Abstract:
In inter-linguistic-cultural communication, cultural misreading is unavoidable. The same is true in foreign language teaching and learning owning to the cultural dissimilarities, for the influence exerted by cultural components upon languages constitutes the major barriers. In any language, there is a profound cultural intention relative to its own physiology, convention, and religious belief, etc. English and Chinese, especially idioms, closely related to their own cultures, convey different cultural features that result in great effect in the English language teaching and learning. The causes of cultural misreading in English teaching and learning are mainly in the cultural context of cognitive, traditional concepts and values, and the context without distinct local colors. In this article, the above mentioned factors leading to cultural misreading are analyzed, each with a few examples, and a suggestion is put forward that cultural factors should be taken into consideration in foreign language teaching and learning as cultural misreading usually comes from the teachers’ neglect of cultural influence in language use and the students’ ignorance of the cultural context.

Key words: language, culture, cultural misreading, cultural dissimilarities

1. Introduction

To learn a foreign language is to study the language in use. And the end to learn a foreign language is to communicate with the people who speak it. But to obtain a good command of a foreign language is of no easy job. One of the difficulties lies in the cultural dissimilarities between languages. In this article, the authors attempt to hold a brief discussion on the cultural misreading owning to the neglect or ignorance of the cultural context in foreign language teaching and learning.

2. Language, Culture and Cultural Misreading

2.1 Language
Language is a comprehensive symbolic system. It is a social phenomenon and a tool or means by which people think, communicate, accumulate or disseminate knowledge.

2.2 Culture
Culture is not a single concept. It is an abstraction, which differs among people. But all in all, it refers to the entire way of the life of a human society. It consists of all the shared products of the human beings in the society, including not only perceivable materials such as institutions and organizations, but also the non-material things such as
the tradition, habits, ideas, customs, morals, social relations and standards of all sorts. The essential core of culture is its traditional ideas and their attached value.

2.3 Relationship between Language and Culture

As a matter of fact, there is an interdependent relationship between language and culture. On the one hand, language is part of culture and one of the most important parts. It is a cultural carrier and the symbolic form in which a culture manifest itself. No language can exist unless it is steeped in the context of culture (Sapir). On the other hand, the cultural system can’t exist outside the linguistic form. It is symbolically expressed and transmitted. Therefore, it is impossible to separate language form culture because of the social embodying of cultural information in language use and interpretation.

2.4 Cultural Misreading

Cultural misreading here refers to the misunderstanding or inaccurate comprehension of certain language phenomena owning to the cultural dissimilarities. In inter-linguistic-cultural communication, cultural misreading is unavoidable. The same is true in foreign language teaching and learning, for the influence exerted by cultural components upon languages constitutes the major barriers. One reason is that different nations have different experiences in social life. The second reason is that the speakers of one language do not necessarily follow the way of decoding of the linguistic signs of another.

3. Cultural misreading in Foreign Language Teaching and Learning

Various examples of cultural misreading could be found in teaching and learning a foreign language. In this article, only a few examples are listed for the analysis of its causes.

3.1 Cultural Misreading in Cognitive Context

Culture and language have profound influence on cognitive process. And human beings’ perception of the world around them is greatly controlled by, and primarily embodied in, language forms. Since no two languages are sufficiently similar in representing the social reality, people from different cultural background or speaking different languages, may, therefore, think differently. This may be one of the causes of cultural misreading in foreign language teaching and learning. For examples: When a speaker of English see the road sign “Hill” while driving, he may expect “the hill to go down ahead of him.” In contrast, a speaker of Chinese may expert “the hill to go up ahead of him.” The vocabulary of a language apparently reflects the culture of the people who speak it. If we know nothing about it, we may obtain incorrect information from the road sign mentioned above. And when we hear someone say “we nicknamed our boss ‘magpie’,” we will realize that the boss the speaker referred to was a chatterbox, if we are familiar with the cultural dissimilarities between English and Chinese languages. Otherwise, we will be led to cultural “misreading”, for the image of “a magpie” in Chinese language stands for jubilance, and to nickname a talkative person, we Chinese people usually use the image of the bird “sparrow”.

