

Chinese and Nigerian Address Forms: A Cultural Study.

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Abstract

Every culture has a unique way of address. Address behavior is governed by politeness phenomenon which is culturally bound. This paper attempts to study the culturally driven forms of address in China and Nigeria. In doing this, it explores the cultural differences and similarities in value systems and their underlying philosophical sources. The study will help people develop a full understanding of the meanings of the address terms, and of the polite intention in social contacts so as to facilitate cross-cultural communication. This paper likes also to make it clear that though Chinese has a single majority culture adopted by other 55 cultural groups; Nigeria has three conflicting majorities that try to overtake one another in leading over 632 culture groups thereby building a form of acculturation in their address forms. However, there is need to mention which of the three Nigerian culture groups, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba, that owns a particular address form if need arises.

Keywords: Address form, Cultural differences and similarities, Cross-cultural communication

Introduction:

Address phenomenon is important as well as frequent in social interactions. Appropriate address behavior is crucial for effective communication and successful maintenance of interpersonal relationships. Normally, address behavior is governed by politeness phenomenon which is culturally bound. Misunderstanding and misinterpretation can lead to feelings of offence, insult, and suspicion on the individuals involved, which will result in break-down in cross-cultural communication. For instance, non indigene of Nigeria often expresses surprise at the wide use or distribution of reciprocal first naming among people in the Nigeria. This change from an address form employed to define intimate relationships within a family or among close friends or business associates to the one used to define general relationships between strangers, between people of asymmetrical age and occupational status, between students and professors, and between young people and their seniors, has been quite a recent development which has naturally stimulated cross-cultural studies of address behavior in different countries.

Chinese and Nigerian Address Forms

There have been studies in address forms of different cultures. Address forms in one culture most a times, differ from that of another. It is therefore pertinent that Nigerians and Chinese understand the forms of address of each of the cultures. It is important in that in recent time, China and Nigeria have began to contract businesses and as such, many Chinese nationalities fly into Nigeria on daily bases just as many Nigerians, leave Nigerian ports for import from China. Each nation's address forms therefore will help in boosting their business relationship among the Governments and business class. Based on studies by Chen Songcen (1989) and Quirk (1985), there are six types of address forms: kinship terms, proper names, titles (occupational, official and social), pronouns, no-naming and others (terms of endearment and derogation, indefinite pronouns, nominal phrases and nominal clauses). Although the six categories of address forms exist in both languages, they vary greatly in contents and usage patterns. Besides, although social factors like age, kinship, acquaintances, generation, rank and setting and the principles governing politeness strategies are universal, the linguistic possibilities for the realization of politeness strategies are language specific, that is, different factor may carry different weight in the choice of address strategy in different languages. When comparing the two flow charts designed respectively by American linguist Ervin-Tripp (1972, p226-7) and Chinese Zhu Wanjin (1984, p326), it is not difficult to find that in Chinese address system, order of seniority and age play an important part in their choice of proper address forms especially when addressing relatives, neighbors and seniors. However, in Igbo Nigeria and not in Hausa and Yoruba address system, seniority and age exert influence mainly on people of higher generation (15 years older) in kinships, while first names instead of honorific titles can be used even when addressing older generations among friends and colleagues.

Let's now summarize the major Chinese and Nigerian address use as follows:

- ◆ Recently, the trend of many Nigeria people has been to address others by using the first name than using titles like Chief, Dr., Prof., Nze, Alhaji, Mr., Mrs., or Miss even when people meet for the first time. This applies not only to people of roughly the same age, but also of different ages. It is not a sign of disrespect. However, this is quite counter to Chinese custom.
- ◆ Kinship terms play an important part in Chinese address system. Age, generation and order of seniority are regarded as far more important than those in Nigerian system.
- ◆ In Nigeria as well as in Chinese address system, it is quite common to use a person's title, office or occupation. This is why among Nigerians, one hears people addressing others as kabiesi (king in Yoruba), Alhaji (Hausa or Yoruba Muslims signifying having been to pilgrimage), dinta (hunter among the Igbo), dimgba (wrestler among the Igbo), Diochi (Wine taper among the Igbo), Diji (Yam farmer among the Igbo), Agbade (Blacksmith among the Yoruba), Dibia (Herbalist among the Igbo), e.t.c.

