, humankind takes refuge in the comfort of the familiar. Then knowing the diversity of culture helps us understanding more about the outside world as well as ourselves.

2 PROVERBS RELATES TO CULTURE THROUGH THREE PERSPECTIVES

Different proverbs in different countries seek through some basic values in different cultures. Proverbs are just like a mirror that will reflect certain properties of cultures.

2.1 Different Values and Life Attitudes Reflect Culture Diversity

—From the perspective of uncertainty-avoidance

Life should be a dance, not a race

—Irish proverb

A horse never runs so fast as when he has other horses to catch up and outpace.

—Roman philosopher Ovid

If at first you don’t succeed, try, try, and try again.

—American proverb

Uncertainty-avoidance refers to the degree to which members of a culture try to avoid uncertainty. High uncertainty avoidance cultures are more inclined to avoid uncertainty and ambiguity, which indicates that they are in higher levels of anxiety and energy release. On the contrary, low uncertainty avoidance cultures have lower stress levels, and they are much better at taking risks than high uncertainty avoidance cultures. Hofstede contends that high uncertainty avoidance cultures believe that “what is different is dangerous.”, and low uncertainty avoidance cultures believe that “what is different is curious.” Therefore, members of low uncertainty avoidance cultures are less tense and more relaxed.

The first proverb definitely is suitable for low uncertainty avoidance cultures not only for Irish people. In the table of ranking of forty countries or regions on uncertainty avoidance by Geert Hofstede, the U.S ranks at 32 and Ireland ranks at 36. So both belong to the group of low uncertainty avoidance cultures. However, the Americans don’t seem as leisure as Irish people. Although Americans are easily to take risks and flexible, they just don’t have as much time as the Irish people to “dance”. For most of the time they may be more suitable to “race”. So the last two proverbs seem more appropriate for American, because for Americans, leisure may be a major reward of hard work. As the words of the American poet and philosopher George Santayana shows: “To the art of working well a civilized race would add the art of playing well.” So play is something they have earned for Americans. This may have something to do with their history. Ireland is a European country; it embraces the European tradition of gentle, elegant and so on. America is comparatively a new country, and its pace of life is

much quicker. And competition is part of an American's life from early childhood on. The competitive nature is encouraged in the United States. Young people are even advised that if they lose and it does not bother them, there is something wrong with them. So it is clear for Americans that they need to "outpace" all the other horses.

Then although America and Ireland both belong to the group of low uncertainty avoidance, for Irish people, life is much more like a dance, while for Americans, life is much more like a race.

Even if the bridge be made of stone, make sure it is safe. This Korean saying expressed the wisdom of going slowly and being cautious and reflective. In this aspect, Korea must belong to the high uncertainty avoidance group.

2.2 Non-Verbal Communication Reflects Culture Diversity

—From the perspective of high-context and low-context

Silence is also speech

—An African proverb

In human intercourse the tragedy begins not when there is misunderstanding about words, but when silence is not understood.

—Henry David Thoreau

The proverb and sentence mentioned above bring out the subject of silence. Actually silence is a part of nonverbal communication. Nonverbal communication is communication that conveys meaning without words. "It is a subtle and mostly spontaneous and unconscious process in which we are not aware of." (Andersen, 1986). Researchers have estimated that 85 percent of all communication is nonverbal, with the importance of this type of communication varying widely across cultures. In fact, research indicates that we will believe nonverbal message instead of verbal ones when the two contradict each other. So nonverbal communication is important. First, we use the actions of others to learn about their affective or emotional states. Second, it is usually responsible for first impressions and those initial messages usually influence the perception of everything else that follows. Many scholars believe that nonverbal signals are part of a universally recognized and understood code.

The squeaky wheel gets the grease.

—U.S. proverb

Still water runs deep.

—Japan proverb

Empty cans clatter the loudest

—Indonesian proverb

The U.S. proverb implies that the person who stands out and is the most vocal will be rewarded. Because Americans usually hold that expressing one's opinion as openly and forcefully as possible is an admirable trait. While the Japan proverb conceals that the Japanese believe that a person who is quiet and spends more time listening than speaking is more credible because they

regard constant talking as a sign of shallowness.

Sometimes silence—seeming the opposite of communication—sends a powerful message. The differences in the use of silence can best be examined by looking at high-context and low-context cultures. Low-context cultures place less attention on the context of a communication (such as implied meaning or nonverbal messages), they rely on explicit verbal messages. In low-context cultures, the verbal message contains most of the information; they expect messages to be detailed, clear-cut, and definite. On the contrary, high-context cultures emphasize the context in which a communication takes place; they pay a great deal of attention to implicit, nonverbal messages. In high-context cultures, meaning is not necessarily contained in words, information is provided through gestures, the use of space, and even silence, therefore, low-context cultures view silence as communication gone wrong. To them it indicates a rupture has occurred in the communication process. Silence is ambiguous, it must be interpreted, and the interpretation of silence is more difficult than the interpretation of words. So silence does not fit with the low-context culture which emphasizes precision and clarity. And people in high-context cultures perceive low-context people, who rely primarily on verbal messages, as less credible. They believe that silence often sends a better message than words.

