

TALKING ABOUT CULTURAL INFLUENCE ON TABLE MANNERS FROM INTERCULTURAL ADAPTATION

-- A CASE STUDY OF MY CANADIAN FRIEND'S STORY

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Abstract:

Table manners evolve within culture and vary widely between different cultures and countries. To some extent, culture permeates all cultural customs including table manners. Any foreigner would encounter some difficulties in intercultural communication and feel baffled or a little nervous about local cultural customs if they had no any basic knowledge about the table manners in a new country. The author takes his Canadian friend as an example, retells his friend's special story while eating with the Chinese teachers at the restaurant in Beijing, and analyzes the cause that his friend experienced during eating and discusses some things about the relationship between culture and table manners, and the different influence on table manners from various cultural contexts. Finally, the author explores the functions of table manners in intercultural adaptation and offers some suggestions about how to enhance intercultural communication awareness and intercultural adaptation and master some fundamental knowledge of table manners in a new culture, so as to make people attach attention to table manners and have better intercultural adaptation in a new culture.

Keywords: culture, cultural custom, table manner, intercultural communication, intercultural adaptation,

1. INTRODUCTION

The world is shrinking. People of different cultural backgrounds are more inter dependent than ever. The 21st century will confront the ever-shifting social, cultural, and technological challenges. The rapid development in every aspect of the 21st century demands us to see things through the others' eyes and develop a new way of living together (Chen, 2010, 218p).

No doubt, all individuals must eat in order to survive – but what people eat, when they eat, and the

manners in which they eat are all patterned by culture (Xu, 2012,43p). When a foreigner enter a new country and a new culture, he or she should adapt to a new country or to a new culture including a new living patterns and environment. In this way, the foreigner may have good intercultural communication with native people and finally merge into a new culture and a new social living environment. First of all, a foreigner should know some basic knowledge about local cultural customs especially including table manner. Because table manners are not just an important social communicative form, but also an important symbol which represents the local culture and cultural customs. Hence, it is a good beginning for any foreigner to go on intercultural communication smoothly if they have some common senses of table manners in a new country. Needless to say, if not, any foreigners may feel baffled or a little nervous about local cultural customs and encounter some difficulties in intercultural communication. Here, the author attempts to take his Canadian friend's story as a typical example and to discuss about cultural influence on table manners from an intercultural adaptation perspective.

2. MY CANADIAN FRIEND'S STORY

My Canadian friend Mr. Stephen (Not real name) was from Saskatchewan in Canada. He came to China as an English teacher. His first real intercultural experience in China took place in Beijing, capital city of China during the first few days he stayed in Beijing. One day, it was arranged that all the foreign teachers from the same organization went out for supper with all the Chinese teachers who were going to Canada for exchange program.

My friend told me about his experience like this: that evening in Beijing, when his Canadian and Chinese friends together came to a restaurant which was full of much noise where people talked aloud and music sound was in high volume, and eating environment was different from Canada. Mr. Stephen felt unfamiliar and a little uncomfortable at the very beginning. And he sat with a Chinese teacher on either side of him. The one on his right was very helpful. She saw how difficult it was for him to use Chinese chopsticks and began to put food into his bowl for him although he could have managed. The food was delicious, but soon he was full. The gracious Chinese teacher beside him kept on filling his bowl. Like an idiot, Mr. Stephen kept on eating everything. Soon his stomach began to ache, but still, when he would look away for a minute, more food would be in his bowl. As he was taught, he kept on eating. Finally, he thought he would explode if he had one more bite, he was in pain and could eat no more. When he stopped eating, the Chinese teacher beside him stopped putting food into his bowl. Mr. Stephen suddenly realized that he should have stopped eating long ago. That night he was sick, but he learned a lesson about the culture he had just entered.

Later, I chatted with him and knew more about him. While Mr. Stephen grew up, he was taught by his parents that he must always finish all the food on his plate at meal time. There were several reasons for this. One was because he did not want to waste food. Another was that if he could not finish his food, he obviously was too full to eat dessert (his favorite part of the meat). Mr. Stephen was also told that it was rude – a sign that he does not like the food for one reason or another. Maybe, this is why the laughing story happed with my Canadian friend. When my Chinese friends and I were told about his story, we could not hold our laughing into tears. However, it is worthy for us to deeply discuss about different factors of cultural influence on table manners from an intercultural adaptation perspective.