♦ Due to the complexity of Chinese address system, there are some problems in finding the Nigerian equivalents of some Chinese terms of address. For instance, how to address a teacher has long been a problem. Should it be Teacher or Teacher Zhang? Neither of these is in keeping with Nigerian custom. Or should we simply follow the English custom and call the teacher Mr. Zhang, Mrs. Yang, Miss Lei, or just his or her first name? Among Nigerian cultures, this nomenclature has not been a problem since the introduction of western type of education. All the cultures in Nigeria do accord the title “Teacher” to the person whose job is to educate persons but such culture has to pronounce teacher in such language and it has to come before the name. Instances are “Ticha Nweke, Ticha Adaora (for the Igbo), Tisa Gbenga, Tisa Bosede (for the Yoruba). However, among the Hausa, they have a name for a person doing the work of teaching and that is Mallam. In accordance with their culture, it is Mallam Aminu, Mallam Mariam, e.t.c.

All of these would sound terrible to Chinese if school-age youngsters were to do so. Although terms such as *xiansheng* and *xiaojie* can roughly be translated as Maazi (Mr.) or Nnamukwu (Sir or literally, my big dad), Nwaada (Miss) or Mgboto (Lady), they carry different connotations. In Chinese, *xiansheng* and *xiaojie* are honorific titles, while Maazi (Mr) or Nwaada (Miss) is only a very common address form. Therefore, Nigerian professors, scholars or professionals often prefer to be addressed by their occupational or technical titles such as Professor, Doctor, Architect, Engineer and would be offended if otherwise addressed by Mr. Prefixes such as *lao* (Old), *xiao* (Little) and the suffix *lao* (Old) are also regarded by Chinese people as showing friendliness or affection or respect. However, the word “*lao*” (Old) may make a Nigerian extremely unhappy. Sometimes, this may get abuse such as “*Q bu m muru gi?*” (Am I your mother or father) as a reply from the person addressed. Similarly, while the use of *xiaojie* (*nwaada*) which means “miss” among the Igbo, may please a middle-aged Igbo woman, it may really annoy a Chinese woman. Here again we can see the importance of age, generation and seniority in Chinese address system. What is considered proper and polite in one language may cause embarrassment or disrespect in another. Now let’s go further and try to explore the philosophical sources behind the differences in Chinese and Nigerian address use.

Cultural Backgrounds and Philosophical Sources

Since address behavior serves as an indication of social relations between the speaker and the hearer or receiver (Brown & Gilman, 1990, p.252), it is inevitably a reflection of interpersonal relationship in a specific culture or a certain language context (Du, 1999, p217).

However, interpersonal relationship in the Chinese context is underpinned by Confucianism, especially *Ren* and *Li*, which lie at the very core of Confucianism. One understands that *Li* and *Ren*, which can hardly be appropriately translated into any Nigerian language, virtually determine almost all aspects of the Chinese life. They have become the collective unconsciousness for the Chinese programming of their social behavior including speech acts such as apologies, compliments, addressing, etc; as well as communicating rules, such as conversational principles, politeness principles, face work, etc. In short, *Ren* and *Li* have shaped the way the Chinese behave

(Jia, 1999:505-506). *Ren* serves as the goal of life. Men should be warm and benevolent to others or love them and respect themselves. Self or an individual must merge himself into the group or collective. To some extent, the largeness of heart which *Ren* renders knows no boundaries as *Ren* advocates that “within the four seas all men are brothers and sisters.” Unfortunately, among Nigerian cultures where benevolence or rather as the Igbo may have it, “being one’s brother’s keeper” was in vogue before Nigerian amalgamation, is no more in Nigerian people’s dictionary of the mind. Even among Hausa of Nigeria where the practice of *almajiri* was popular, is never being done in good faith. Any Hausa man involving himself in almsgiving does that for anterior purposes and not for salvation as they claimed.

