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Pragmatic Differences Under High-Context and Low-Context Cultures: A Comparative Study of Politeness Strategies in Sino-French Business Negotiations

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Abstract. With the impact of globalization, business interactions between China and France have deepened continuously, yet negotiation obstacles caused by cultural differences still persist. Based on Edward Hall's high-context and low-context culture theory and Brown-Levinson's politeness strategy theory, this paper combines their intersection points and conducts discussions through theoretical analysis and illustrative examples. Focusing on the pragmatic differences between Chinese and French negotiators, it explores three aspects: language, non-language, and "face". It is found that Chinese negotiators are characterized by an indirect, implicit, and interpersonal relationship-oriented communication style under high-context culture, while French negotiators adopt a direct, clear, and task-centered communication mode typical of low-context culture. These differences may lead to misunderstandings between Chinese and French negotiators regarding price, controversial issues, and interpersonal relationship building. In response to the above reasons, this paper proposes a hierarchical solution based on "cognition-strategy-process", namely conducting in-depth cross-cultural training, facilitating bilateral adaptive communication, and establishing cultural buffer zones during negotiations, so as to ensure effective communication channels for Sino-French business negotiations.

Keywords: high-context and low-context cultures, pragmatic differences, politeness strategies, business negotiations, cross-cultural communication

1. Introduction

With the deepening of economic globalization, business interactions between China and France in the fields of trade, investment, and technological cooperation have become increasingly frequent. However, significant cultural differences often serve as invisible barriers to the smooth progress of negotiations, among which pragmatic differences arising from language use and social norms are particularly prominent. Edward Hall's high-context and low-context culture theory provides a classic analytical perspective for understanding such differences [1]. As a typical high-context culture, Chinese communication relies heavily on context, non-verbal cues, and pre-existing shared knowledge, with a large amount of information implicit in the communication background and the relationship between the two parties. In contrast, although France retains the relationship orientation

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of Latin culture, it is deeply influenced by Descartes' rational tradition in the business field and is generally more inclined to low-context culture. Its communication mode emphasizes the clarity, logic, and directness of language, expecting the information itself to express intentions independently and explicitly [1].

Brown and Levinson's politeness theory further points out that all social members have the need to maintain "positive face" (the desire to be approved and liked by others) and "negative face" (the desire to act without interference from others), and politeness strategies are linguistic behaviors adopted to meet these needs [2]. In high-context cultures, the implementation of politeness strategies is often more indirect and implicit, maintaining the face and harmonious relationship of both parties through euphemisms, modest expressions, and non-verbal behaviors. In low-context cultures, however, politeness may be achieved by directly expressing appreciation or respecting the other party's autonomy, and sometimes even sacrificing part of the euphemism for efficiency. In the practice of Sino-French business negotiations, Chinese representatives may regard the direct refutation of French counterparts as "impolite", while French representatives may perceive the silence and circumlocution of Chinese counterparts as "lack of sincerity". Such cognitive dissonance directly threatens the negotiation process and outcomes.

Although there have been many studies on cross-cultural communication, few articles specifically discuss the "comparative analysis of politeness strategy systems under the framework of Sino-French high-context and low-context cultures". Most studies focus on macro-cultural comparisons or are completely divorced from specific pragmatic strategies, providing little practical guidance for negotiators. To make up for this deficiency, this paper mainly starts from the high-context and low-context culture theory and politeness strategy theory, constructs a higher-level analytical framework based on summarizing relevant empirical analyses and typical cases in recent years, explains the specific differences and applicable solutions, and provides feasible methodological paths. This paper is based on theoretical deduction and integration of previous literature. To facilitate readers to grasp the research context, this paper first establishes the theoretical framework, elaborates on the core meanings and relevance of the two theories (high-context and low-context cultures and politeness strategies); then expounds the content of the practical analysis part, providing a detailed interpretation of issues such as language, non-verbal behaviors, and face strategies in Sino-French business negotiations; followed by refining solutions and proposing an integrated "cognition-strategy-process" trinity solution.

2. Theoretical research

2.1. High-context and low-context culture theory

Proposed by the famous anthropologist Edward Hall in his 1976 book Beyond Culture, the high-context and low-context culture theory has provided a foundational analytical tool for cross-cultural communication research [1]. Hall argues that cultural communication can be divided into two types: high-context culture and low-context culture. In high-context culture, most information is embedded in the physical context or deeply imprinted in the minds of both parties, with relatively few explicitly coded messages. This requires people to have a certain degree of tacit understanding and good identification during communication, possess certain common sense knowledge, and be able to correctly interpret information beyond the context. Many high-context cultures in the world generally refer to Chinese culture, Japanese culture, and Korean culture. A characteristic of this culture is the tendency to achieve one's goals in a passive way, aiming to maintain harmony among group members rather than actively expressing one's opinions.