3. CULTURAL INFLUENCE ON TABLE MANNERS

Many cultures' table manners differ in many respects such as what to eat, how to eat, when to eat, and where to eat. Table manners in different cultures reflect different cultures' underlying values. Generally speaking, any foreigner wants to adapt to a new culture. One important thing is that he or she should be familiar with fundamental knowledge about cultural customs including table manners in a new culture because cultural customs including table manners have always played an important part in making a first good impression to the people in one host country. Any person's actions at the table while eating can be essential to how others perceive him or her and can even affect his or her success both in intercultural communication and professional careers. Now, we may discuss some things more details about the cultural influence on table manners as following.

3.1 The relationship between culture and table manners

As Edward T. Hall points out, "culture hides much more than it reveals, and strangely enough, what it hides, it hides most effectively from its own participants." And he also says that "culture controls behavior in deep and persisting ways, many of which are outside of awareness and therefore beyond conscious control of the individual." (Hall, 1959)

Therefore, culture can be viewed as an iceberg. Nine-tenths of an iceberg is out of sight (below the water line). Likewise, nine-tenths of culture is outside of conscious awareness. The part of the cultural iceberg that is above the water is easy to be noticed (Xu, 2012, 44p). To some extent, table manners evolve within culture. Table manners can vary widely between different cultures and countries. Different cultures have different cultural customs, different cultural customs have different table manners. Different table manners represent different symbols of different cultural customs from different countries. Hence, cultures are rooting in different cultural customs. There are so many different cultures all over the world, so it is impossible to touch every special one under different cultures.

From the above case, we may easily see that my Canadian friend didn't know any cultural customs and table manners in China when he first had supper with his Chinese friends. Because any host in China always persuade his guest to eat more or drink more, it shows host's hospitality and friendly with his guests. This is the reason why the Chinese teachers sitting beside my Canadian friend always refilled all kinds of food on his plate and made him full enough so that he suffered a lot from a large amount of food in his stomach.

However, we have to remember that most of the time the different table manners that are the customs of different cultures are either right or wrong. It is simply that different people do the same things in different table manners.

Therefore, the author thinks that the relationship between cultures and table manners could be understood in this way: the out-of-awareness part of table manners is sometimes called "deep cultures". This part of the cultural iceberg is hidden below the water and is thus below the level of consciousness. Any foreigners learn this part of culture through imitating models. Once these behaviors and attitudes while dining are learned, they are automatic and taken for granted.

3.2 The different influence on table manners from different cultural contexts

From an intercultural communication, we know that China is high-context culture, the Western countries including Canada are low-context cultures according to the American anthropologist Edward T. Hall's (1976) descriptions of cultural differences in the use of language and context in communication.

People in low-context cultures also follow codes of etiquette, but they are not nearly so elaborate as the Chinese codes. What often happens when Chinese are communicating with Westerners is that the Chinese person behave especially well by the standards of Chinese codes of etiquette to show the Westerner his respect and welcome and to demonstrate his own high quality as a person. The Westerner may not fully understand the significance of his Chinese host's behavior, and even if he does, he may not respond appropriately according to the Chinese etiquette code (Davis, 2011). And table manner may an integral part of etiquette. If anyone wants to know different etiquette code, he or she should learn or know different table manners.

In the Western countries, every person has one's own separate meal. Even at a dinner or a banquet, people usually take some food that they like for themselves rather than sharing dishes with other people. In recent years, with ever-widening opening up to the outside world, this custom of western culinary has made a certain influence on China's cuisine. Chinese cuisine is a brilliant facet of Chinese culture, which is proven by the fact that Chinese restaurants are found scattered everywhere throughout the world (Ye and Zhu, 2008,209p). In addition to these traditional cuisines, the culinary industry in China has undergone great changes, as almost every place has its own local specialties, just as different cuisines have gathered in one place.

But, the Chinese people still have persisted in their own eating habits and table manners, especially while treating guests at restaurants, eating seems very important in a warm and hospital atmosphere and certain sentiments. In the eating process, the hosts usually do not stop using a pair of serving chopsticks to fill the guests with nice food, meanwhile, people enjoy talking loudly and laughing soundly in a joyous atmosphere, where the hosts choose some special food for the guests or friends and the hosts and guests or friends make toasts each other. In this way, it shows out that hosts have respect warmth and hospitality to the guests or friends coming from afar.

However, during the meal, the host or hostess in the western families always offer the guests a second helping of food. Sometimes the host or hostess will ask the guests to help themselves. When the host or hostess offer the guests food, they must give a direct answer. If the guest refuse the first time, the host or hostess might not ask you to get more again.