Asia, Arab and Mediterranean cultures belong to high-context culture while American, German, Swiss and Scandinavian cultures belong to the category of low-context culture. From this aspect, silence has two layers of meanings. First, silence is negative and indicates confusion: because Euro-Americans and northern Europeans expect a certain rhythm and cadence of statement and response, they may interpret silence as confusion about the statement, as a negative response to the proposed idea, or even as anger at the speaker or the proposal. Second, silence is positive and indicates respect. People from Asian cultures use silence to indicate respect for the other speaker, consideration for the idea the speaker has presented, and time to weigh the pros and cons of the statement and form a thoughtful response.

In this way, it is clearly that America is a culture of low-context while Japan is a high-context culture. Back to the proverbs mentioned above, it will be more easily to understand the differences they reveal. The Japanese believe that silence is preferable to conversation. It is through silence that one can discover the truth inside oneself. Contemplation and meditation take place in silence. There is a view in Japanese culture that words contaminate understanding. Reading another person's inner core, a kind of communication without words, can take place only in silence. Most of the discussion in Japanese negotiations is in groups, and much is said through silence, facial expressions, and body gestures

among the Japanese team. A study by Japanese scholars shows that silence is a key to success for Japanese men, and over 60 percent of Japanese businesswomen said that they prefer to marry silent men. So while Westerners typically view silence as a gap in conversation, the Japanese believe that silence is part of conversation.

—*Nothing done with intelligence is done without speech.* This Greek saying emphasizes the importance of talk as a means of conversation.

—*A man's tongue is his sword.* With this saying, Arabs are taught to value words and use them in a powerful and forceful manner.

2.3 Self-Evaluation Reflect Culture Diversity

—From the perspective of power-distance

The eyes cannot rise above the eyebrow

—Arab proverb

God helps those who help themselves

—Benjamin Franklin

He who runs alone will win the race.

—America proverb

People who live in Arab countries(except Egypt) believe that some people are born to lead and others to follow, so authoritarian relationships—from those with the ruling family to those with the leaders of the church—are accepted. The Arab proverb clearly demonstrates this accepting attitude. “One does not make the wind but is blown by it.” This saying, found in many Asian cultures, suggests that people are guided by fate rather than by their own devices. “A zebra does not despise its stripes.” From the Maasai of Africa, this saying expressed the value of accepting things as they are, of accepting oneself as one is, and of not envying others. On the contrary, the America proverbs convey that American’s emphasis on oneself, and this kind of emphasis closely relates to the American value of equality, which is emphasized in everything from government (everyone has the right to vote) to social relationships (“Just call me by my first name”). Americans believe that all people have a right to succeed in life and that the state, through laws and educational opportunities, should ensure that right.

This can be explained through the perspective of “power-distance”. According to Hofstede’s value dimensions, people in high-power-distance countries believe that power and authority are essential parts of life. This can be interpreted that in these cultures, members hold the opinion that people are not equal in this world and that everybody has a rightful place. Different from this, low-power-distance cultures hold the opinion that inequality in society should be minimized. People in these cultures believe that they are close to power and should have access to that power. To them, a hierarchy is an inequality of roles established for convenience. Therefore, it is clear that many Asian countries and Arab countries are high-power-distance countries while America is a low-power-distance culture.

Further speaking, America’s view on equality has great relationships with America’s individualism. For culture in that value the individual believe that all people should have equal rights and complete control over their destiny. While this kind of individualism has something to do with its own history. The early settlers of America came to the new land to establish colonies that were free from the controls existed in European world. They wanted to escape the controls placed on their lives by kings and governments, priests and churches. The establishment of a new nation believed that the power to govern should lie in the hands of people. And the written of the constitution greatly limited the power of the noble. The historic decisions made by those first settlers have had a profound effect on the shaping of the American character. They have exerted great influence on the emphasis of the role of individual. Maybe just like the advice offered by the Latin poet Quintus Ennius two hundred years before Christ: “Do not expect stranger to do for you what you can do for yourself.” Thus it clearly spelled out the independent nature of the individual. And think of the power of the concept in the words of former Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter: “Anybody who is any good is different than anybody else,” while the emphasis was put on the individualism, it indicates the value of equality at the same time. American’s values on individualism and equality are closely connected to each other.

On the context of individualism, the value Americans place on individualism, self-reliance and independence is perceived by persons of different cultures as being self-centered. While the Chinese, Malaysians and Japanese’s concern with following family traditions and with respecting the opinions of their parents is perceived as sign of weakness and indecisiveness by Americans.

CONCLUSION

Think three times before you act.

—Confucian proverb

What’s the use of running if you’re not on the right road?

—Germany proverb

Cultures have many layers of meanings, while proverb provides only a small part to understand culture. However, it does offer a kind of window to seek through the outside world—the culture diversity. And in this way, proverb is a good way to analyze what the other kind of culture is and why it is being so. At the same time, proverb provides important information of the culture pattern or culture value orientation.

However, although this text mainly concerns the analysis of culture diversity through proverbs, cultures do have common points. It is just like that the proverbs from China and Germany both reveal the importance of good thinking. And because of culture diversity, conclusions about different cultures are generalized observations, not ironclad rules.

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