3.2 Cultural Misreading in the Context of Traditional Concepts and Values

Culture is historically derived and selected. Therefore, in any language there is a
profound cultural intention relative to its own physiology, convention, religious beliefs, etc. And people’s concepts and values of social life are almost never identically expressed in two languages. This may be another cause of cultural misreading. For examples: When attending a wedding, the Chinese people may say “Congratulations” to both the bride and the bridegroom. But the English-speaking people would only say their “Congratulations” to the bridegroom. As for the bride, “My best wishes for your happiness” or “Happiness to you” may be the best words they choose. Knowing nothing about the cultural dissimilarities in the wedding ceremonies and the different customs between the two nations, we may lay ourselves to ridicule by saying “Congratulations” to the bride of an English-cultural background. For saying “Congratulations” to the bride in English-speaking society means facilitating the bride on her success in being capable of catching a husband. Without the knowledge of the western custom that a female, when married, should change her surname to her husband’s, we may find ourselves at a loss, when we read the sentence “Mrs. Smith was born Brown fifty-eight years ago.” And we will be puzzled with the words “John can be relied on. He eats no fish and plays the game,” if we don’t know the religious source of the phrase “to eat no fish” that the Christians in the period of Queen Elizabeth First ate no fish on Fridays in order to show their loyalty to the Queen, while the Roman Catholic church asked its Catholics to do so. Some knowledge of Shakespeare will be a help to us in avoiding cultural misreading of the sentence: “That sort of loan is not different from Shylock.” And the Tale of Jack and the Beanstalk will lead us to an accurate comprehension of the sentence. “For the affection of the young ladies is of rapid growth as Jack’s beanstalk.” (In the Tale of Jack and the Beanstalk, Jack, a poor boy, sells the cow and gets a few beans. His mother throws them away in a fit of anger. One of the beans grows up to the sky overnight. Jack climbs up the stalk to the castle of a huge man and gets lots of treasures.) “Lady Hermits Who Are Down But Not Out” is the title of an article adopted in College English {Intensive Reading, Book Three}. It is no doubt that there were hermits both in China and the west countries. But a hermit in the west was different from that in China. The former referred to any person who went away from other people and lived alone in a solitary place, usually from religious motives. And the latter meant a talented person, usually a scholar, who had no heart to become an official, or withdrew from the official position and lived in a secluded place because of the world-weariness or dissatisfaction toward the establishment. Therefore, the term “lady hermits” in the text has nothing to do with the women’s intelligence, educational background, and even their ability to make a living, not to speak of their might and potentialities for being an official. It only indicates that these jobless, homeless women, though being in a crowded large city like New York, live alone in a solitary, mistrustful world of their own. They have no way to go but to accept their defeat in life. Without consciousness of the above-mentioned, one is liable to commit oneself to the cultural misreading in studying the text.

3.3 Cultural Misreading in the Cultural Context with Social Progress

Culture, though often referred to as a people’s “social heritage”, is not passed on intact. It changes constantly with its basic features remaining in line with the
development of the human society. And different culture treats different aspects of social life.

Since language is not only a static reflection of culture, but also a dynamic mirror of culture changing state, every aspect in social life and every change in social progress will be reflected in the language. In teaching or learning a foreign language, the neglect of the social development is perhaps another cause of cultural misreading. For example: In understanding the words, “They wanted us to have tea, but we said we’d just had it. Then their eldest daughter wanted us to have tea and cake,” we will not realize that the first “tea” above defers from the second and means “a meal in early evening,” if we are not familiar with the language development. When we read the sentence “Jack is a good footballer, but Peter could buy and sell him any time,” we wouldn’t catch the meaning of the second part of the sentence that “Peter is much better than Jack in playing football,” if we do not know the newly-gained meaning of the phrase “buy and sell.” The sentence “The path to November is uphill all the way.” is difficult to understand, if we have no knowledge that the general election in America is held in November. In the sentence “A man in Tom’s position was always in danger of being taken for a ride,” the idiom “to take somebody for a ride” was initially used only in American criminal syndicate, meaning kidnapping and murdering the kidnappee.

3.4 Cultural Misreading in the Cultural Context without Distinct Local Colors

In foreign language teaching and learning, the language phenomena with strong cultural property usually call much attention of the teachers or the students, but those without distinct national colors are likely to be overlooked, which may be the main cause of cultural misreading. For example: “When we alighted at the door, a dispute arouse with the driver of the cabriolet---.” A loud scream from his wife, at the mention of this word, rendered all further explanation inaudible.” In the above discourse, there are no any language phenomena with distinct cultural property, but the neglect of the cultural context will result in serious cultural misreading. The cultural background is that in Britain in the 19th century, a cabriolet was a kind of horse-drawn vehicle used usually in the service of the citizens of the lower classes, and the wife was a vain woman and her scream was made simply out of vanity.

4. Conclusion

Language and culture do not exist apart from each other as language can be viewed as a partial reflection of social reality, revealing an enormous amount of cultural information. And cultural misreading usually comes from the teachers’ neglect of the cultural influence on language use and interpretation, and the student’s ignorance of the cultural context in which the language is steeped. Therefore, in teaching and learning a foreign language, all the cultural factors embodied in the language should be taken into full consideration so that we could comprehend the meanings between the lines and keep clear of cultural misreading.

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