Such culinary customs have had a certain influence on the character of the Chinese people. In a sense, it has strengthened the collective spirit of the nation. At a part or a banquet, everyone first takes into consideration the needs of the group, with the eating process also being a time to show humility and concern for others. This is different from Western eating habits, which pay more attention to individual needs. (Ye and Zhu, 2008,214p)

Otherwise, in the western countries, the culinary customs and that the host or hostess always create a relaxed, comfortable and delighted air for their guest in various ways and to make their guest enjoy that good time freely. When the dinner or the feast starts, the westerners are also warm to guests, urge guests to drink and eat, but only once or twice. To westerners, they consider saying too many words force their views on others.

It does not conform to the way one gets along with people. Usually, the dishes prepared for guests are extremely simple. The Westerners hope their guests are joyful. Meanwhile, they think that invitation is just an occasion for intercourse, a chance of the maintenance of friendship, also have all kinds of and free ways of entertainment.

In sum, different cultural contexts influence people to have different culinary customs and table manners. The people in different cultural contexts have different table manners to receive guests or friends. Therefore, people from different cultural contents should respect their own different cultural customs and table manners.

3.3 Function of Table Manners in Intercultural Adaptation

From the above discussion, we know table manners evolve within culture and can vary widely between different cultures and countries. In particular, any persons leave their home culture and enter an unfamiliar culture, they may encounter certain mental, emotional and physical discomfort. This process is essentially a communication process in which strangers learn, understand and acquire communication patterns of the new culture. Just as individuals learn their own cultural communication patterns through interaction with significant people around them, strangers acquire the culturally-recognized communication norms of the host culture and build up relationships with the new cultural environment by various means of communication. (Kim, 2010)

Needless to say, table manners are one of culturally-recognized communication norms of the host culture. Any strangers need to learn and acquire new norms acceptable in the host culture and the host society. In this way, intercultural strangers in the new country, they are subject to a greater or lesser necessity to conform to the communication patterns of the host society.

To some extent, table manners are an important step or first step to adapt to a new culture or a new country. For instance, if my Canadian friend knew the Chinese table manner, he would not suffer from eating with Chinese teachers at the restaurant and would really enjoy Chinese food. Although table manners are single, basic code shared by all, yet they make life simpler and more pleasant by removing many chances for misunderstanding intercultural communication.

Especially, Chinese people value eating very much, and there is an old but still-being-quoted saying—"Food is the first necessity of human being." Maybe, for any foreigners, table manners in China are a first step or an important step to adapt to Chinese culture or Chinese society.

Therefore, we should know that "cultural values generally are normative in that they inform a member of a culture what is good and bad, right and wrong, true and false, positive and negative, and the like. Cultural values also specify what behaviors are of importance and which should be avoided within a culture. Values represent a learned organization of rules for making choices and for resolving conflicts (Xu, 2012, 96p). Furthermore, cultural values permeate a culture and daily life including table manners.

Overall, adapting to a new culture involves a new daily life, especially table manners which are good beginning of new life in the new culture. The following suggestions should help you start a new life not only in the new culture but also in intercultural adaptation.

3.3.1. Do not forget that different countries have different cultures and customs which permeate different people's daily lives including table manner. People should own intercultural communication awareness.

3.3.2. Do not ignore learning some fundamental table manners in a new country before entering a new country. People should obtain basic knowledge about intercultural adaptation including table manners..

3.3.3. Do not keep yourself alone in a new culture. It means that you should meet new people, make friends and go out to dine with them in a new culture. In this way, people should adapt to a new culture, and smoothly communicate with new people through daily life including table manners.

4. CONCLUSION

From the above analysis and discussion, we may clearly know that table manners in different cultures reflect different cultures' underlying values, and differ in many respects such as what to eat, how to eat, when to eat, and where to eat. It seems like simple customs on the surface but there are sure to be a big problem in intercultural adaptation. Any individual's behaviors at the table during his or her eating clearly show that his or her intercultural awareness and intercultural communication competence are good enough to adapt to a new society and a new culture. Anyhow, table manners can even affect his or her success both in intercultural adaptation and professional careers. Therefore, any person can not ignore learning any table manners from a new culture before entering a new country.

At the same time, any person should know that table manners are an integral part of the specific culture and learn some fundamental knowledge and skills about table manners in a specific culture. In this way, people will not only master table manners but also gradually understand culture, it will be of benefit to improve any individual's intercultural adaptation ability. As a result, culture does not present a abstract concept or a sign and also puts down roots in our daily life. And culture permeates any customs just like table manners. Hence, any foreigner who want to learn and know a new culture should start learning cultural customs like table manners from the very beginning. Only can anyone adopts an active and respectful attitude towards a new culture and its table manners when he or she communicate with others from another culture.

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