

# Study on Addressing Terms and Relevant Culture in America and China

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**Abstract**—Language is not only the key to understand the culture, but also the obvious characteristic to label the culture. One kind of language may contain its special words or terms to indicate some particular matters in its own culture. It is the special words that revealed the various kinds of customs and social commitment. In order to learn culture very well, everyone should focus on the analysis of language. Addressing Terms has significant social functions: the recognition of the social identity, the social position, the role of the addressee and of the interrelations between the addresser and the addressee. This study is based on American address terms and Chinese address terms. Through these features, we can bright the differences of the two cultures to light.

**Index Terms**—language, culture, addressing terms

## I. INTRODUCTION

A language expresses cultural reality and embodies cultural identity. If one language has certain words to describe things or make distinctions, while another language lacks similar words, then speakers of the first language will find it easier to talk about those things and to perceive the differences in their environment.

In communications, addressing someone is a very important social intercourse. Addressing has significant social functions: the recognition of the social identity, the social position, the role of the addressee and of the interrelations between the addresser and the addressee. It can establish, maintain and reinforce all kinds of interpersonal relations. We can use title (T), first name (FN), last name (LN), nickname, combination of these, or nothing to address someone.

In general, address terms fall into four groups: kinship terms, social titles (genetic titles, official titles and occupational titles), names and demonstrative pronouns. In this paper, we mainly discuss kinship terms, genetic titles and official titles.

The choice of address terms is governed by a variety of social factors: the particular occasion, the social status or ranks, sex, age, family relationship, occupational hierarchy, race or transactional status. When family ties are extremely strong, kinship terms will play an important role in family and society. When racial or social rank is important in society, the address terms that show respect and hierarchy will be preferred; while in society which claims to be egalitarian, address terms may not be considered so important. Therefore, there is a close relation between address terms and culture.

This study is based on American address terms and Chinese address terms. Through these features, we can bright the differences of the two cultures to light.

## II. KINSHIP TERMS, GENETIC TITLES AND OFFICIAL TITLES IN AMERICA AND CHINA

The modern system of address terms in China developed on the basis of ancient or traditional system. It inherited the tradition of honorific titles and self-depreciatory titles, and discarded many address terms which designated class relations in feudal society. Compared with China, English-speaking countries have less complicated address terms. Address terms in English-speaking countries appeared first in Britain, and then spread to the United States, Canada, Australia and other former British colonies. With the development of history, these countries also added new contents and regional features to address terms. In this part, kinship terms, genetic titles and official titles in America and China will be introduced.

### A. Kinship Terms

Samovar argues that we are born into a family, mature in a family, form new family and leave them at our death. Family life is a universal human experience. (Stefani, 2000). It is the family that tells us who we are and what groups we belong to.

Kinship terms describe how people refer to relatives by direct or indirect blood and marriage. In the system of address terms, kinship term is the most important one that has the closest relation with people, which generally fall into four groups: nuclear family kinship terms, extended family kinship terms, marital relations kinship terms, and law kinship terms. America and China belong to different systems of kinship terms.

American system of kinship terms belongs to Eskimo system which puts emphasis on the nuclear family. In this system, there are only clear distinctions between members in the nuclear family, while the distinction between members in the extended family is obscure. There is no distinction between the maternal grandparents and paternal grandparents.

The system of kinship terms in China belongs to Sultan system that gives more weight to males than females and has terms for both paternal and maternal sides; both the nuclear family and the extended family are emphasized. Since the kinship system in China is generation- and age- oriented one, there are hierarchical relationships between family members. These can be reflected in the kinship terms.

There are distinctive terms for relatives in paternal side and maternal side. Father's father is called *yéye* or *zǔfù*; father's mother is called *nǎinai* or *zǔmǔ*. Mother's father is called *lǎoye* or *wàigōng*; mother's mother is called *lǎolǎo* or *wàipó*. Mother's sister is called *yímā* and father's sister is called *gūmā*, while in America they both can be called aunt. In the paternal side, father's elder brother and younger brother have different terms. The former is called *bófù*, while the latter is called *shūfù*. But in the maternal side, there is no such distinction. This indicates the hierarchical relationship between family members, and also reflects the superior position of men in family life.

In Chinese kinship terms, there are terms designating the relationship between family members that are relatives by marriage, not by blood. For example, *zhóuli* is used to indicate wives of brothers; *sǎozi* designates elder brother's wife, while *dimèi* designates younger brother's wife. But in America, there are no specific terms to designate this kind of relationship.

