

A Study of the Differences between Chinese and Western Addressing Terms in Sociolinguistics

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Abstract: Language is an important aspect of a country's culture. Various ethnicities use various addressing terms. This difference is due to the various social terms. As a result, English learners should pay attention to historical knowledge while learning a language in order to communicate effectively across cultures.

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1. Introduction

As China's international reputation develops, more people are becoming aware of the cultural differences that exist between China and other countries. The addressing terms used in Western addressing are quite straightforward. A simple "Miss" can be used to address any woman, however in China, women are referred to as "nvshi," "xiaojie," "meinv," "guniang," and "guinv," etc. Another example is the western term "grandfather," which refers to both mother and fathers' father, but in China is referred to as "yeye," "waigong," (both in Chinese can be directly separated from the kinship), dialect is referred to as "waiye" (Shaanbei dialect). The term "teacher" was once only used to refer to a teacher, but it is now widely used in the training industry, particularly in sales, where instructors or "XX" teachers are preferred. This paper analyzes the current situation of addressing terms, hoping to make a basic classification of the use of addressing terms and provide some reference to the related research.

2. Addressing Terms

According to the Modern Chinese Dictionary, appellation means "the name that people get from their relations with relatives and others, as well as from their identity, occupation, etc." An appellation is both a linguistic phenomenon, as well as a social and cultural phenomenon. In any language, addressing terms play an important role in social etiquette.

2.1. The appellation of relatives

The appellation of relatives refers to the appellation of the members of the relatives and their relationship, which is based on the blood relatives as well as by marriage. It is a sign of the relationship between the relative and the person, which is centered on the person. In modern Chinese, most kinship terms can be used to indicate one's identity, such as seniority (Father: uncle; peer: brother, sister, cousin), paternal or maternal line (aunt), lineal or paratactic line (grandson, nephew), the age (uncle, brother) and blood relatives or in-laws (brother, sister, sister-in-law, brother-in-law).

2.2. Social appellation

The social appellation refers to the appellation custom which reflects the relationship between people in the social life except the kinship appellation. Social appellation is divided into non-relative appellation and contextual appellation. Non-relative appellation is a kind of appellation which means interpersonal relationship except the appellation which means kinship in social life.

3. The Present Situation of the use of Addressing Terms

Cheng Yulan (2004) pointed out that different ethnic groups have different cultures ^[1]. Similarly, the cultures and social customs of different ethnic groups are reflected in the language of the ethnic group. Different ethnic groups have their own addressing terms, its' similarities and differences show the differences between Chinese and American cultures.

Zhao hongmei (2014) points out that social addressing terms play an important role in daily communication ^[2]. In her paper, she uses a questionnaire to make a contrastive analysis of the use of social addressing terms in Chinese and American contexts from the perspective of politeness strategies, it is hoped to help foreign language learners to carry out successful cross-cultural communication.

Chen Shi (2021) pointed out in her paper that the generalization of the term "teacher" has shown the phenomenon of the absence of social addressing terms ^[3]. She believed that the origins of the generalized term "teacher" should be studied, and it was discovered that the Chinese traditional concept of respecting teachers is the intellectual basis for the generalization of the appellation "teacher." In the end, she pointed out that in the future, when people use the term "teacher," they should accurately locate its specific connotation.

4. Classification of Addressing Terms

4.1. Kinship terms

In traditional Chinese culture, "nainai" means the mother of the baby's father. In the Shaanbei dialect, it is called "niania" or "nuenue" whereas, "waipo" refers to the mother of the baby's mother. In northern China, it is usually referred to as "laolao," meanwhile the word "waipo" is often used in the south. The Shaanbei dialect uses "popo," and in the Guanzhong dialect (Shaanxi province), uses "po." However, in English, the two terms are unified as "Grandmother." In Chinese, "shushu," "baibai" and "jiujiu" refer to different relatives, but in English they refer to as the "uncle." Actually, China is influenced by moral and ethical concepts so Chinese people must choose proper appellations according to their level of seniority. In the west, equality is seen as necessary, thus in comparison, we can better understand the addressing terms of English relatives and strengthen our cross-cultural communication.