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In contrast, low-context culture tends to convey information in a direct manner, encoding and transmitting it through simple and straightforward language. It has low dependence on context—once the words are clearly expressed, the meaning is unambiguous. Countries such as the United States, Germany, Switzerland, Canada, and Nordic countries basically belong to low-context cultural countries. Based on empirical research, in practice, low-context societies tend to prioritize business activities and exhibit more low-context characteristics. This low-context tendency is determined by the cultural and historical development of these regions. For example, French culture possesses both low-context tendencies and high-context characteristics: on the one hand, it is influenced by the relationship-oriented nature of Latin culture and on-site situations; on the other hand, in formal occasions such as business activities or academic settings, it emphasizes logical rigor and clarity, thus reflecting more low-context characteristics [4].

2.2. Politeness strategy theory

Proposed by linguists Brown and Levinson in 1987, the politeness theory centers on the concept of "face". They define "face" as "the public self-image that every social member intends to establish for themselves" and further divide it into "positive face" and "negative face". Positive face refers to an individual's expectation that their needs, traits, or possessions are approved and praised by others; negative face refers to an individual's desire to act freely without being interfered with or coerced by others [2].

Any speech or behavior that may threaten the other party's face is called a "face-threatening act" (FTA). To this end, communicators adopt different politeness strategies to mitigate the threat. These strategies form a continuum, ranging from the most impolite "performing the FTA baldly" to "negative politeness" (emphasizing respect for the other party's autonomy), "positive politeness" (emphasizing consistency and common ground between both parties), and finally to "performing the FTA indirectly" or "not performing the FTA" [2].

High-context and low-context cultures show obvious differences in the choice of politeness strategies. High-context cultures usually prefer to use positive politeness and indirect strategies, downplaying face threats by creating group identity and shared context; silence itself is often used as a politeness strategy in high-context cultures to convey prudence or avoid direct conflicts. In contrast, when facing FTAs, low-context cultures may more often adopt negative politeness strategies to respect the other party's independence, and even directly use bald strategies in efficiency-prioritized situations, considering this as a sign of candor and professionalism. As contemporary studies have pointed out, understanding the cultural logic behind these strategies is crucial for resolving cross-cultural pragmatic frictions [5]. Combining high-context and low-context culture theory with politeness strategy theory can form an "analytical lens" with dual cultural and pragmatic perspectives: it can not only observe the way information is encoded (high-context vs. low-context) but also examine the path of face management (politeness strategies), thereby providing a synchronous and in-depth explanatory tool for pragmatic frictions in Sino-French business negotiations.

3. Problem representation and analysis

3.1. Conflict between direct and indirect language expression

Influenced by low-context culture, French negotiators, who are direct, clear, and logical in speech, are more willing to express their ideas straightforwardly as long as the other party understands.

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However, Chinese people are typical representatives of high-context culture and value tacit communication. They do not pursue literal meaning or clarity in language use, and ambiguous expressions such as "further research is needed" and "to further improve product quality" are widely used. Chinese negotiators even attach more importance to whether a good relationship exists with the other party to determine the success of the business deal—if the relationship is not good, it is better to postpone it. It is precisely the cyclic misunderstanding where the French side considers the Chinese side untrustworthy and the Chinese side regards the French side impolite that prevents the negotiation from achieving good results [3].

3.2. Cognitive differences in non-verbal communication

In terms of information transmission, in high-context culture, not speaking or not shaking one's head can express affirmation; hesitation or negation is reflected through prolonged silence. Therefore, when Chinese negotiators listen without stopping to express their views but nod or make slight movements, this may already indicate approval or contemplation to the French side, who pay extreme attention to formalities in a high-context cultural sense; however, for Westerners from low-context cultures, this may be regarded as a lack of response, leading to interrogative questions. In addition, differences in the understanding of "body language" such as eye contact, gestures, and physical distance between the two parties also become important sources of cross-cultural misunderstandings, continuously undermining negotiation trust [6].

3.3. Face concept and paths of relationship building

Although both China and France attach great importance to "face", their "face" mechanisms are different. Chinese "face" is maintained through long-term banquets to uphold "positive face"; while French "face" is built through their own professional competence and strict contractual spirit, and they separate social interactions from negotiation behaviors, adhering to the principle of "talking business first, then making friends". For the French side, the Chinese practice of spending a long time building relationships seems inefficient; while the Chinese side feels uncomfortable with the French side's distant attitude. During disputes, direct criticism is likely to make the Chinese side feel "losing face", and the Chinese side's circumlocutory way of speaking also makes the French side feel incompatible. This results in a continuous process of mutual loss of trust between the two parties [7].

