

The Trouble I Got with “Thank You”

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When we talk about learning Chinese, what often pops up in our heads is a long list of arduous tasks to conquer - the sound system, the tonal variations, the endless vocabularies, the symbols of sinogram, the complex grammar and the list can go on. What often slips out of this list is the crucial cultural aspect inherent in Chinese as in any other languages.

I still remember the “odd” way I would respond to a compliment when I first went to England in the 1970s. Whenever my English friends made a compliment such as “you look beautiful today”, I would automatically mutter out a string of “No! No! No!” while covering my face with my both hands just to show how embarrassed I was. Why didn’t I just say “thank you” instead? And why did I have to cover my face then? Why? It was a habit. A cultural habit I acquired in the Chinese cultural environment that strongly favors outward expressions of modesty. In the Chinese culture, to refuse a compliment is considered an act of modesty while accepting it a sign of arrogance. So in front of a compliment I was culturally impelled to act as a modest girl through both the linguistic transfer of the Chinese word “不! 不! 不!” to the English word “NO! NO! NO!” and the cultural value transfer of the concept of modesty to the act of handling a compliment. Not only was my verbal expression controlled by my cultural norms my body language (covering my face) was also dictated by my cultural tradition that encourages a girl to show her shyness physically. Here I was – interacting with my English friends in English but following a set of Chinese cultural values and norms. This is often called – sociolinguistic transfer, a term that normally refers to the use of rules of speaking of one’s own speech community or cultural group when interacting with members of another community or group.

I also remember the “trouble” I got into with the use of - “thank you” when I first came back to China in the early 1980s after three years of study in England. By then I had got so used to saying “thank you”. But when I said “谢谢” (thank you) to my mum when she brought me my favorite food the first night I was home, she was utterly stunned at first, and then burst out laughing: “What has England done to you, Xiao Hua? How come you even say ‘thank you’ to your own mum?”

How come? Again, it was a habit. A newly acquired English habit based on the English value system that strongly favors verbal appreciation of others’ kind efforts. I forgot, however, that among the Chinese family members we don’t normally say “谢谢” (thank you) to one another. In fact, “谢谢” (thank you) when used with family members and intimate friends sounds rather insincere or even pretentious. In this case, I created another mismatch between

the linguistic choice and the cultural context. This time, however, it is a reverse sociolinguistic transfer – using rules of speaking of another cultural community or group when interacting with members of my own speech community.

It is commonly accepted that each language and language use are inevitably imprinted with its cultural properties including knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religions, timings, roles, spatial relationships, concepts of the universe, and material objects acquired by that group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving. Therefore, to learn Chinese, one has to acquire both the linguistic properties as well as the cultural aspects of the language. My own journey from a language learner to a language teacher has led me to the conviction that unless language and culture are learned simultaneously, one will only end up with loads of painstakingly acquired vocabularies and sentences without knowing how to match them with each cultural context.

Make any sense? It certainly does if you learn to appreciate the minutely cut Chinese food with a pair of chopsticks just as much as you enjoy a generously proportioned steak with knives and forks. Treat your language learning as a cultural venture and you'll get fun out of it and get enriched through it.