"Lianjin" in Chinese is represented in Shaanbei dialect as "tiaodan," "tiao" and "dan" are closely connected, which means the close relationship between them is indispensable, also it reflects the importance of family concept in Chinese traditional culture. In English, such a relationship is usually called "brother-in-law" or "in-laws." Literally, it is a legal relationship, not a kinship relationship, which reflects the difference between Chinese and western concepts of family, China pays attention to the long-term development of the family, the west pays more attention to the development of their own small family, or more attention to personal value.

4.2. Social terms

In the 1970s, Chinese societies used to refer to each other as "tongzhi." Today, "tongzhi" implies that the man is gay which leads to interpersonal misunderstanding. In the 1990s, Chinese society addressed random women as "xiaojie," however, calling a woman "xiaojie" today is misleading because "xiaojie" means the girl may be a sex trafficker. From 2010 till now, "meinv" is the most common word used to address a girl,

no matter if she is tall or short or fat or thin or beautiful or ugly. From 2018 till now, the most commonly used address is “xiaojiejie,” if addressed a woman “xiaojiejie” in her 30s, this woman will feel very young. However in daily life, some young people always make mistakes when they call their older colleagues and friends. For example, when they are in their 20s, they call their 30-year-old sister “ayi” or “Surname + sister.” Thus, in social addressing term we need to pay attention to whether it is correctly addressed. In the Shaanbei dialect, young women are called “nvnv,” “nvzi” and “nvwawa,” married women and middle-aged women are called “poyi,” and older women are called “laopo.” Young men are called “housheng,” old men are called “laohan,” but middle-aged men do not have a fixed address. Taobao has become a part of our lives, where the terms often used by sellers is “qin.” “Qin” can refer to men, women, teenagers, middle-aged and elderly people, although it is very formalistic, it has a psychological effect on clients, causing them to want to buy things.

In English, random women are always addressed as “Miss.” We normally address a woman as “Mrs” if we know her. As China is a humanitarian society with a strict social hierarchy, men will address her as “Ms.” Thus, people’s relationships have been established. This is because the West is more concerned with personal value, social addressing is relatively straightforward.

4.3. Honorific and humble words

In interpersonal communication, the Chinese cultural tradition requires people to use honorifics and modest terms to lower oneself as much as possible and to raise others to show modesty, respect, and politeness, etc. In Chinese, the most common form of address is “nin,” which is always used when meeting someone for the first time. Both “nin” and “ni” mean “you.” For example, Chinese speakers often say “Respected...,” whereas “Ladies and gentlemen” is more commonly used in English, reflecting the cultural distinctions between China and the west.

4.4. “Teacher” is a generic term

In China, respect for teachers and the transmission of traditional ideas from generation to generation are important. Ji Yingchao (2016) points out in his paper that the term “teacher” is interpreted by the Modern Chinese Dictionary (1996) as referring respectfully to a person who conveys culture and technology^[4]. In 2002, the term “teacher” was defined as “person who respectfully refers to a person who imparts culture or technology.” In 2012, the term “teacher” was defined as “a person who respectfully refers to a teacher who imparts culture or technology or who is worth learning in a certain way.” In recent years, the rapid development of pyramid schemes has promoted the generalization of the term “teacher,” in which each salesperson appears to the target customer as a “teacher” in order to improve their own authority and credibility, hence facilitating the transaction’s completion. In addition, wechat business establishes a teacher’s image and gain profits, whereas consumers are willing to put themselves in the student position.

5. Conclusion

The differences between Chinese and American appellations are not accidental. They are the products of two different types of cultures under different social terms. They are all marked with the historical brand of each nation’s culture. Language is the reflection of a national culture that has influenced our worldview, values, and approach on life. As a result, when we learn a national language, we also learn culture, and we should pay special attention to historical knowledge in order to communicate effectively across cultures.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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