4. Discussion on solutions

4.1. Cross-cultural cognition and competence building

Enterprises can organize relevant teams to participate in cross-cultural negotiations in advance and provide them with targeted and focused cross-cultural training. In addition to introducing their own traditional culture, the training should focus on in-depth understanding and mastery of theoretical knowledge such as high-context and low-context culture theory and politeness strategies. By using video comparison analysis of real negotiation cases, negotiators can clearly understand the differences in language and behavior between the two parties and the underlying thinking differences. For example, pair Chinese and French colleagues to conduct experiential discussions: one group with Chinese as the counterpart of French negotiators and another group with French as the counterpart of Chinese negotiators. Adopt the method of taking turns as direct or indirect communicators for experiential exercises—for instance, ask French negotiators to express objections

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in the indirect way commonly used by Chinese negotiators; ask Chinese negotiators to practice expressing their bottom lines directly, and even rotate roles and groups. For example, Chinese team members can try to explain indirectly by saying "Could we look at this from another angle?"; those who originally intended to express their views directly can say "Based on the above three sets of data, we believe that the current measures have inappropriate aspects." The effect is very obvious. Practical activities have shown that after organizing such role-experiential training, the team builds mutual trust faster at the beginning, and the possibility of reaching an agreement on their own interests is higher in the end [8].

4.2. Two-way adaptive communication strategies

Successful cross-cultural negotiations require both parties to have a certain degree of adaptability and flexibility. French negotiators can learn to appropriately use high-context communication skills, including: learning to interpret Chinese non-verbal signals, understanding the positive meaning of silence, cultivating patience, affirming part of the other party's views before expressing objections, and trying to use more hypothetical sentences and open-ended questions to explore the Chinese side's true intentions. For example, adjust the blunt "This price is unacceptable" to "We highly recognize your technical investment; if we can reach an agreement on the payment method, both parties may jointly explore a more balanced price plan."

To achieve effective communication with low-context cultural partners, Chinese negotiators should consciously improve the clarity and directness of their expressions. This does not mean abandoning the politeness principle, but embodying politeness in logical structure and adequate preparation. For example, provide a clear overview of key points before a long speech, supplement clear and objective data as reasons when refusing, and take the initiative to clarify the schedule for subsequent communication to eliminate the uncertainty caused by "needing further research". This strategic clarity is itself a respect for the negotiation partner's "negative face" (the desire for unobstructed progress of affairs) and an effective politeness strategy in cross-cultural contexts, as advocated by relevant case studies [5].

4.3. Negotiation process optimization and cultural buffering

In key stages of negotiations, it is recommended to use professional interpreters who are proficient in both languages and familiar with the business cultures of China and France for communication. Such interpreters can not only perform language conversion for both parties but also timely convey the true meaning behind the Chinese representatives' remarks to the French side in a way they are familiar with, thereby avoiding phenomena such as "If all opinions are positive, why need further negotiations?"; alternatively, they can serve as "cultural specialists" integrated into the negotiation team. That is, when major misunderstandings occur or the negotiation reaches a stalemate, they act as a bridge between the two companies, explain the cultural differences behind relevant issues, and increase the possibility of resolving corresponding conflicts. It is also possible to set two time slots in the negotiation agenda: "relationship building time" and "business negotiation time". The former should provide occasions and time costs for the French side's social interactions, while the latter should ensure sufficient time for both parties to reach agreements on substantive issues. Before negotiating business contracts or when repeated negotiations yield no results, fully prepare written documents, striving to express them in the most direct and specific language, and avoid using ambiguous and vague expressions. Use the above systematic cultural buffering measures to

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effectively prevent the escalation of two types of factors into serious misunderstandings and intensified conflicts [3].

5. Conclusion

This study constructs an analytical framework for pragmatic differences in Sino-French business negotiations based on two dimensions: high-context and low-context cultures, and politeness strategies, using recent classic cases to illustrate potential differences. Currently, the two parties have fundamental differences in aspects such as direct or implicit language, the meaning of silence in non-verbal information, ways of maintaining "face", and paths of relationship building. Behind the surface of the world lie deep-seated cultural cognitive models and roots, which have become one of the factors leading to suspicion, distrust, and misunderstanding between the two parties.

Based on the above discussions, this paper proposes a "cognition-strategy-process" trinity negotiation management model: updating negotiators' cognitive structures through in-depth cross-cultural training; adjusting negotiators' communication methods using two-way adaptive communication strategies; and optimizing the negotiation process by setting up cultural buffering methods (such as cultural coordinators). The purpose of this model is to transform cultural differences into an opportunity to enhance mutual understanding during negotiations.

Compared with previous cross-cultural pragmatic studies, this paper has more refined analytical dimensions; in addition to summarizing the latest theoretical knowledge, it presents theoretical viewpoints in accordance with the two processes of negotiation cognitive reconstruction and operational implementation, forming a set of guiding methods for negotiators. As a special mode of business communication, negotiations are constrained by specific cultural and pragmatic norms. Transforming global business negotiations based on cultural pragmatics from an auxiliary skill into a decisive factor in building long-term trust bonds and cooperation mechanisms has become a future trend. Therefore, future research needs to test the model through empirical methods and further expand it to fields such as remote negotiations and digital communication; transform the "challenge" of cultural diversity into a "strategic resource" for stimulating innovation and creating synergistic value. This should also be the mindset held by every enterprise or individual seeking global development.

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