Kinship terms in China can be used with people who are obviously not kin by any of the criteria, which is another feature of Chinese kinship terms. The Chinese kinship terms which are equivalent to uncle, aunt, grandma or grandpa are used in many social intercourses. For example, children use *shushu* to address male friend of their friend. In social intercourse, no matter formal or informal, in non-relatives in English-speaking countries, children are taught to address stranger by Mister or Madam.

Social titles refer to address people according to their social positions, such as the occupation, academic rank, and the title of a technical or professional post. Social titles include genetic titles, official titles and occupational titles.

Social titles stemmed from social structure and personal relation. Some titles are different in pronunciation, but they are similar in the meaning. They are genetic titles. Genetic titles refer to address people in any social positions regardless of occupation or academic rank.

Sir and Madam is a set of respectful title. In fact, they stemmed from two sets of respectful titles used for feudal aristocrats: Sir and Lady; Monsieur and Madame.

Generally speaking, Sir and Madam cannot be used with the surname. Sir is used for the inferior to the superior, the descendant to the ancestor, the soldier to the commander, the student to the teacher, and the shop assistant to the male customer. Madam is the respectful title for women. In addition, in business letters, people use Sir or Madam to address unfamiliar men or women, such as Dear Sir or Dear Madam. Sir can be combined with the full name or the given name, but not the surname. When Sir is used with the full name or the given name, it loses its original meaning but indicates the rank of nobility, such as, Sir John White or Sir John. Madam is mainly used with the surname or official titles, such as Madam Smith, or Madam Ambassador.

Lady is another address term for women. Before a conference, we usually say, "Ladies and Gentlemen." Lady is usually combined with the lady's surname, say, Lady Smith. It can also be used with official titles, such as Lady President. As a respectful title, the single and plural forms of Lady can be used on its own.

Mr. and Mrs. is another set of respectful title. Mr. is the abbreviation of Mister, and Mister is changed from Master. Mrs. is the abbreviation of Mistress. Mr. and Mrs. can be used with the surname or the full name, but not the first name, such as Mr. John Smith, Mr. Smith or Mrs. Smith.

Mr. is usually used for people without official titles. However, sometimes it can also be used with official titles, place names, nation names, sports or occupation, such as Mr. President, Mr. America or Mr. Baseball. Mr. can also be used on its own, written as Mister. For example, "Hey, Mister, you dropped your wallet."

Mrs. is usually used for married women. It is used with the husband's surname, such as Mrs. White. Mrs. can be used with place names, nation names, sports or occupation, such as Mrs. America. Mrs. can also be used on its own, written as Missis that is usually used with "the" to indicate housewives.

Miss, used for single women, stemmed from Mistress. Miss is usually used with the surname and the full name, and it can also be used with place names or an activity to mean the woman in one place or an activity, such as Miss America or Miss Industry, 1971. Generally speaking, Miss cannot be combined with the first name, however, in American South, this usage is acceptable, such as Miss Lillian. This new usage expresses the respect and intimacy to the addressee.

In recent years, females feel that by taking their husband's surname they lose their own identity. Therefore, a new title appeared: Ms. Ms. is used for any woman without the indication of the marital status.

#### B. Genetic Titles in China.

Xiānshēng appeared in ancient times. In the past, it was used to address old people with high morality. Gradually it developed into a genetic title. After the Liberation, xiānshēng was equivalent to teacher. It was also used to address members of democratic parties, patriotic personages, learned people, foreign guests and overseas Chinese.

Tàitai was used for married women, and it was also the symmetrical term to xiānshēng. Xiǎojiě is the genetic title for unmarried women. Another two genetic titles for women are fūren and nǚshi. The former was for married women.

Xiǎojiě is widespread used in China for young ladies. It can be found in the service trades and the social intercourse. However, unlike in America, we cannot address an old woman with Xiǎojiě in China, which will be regarded as degradation of her status, and will cause unhappiness.

Tóngzhi is another genetic title used for all people regardless of sex, position or marital status. This address term puts everyone on an equal footing that implies no social or economic differences. It can be used in situations that are neutral where there are no clear indications of power and no familiarity between the addresser and the addressee, such as to an unknown stranger or to someone whose occupation carries with it no title.

#### C. Official Titles

Official titles refer to address people according to their titles of technical or professional post. They are usually used by the inferior to the superior, sometimes by the superior to the inferior.

In English-speaking countries, people with official titles prefer official titles + LN to Sir + LN, for Sir is used for ordinary people or people without official titles in academic field. Many Chinese use Sir + LN to address Westerners in academic field. It is regarded as disrespect and deliberate degradation of the addressee. In fact, Sir, equivalent to xiānshēng in Chinese, is regarded as respectful title by Chinese.