Li serves as a norm or a means for people to achieve ideal manhood or good relationships. It defines almost all the norms or rules for the appropriate conduct and behavior for every social member according to his or her social position. The Chinese society, traditionally speaking, is hierarchical in nature. In a society as such, *Li* is used as norms and means to maintain this hierarchical social order by differentiating the difference between the emperor and his subjects, father and his sons and daughters, brothers and obligations according to their positions. As a matter of fact, *Li* advocates nothing but vertical or hierarchical relationships and its essential function is to build social order upon this hierarchical relationships. It functions in the society as law does in the western society. If we are to take *li* as *nsopuru* or respect judging by the literary translation from Chinese to English, it has disappeared in Nigeria culture. This is because the elderly have abandoned cultural responsibilities to the youth. They have forgotten that in any society, there are aging group and there are growing up group. It is this abandonment of their duties to the upcoming group that plunged Nigeria into the mess they found themselves now

Now let’s examine the history of the Nigerian State, which is unique in that the acculturation going on in Nigeria recently is relatively young and was formed primarily through many processes. First, those who originally arrived Northern part of Nigeria with Jihad came with Islamic culture. Another set, the Fulani, came all the way from Sierra Leone with nomadic type of culture. They came, met the original occupants of various culture groups, fought and defeated them in different times. Secondly, in the South were the Igbo and the Yoruba as major culture groups with their distinct behaviours. They live near the Atlantic and so, when the West arrived on the Atlantic coast, they brought many English values, the English system of law, and the basic organization of commerce that was prevalent during the sixteenth century. Thirdly, the West that is the British immediately amalgamated the Northern and Southern part of Nigeria and Nigeria nation was born. These settlers were immediately confronted with a wave of new citizens who arrived through migration. This produced what is sometimes referred to as the “melting pot”, “stew”, or “mixed salad” metaphor of culture. The shared, desperate desire of the Nigerian people to be separated from what was known as the Crown and Divine Rights, as well as from the Royal order of England, provided the impetus to seek unity among Nigeria’s foremost Nationalists hence, the independence in 1960. The fundamental Nigerian proposition became “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of happiness” for each individual. The environmental factors also had psychological effects

on the settlers: after developing habits of survival based on individualism, a lack of formality and efficiency, they soon also developed thought patterns, beliefs, values, and attitudes attuned to that environment. Therefore, we can say that unlike Chinese culture, *Ren* and *Li* find no place in the Nigerian philosophy and religion. What is highly valued in Nigeria is individualism and as a result, equal or horizontal relationship is highly valued.

What are advocated are not the obligations and responsibilities ascribed to each member of the society according to his or her social position but humanitarianism and human rights and thus the slogan: everybody is born equal—democracy, liberation of the individual is everybody's wish (Yu, 2011).

As we have discussed, the ancient Confucian kinship relationships are an extremely powerful force in Chinese cultural relationship. In contrast to this, a recent studies on Igbo family structure accepted seven different family types (Anedo, 2015) while America has fourteen different family types (Ron Scollon & Suzanne Wong Scollon, 2000, p130), from the traditional extended family to the single parent with adopted child. Kinship is far from being felt as a significant tie among members of society. In many cases, kinship relationships are seen as significant barriers to individual self-realization and progress especially among the Igbo of Nigeria. The increasingly popular Nigerian practice of young ones calling their elders by first names, for example, would be quite unpleasantly surprising to most Chinese.

In China, authority is respected and listened to and power relationship, in sociolinguistic terms, is highly valued. This emphasis on hierarchical relationship has a two-fold consequence for discourse: from very early in life one becomes subtly practiced in the discourse forms of hierarchical relationship. One learns first to show respect to those above, then, in due time, one learns the forms of guidance and leadership of those who come after. The second consequence is that one comes to expect all relationships to be hierarchical to some extent. If hierarchy is not based on kinship relationship, then it seems to be based on age, experience, education, gender, political affiliation, or one of the many other dimensions of social organization within culture. This relationship is best demonstrated in the use of titles or honorifics when addressing occurs.

