

Chapter 5.8

Intercultural Computer–Mediated Communication Between Chinese and U.S. College Students

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ABSTRACT

This study incorporates the effects of culture and computer-mediated communication (CMC) in the investigation of Chinese college students' use of English in communication with U. S. college students. Ethnography of communication was used as the method to uncover four language patterns in Chinese college students' use of English: others-oriented talk, mentor-mentee talk with limited relationship development, adoption of others' talk, and icebreaker talk. Chinese cultural values showed a strong effect on Chinese college students' use of English in CMC. Chinese cultural values included Chinese significance of personal relationships, Chinese collectivism, Chinese understanding of authority, and Chinese use of CMC. The characteristics of CMC showed

minimal effect as either a constraint or a way of encouragement in the four language patterns.

INTRODUCTION

Although English is a global language in intercultural computer-mediated communication (CMC), patterns, rules, and premises of English use vary across different cultures. Decades ago, Hymes (1968) proposed assumptions regarding speech and language in a cultural group. First, speech and language of a group constitutes a system. Second, speech and language vary cross-culturally in function. Third, speech and language activity of a community should be the primary object of attention. Thus, the study of particular use of English language in a cultural group in CMC should be

the focus that can uncover the resources of different communication contexts. The interpretation of meanings of those resources should provide guidelines for intercultural CMC in return. In this chapter, ethnography of communication was used as the research method to describe, analyze, and interpret Chinese college students' English language activities and Chinese cultural resources regarding language activities that constructed a distinctive intercultural communication between Chinese and U.S. college students.

BACKGROUND

CMC and Intercultural Communication

In the literature of intercultural computer-mediated communication, there are two major perspectives. On the one hand, the focus on communicative effects of CMC argues that CMC with its unique characteristics can facilitate and contribute to intercultural communication. On the other hand, the evaluation of cultural factors in communication leads to the conclusion that communicative styles in CMC as well as attitudes and perceptions toward CMC are subject to cultural effects. However, few studies in the literature have incorporated both CMC characteristics and cultural effects in the examination of intercultural CMC. The current study adopts both perspectives in the evaluation of Chinese cultural effects and CMC's effects on Chinese college students' English communication with U.S. college students.

CMC includes different formats: e-mail, chat-groups, virtual worlds, and the World Wide Web. Across different formats, CMC is primarily in the form of written language. Compared with face-to-face communication, the written communication in CMC is "leaner" because the social context cues in face-to-face communication are missing (Kiesler & Sproull, 1992; Walther & Parks, 2002).

The missing social context cues include people's race, gender, social class, and accent (Sproull & Kiesler, 1991). The direct communicative effect of this characteristic is CMC's potential for fostering flagrant and hostile language known as "flaming" (O'Sullivan & Flanagan, 2003). CMC is also ranked as low in media richness with less immediate feedback and limited personalization (Daft & Lengel, 1986; Trevino, Lengel, & Daft, 1987). Media with low richness communicate low social presence. In CMC, users may pay less attention to others' presence. As a result, CMC makes communication more task oriented (Walther & Burgoon, 1992). Empirical studies (Jonassen & Kwon, 2001; Mazur, 2004) report that during group problem-solving activities, CMC participants produce fewer, but more task-oriented, messages than do face-to-face communication participants.

In intercultural communication, these characteristics of CMC encourage more participation from people who may normally feel intimidated in face-to-face interaction. As Warschauer and De Florio-Hansen (2003) stated, people in CMC do not know whether others are a dog, Black or White, male or female, or rich or poor. Thus, people who are less outspoken in face-to-face situations may contribute more in CMC with anonymity or less exposure (Simons, 1998; Tella & Mononen-Aaltonen, 1998). In some cultures, people take a passive rather than an active role in interaction. With low social presence, CMC's task-oriented communication characteristic offers people an opportunity to make more contributions (Warschauer, 2000; Warschauer & De Florio-Hansen, 2003). CMC's absence of nonverbal cues such as frowning and hesitating also makes interactions less intimidating and thus allows people in cultures that are less dominant to play a more active role in intercultural communication (Warschauer, 2000; Warschauer & De Florio-Hansen, 2003).

On the other hand, CMC as well as other media is subject to cultural influences (Leonardi, 2003;

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