In academic field, Professor, Doctor are two common official titles. Doctor and Professor cannot be used on their own. They must be combined with the last name, such as Professor Davis or Doctor White. Doctor is not only an official title but also a respectful title. Only those who get the degree of Medical Doctor (MD) can be addressed by Doctor on its own, while those without the degree of MD can only be addressed by Doctor + LN.

Some other official titles are usually used in the royal family, the government, the military, the religion or the law circle, such as, Queen Elizabeth, Senator Brown, General Patten, Father Bright or Judge Harley. In the above official titles, Father, General, Colonel, etc, can be used on their own. Your Majesty, His Majesty or Her Majesty is used to address King or Queen; Your Highness is used to address Prince or Princess; Your Honor is used to address judge.

Compared with America, official titles in China are more common. Addressing people by official titles is very popular in China. There are a lot of official titles in China, in the administrative department, there is zhǔxí(chairman), zǒnglǐ(prime minister), bùzhǎng(minister), etc. In the military, there is sīlǐng(commander), jūnzhǎng(arm commander), shīzhǎng(division commander), etc. In academic and technical field, there is jiàoshòu(Professor), jiǎngshī(Lecturer), gōngchéngshī(engineer), etc.

These official titles can be used on their own. They can also be used together with the surname or the full name and be placed after it.

#### D. Other Address Terms

Besides the above address terms, there are many other address terms in America and China.

In America, the universal use is to call someone by his or her first name, which is the indication of intimacy and familiarity. In some American universities, teachers can even be called by their names without the feeling of intrusion and impoliteness. This common practice reflects people's expectation of close relationship between each other. However, it is not proper to call people by their first names who are with titles or high positions, such as governor or diplomat. It is safer to use the title + LN at first.

In China, there is widespread use of lǎo (old) and xiǎo (little) in conjunction with last names as polite forms. They are used not only between intimates but also to mark social distinctions between non-intimates. They have the connotation of equality, kind and affection. An inferior may address a superior by lǎo + LN, such as lǎo wáng. Another form of address used to elderly officials and scholars is LN + lǎo, such as wáng lǎo.

Sometimes, when we are in doubt as to how to address another, we can actually avoid the difficulty by not using any address terms at all, that is  $\emptyset$ use. This phenomenon can be found in both America and China. In many cases, the wrong use of address terms is worse than  $\emptyset$ use. Therefore, people prefer  $\emptyset$ use when they are not certain about one's age, social status, occupation or marital status.  $\emptyset$ use is a safer way in the communication.

### III. DIFFERENT CULTURES VALUES IN AMERICA AND CHINA

Language is the guide for the understanding of culture. One can find out the cultural peculiarities through the language. The differences of address terms between America and China root in the different cultures. These cultural

diversities include values, intentions and the attitude towards the world. There are two kinds of cultural values: individualism and collectivism. America and China belong to the two cultural values respectively.

America belongs to the individualist culture. In this culture, the individual is the most important unit in any social setting, and the uniqueness of each individual is the highest value.

In individualist culture, "I" consciousness prevails. Each person has the right to pursue his or her freedom and happiness, to protect his or her private property, and to uphold his or her thoughts and opinions. Personal goals take priority over the allegiance to groups, like the family or the company. So the loyalty of the individual is very weak. People in the society are equal. Formality is not important. They treat others equally and choose to be treated in the same manner when they interact in school, business or social environment, and even children are often treated as adults.

China belongs to collectivist culture. Thousands of years of living and working together on the land produced the collective nature of Chinese values. Collectivism is characterized by a rigid social framework, which distinguishes between in-groups and out-groups. People, in collectivist culture, rely on their in-groups, such as relatives, clans, organization. In return, they are absolutely loyal to the group.

In collectivist society, a "we" consciousness prevails. It emphasizes the views, needs and goals of the in-group rather than the individual. They share beliefs rather than distinguish self from in-group. Cooperation is strongly encouraged.

Both of the culture values will reflect into the language using fields. Moreover they will influence on the available situations of addressing terms.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The study on addressing terms makes us find out the cultural features. The cultural features are very useful and important to the intercultural communication. Therefore, language is very important to the study of intercultural communication. It makes people hurdle the communication barriers and get effective communication. The analysis of culture is a complex project. It needs the deep and comprehensive knowledge about language with which culture has a close relationship. One nation's morality, values, aesthetic conceptions and other cultural elements are reflected and expressed by language. The analysis of culture cannot be conducted without the research of language. The importance of language to the study of intercultural communication is clearly shown in the American poet Ralph Waldo Emerson's simple sentence "Language is the archives of history." (Essays, 2001, P.12).

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