Cross-cultural Communication way of Addressing:

Addressing takes place so frequently in social interactions that it is an important component of communicative competence. In principle, one cannot expect that the literal translation of the routine expressions of his own language into another will have the same effect in the target language. But in practice, the interference of one's mother tongue in using a foreign language seems to be inevitable for foreign language learner. A Nigerian scholar was greatly annoyed when addressed as Mr. instead of Professor by Chinese speakers of English, who actually tried to show respect to him. A female Chinese student teacher at the Confucius Institute in Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria was also annoyed by the term "nwa" directed to her from an elderly cleaner. The student teacher on industrial training thought how that person could treat her as a

newly born baby. She was quite unhappy until someone explained the goodwill of the cleaner towards her in using the term. Of course, the cleaner meant to pet her as a nice person considering her complexion and beauty. There are more examples in actual interactions. Since misunderstandings can easily occur, Helen Oatey (1987, p22) suggests that “it is important to consider how addressing is conveyed in Nigerian Languages and Chinese, and to what extent there are differences between the two cultures in this respect.” It is important to remember that the communication rules are culturally bound. This means that if you want to be successful in intercultural communication, you must know not only the rules of your culture but that of the culture of the person with whom you are interacting as well. If you know the rules, the other person’s behavior will make more sense to you and you can alter your behavior to the rules of the culture. Otherwise, you may interpret what you hear according to the rules of your native culture and misunderstand the speaker’s intension or even perceive insincerity or offence where none was meant. The key to clear the difficulty is to acquire adequate knowledge of, and to be willing to accept the cultural differences in communication.

In further explanation on how wrong or misappropriate use of word could mar a relationship or business contraction; I like to share my experience while in China. As a Post Graduate Student of Zhongguo Wenqua (Chinese Culture and Anthropology), I came to realize that Chinese name for Africa was **Feizhou**. America’s Chinese name is **Meiguo** and so are other nations and continents. For instance, Nigeria in Chinese is **Niriliya** spelt in their language as they find it hard to perfectly pronounce other words other than theirs. **Feizhou** sounds nice to an African who did not study Chinese Linguistics. As time went by and as my studies progressed, I started to ask questions on the essence of different names given to nations other than what they bear. Of course, from my studies, I came to know what **fei** and **zhou** were all about. None of my Chinese Professors and friends except my Linguistic Professor who of course, was against the name, could tell me what they meant by **feizhou** given to my continent, Africa. I really quarreled with my Chinese folk Religion Professor on our visit to a Buddhist Temple in far away, Gang Wei Island when he introduced me to our host during dinner, as **feizhou ren** (African) instead of **Niriliya ren** (Nigerian). When he found that I was not pleased with such an introduction, he tried to pacify me saying that they used the word to suit their language. I then warned him and any other Chinese that might use such abusive word for Africa. In Chinese, **fei** means nothingness, empty while **zhou** means continent or country and **ren** means man. It then means that Africa is empty continent. I considered it as insult to entire Africa nation where Chinese come to take petroleum from Nigeria, cement from Zambia, Timber from Liberia, Ivory from Kenya and lots more, to feed her populace. Of course, I asked my Professor who had no bicycle to tell me between he and I who is **feizhou ren** since I had cars, houses, wife and children and by grace of God, five degrees including Ph.D. before coming to their country? He could not answer that question. I told him that they should give Africa, the name, **Meiguo** and give America, **Feizhou** and see how America would take it. I told him that they should stop forthwith, the introduction of Characteristics of African to their children to be: (i). hunger, (ii). Sickness, (ii). HIV & AIDS (iv) War and everything bad. These are the

characteristics that they use to classify Africa as *feizhou*. Sometimes, recognition of one's title or abuse of one's title has to do with one's concept what another is to the recognizer.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, I have to say that in this world with a diversity of cultures, no culture may necessarily be better or worse than another. Cultures are just different from one another. It is the cultural differences that make this world move, grow and enrich itself. To end this paper one would like to learn a lesson from a beautiful sentence written by Benedict (Samovar, 2000, p78), "God gave to every people a cup, a cup of clay, and from this cup they drank life... They all dipped in the water, but their cups were different."

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