

Inscrutability Revisited

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## INSCRUTABILITY REVISITED

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I. INTRODUCTION

Considerable thought has been expended on the understanding and the improvement of contact across different cultures, both within nations as well as between nations. The theoretical apparatus has been drawn from various disciplines. For example, recent literature by anthropologists of the ethnic processes in state societies explain the persistence of ethnicity as an aspect of socio-economic considerations and power relations. Previous work by social psychologists on the problems in cross-cultural interaction attributes the differences to one of values and attitudes.

I should like to address this paper to the philosophers and historians who, for more than three centuries, have grappled with characterizing Chinese ethos, values and perceptual framework. Many of these works seek to define the differences in logical processes between the Asian mind and the Western mind. Moreover, they attempt to delineate the differences in social processes between Asian cultures and Western cultures. Their emphases have been to either rely on historically or religious based explanations, or they search for the nexus between language and culture. Unfortunately, their excursion into the role of language in delineating modes of thinking has been mired in the study of vocabulary and isolated grammatical paradigms. Conversely, their comments on the overarching framework of social values were not linked to linguistic evidence.

This paper hopes to show that some of the Westerner's claims concerning the peculiarities of the Chinese mind and the Chinese preference towards harmonious social relationships can be traced to culturally-specific notions of acceptable discourse strategy. The unit of analysis will be Chinese speakers of English--specifically, Chinese businessmen conducting a budget meeting in English.\* This study will be guided by the assumption that these speakers will have transferred some of the mechanisms of their native speech into English.

II. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

When a Westerner listens to a foreigner whose English sounds odd, he often attributes it to grammatical inadequacies or to phonological characteristics, such as accent. When he encounters someone with an unusual discourse style, he may misjudge that person's intention or ability, leading to severe social consequences. On the other hand, there are Chinese users of English who are convinced that an improvement in the communication process with English-speakers resides in a modification of accent and an increase in vocabulary. What both groups fail to realize is that there are substantial differences in basic sentence type as well

as in certain discourse strategies.

Chinese, as well as many other mainland Southeast Asian languages, has utterances that show a topic-comment grammatical relationship, as in the sentence (from Li and Thompson 1976:479):

- (1) Huang   se   de   tu-di     dafen   zui   heshi  
       yellow color rel.   soil        manure    most        suitable  
    clause  
    marker

"The yellow soil (topic), manure is most suitable."

Y.R. Chao has suggested that fifty percent of the utterances in Chinese are topic-comment types. He has also claimed that the topic-comment utterance is "the favorite sentence type only in deliberate connected discourse" (Chao 1968:83).

The topic-comment grammatical relationship is in sharp contrast with the preferred subject-predicate format of many European languages, English as well. However, the topic-comment structure itself is not unknown in English. It functions least like:

- (2) As for the President's men, they're all a bunch of liars.

where a contrastive relationship is presumed. It is more in tune with the following:

- (3) You know the blue surfboard, a giant squid ate it.

The Chinese version of the topic-comment utterance would eliminate the "you know" and "the" portion. The sentence would read, then:

- (4) blue surfboard, a giant squid ate it.

Li and Thompson (1976) argue that the topic-comment structure is a basic sentence type and point out some of the differences between subject-prominent and topic-prominent languages: the topic is definite, selectionally independent of the verb, sets the framework for the predication and occurs in sentence-initial position. Other writings on topic-comment in Chinese have acknowledged that the topic bears a loose relationship with its comment. Chafe (1976) suggests that the topic sets the spatial, temporal or personal framework for the following assertion. Chao (1968) has stated that the topic carries the old information whereas the new or significant information is found in the comment.

To put it all succinctly then, the Chinese topic-comment utterance eliminates the necessity of the lexicalized "you know" and "the" parts of a sentence like (3), since it is understood from the context, and their appearance would consequently be redundant.

In conjunction with this discussion on topic-comment sentence organization, Chinese also has subordinate clauses that set the

evaluative framework for the main clause. The appearance of these subordinate clauses is in the order prescribed for the topic of the topic-comment utterance. In other words, they must precede the main clause (Chao 1968). Both the subordinate and the main clauses have pairs of specific lexical markers that occur in clause-initial position. The markers can be optionally dropped by either clause.

These subordinate clauses can be divided into three types:

the causal

(because).....(therefore) .....  
(since) (so)

the conditional

if.....then.....

the concessive

although.....(yet).....  
(but)

Guided by the insights of these scholars, I should like to expand their notion of topic and comment. I will extend their analyses of the functions of the topic-comment utterance to reflect beyond the sentence boundary. I will suggest that in such speech acts as explaining, justifying, and persuading, the organization of the discourse mirrors the order presented in the topic-comment utterance. The relationship of the main point to the rest of the discourse is in the order of the semantic relationship of topic to comment.

### III. ANALYSIS

A tape had been collected of Chinese businessmen in a role play conducting a budget meeting in English. There were five participants, one of whom chaired the meeting. He began the meeting by asking the participants, who were members of various departments, what should be done with an excess sum of 180,000 pounds in the budget. Several of the participants, for various reasons, requested a portion of the fund.

There is a remarkable coincidence in the presentation of requests. Like the topic of a topic-comment utterance, the reasons for the request appear initially, represent old information and establish the situational framework for the request. In more prosaic terms, the listener is given a build-up before the punch-line is delivered. The following example comes from the tape:

Theta: One thing I would like to ask. BECAUSE MOST OF OUR RAW MATERIALS ARE COMING FROM JAPAN AND ( ) THIS YEAR IS GOING UP AND UP AND UH IT'S NOT REALLY I THINK AN INCREASE IN PRICE BUT UH WE LOSE A LOT IN EXCHANGE RATE AND SECONDLY I UNDERSTAND WE'VE SPENT A LOT OF MONEY IN T.V. AD LAST YEAR, so in that case I would like to suggest here: chop half of the budget in t.v.

ads and spend a little money on Mad magazine.

Note that the justifications or reasons for the request appear before the request. The subordinate marker "because" initiates the listing of reasons while the conjunction "so" signifies the transition from the reasons to the request. Between the two markers are several independent clauses, connected by the conjunction "and", which itemize the reasons. Thus, the example shows a series of conjoined sentences which not only repeat old or assumed information but also provides the hypothetical context with which to evaluate the significant information to follow. The same structure is revealed in the next two examples. Note that the topic-comment structure can be juxtaposed to another topic-comment like structure:

(5)Chairman:...I would like to have your opinion on how we should utilize the extra amount of one hundred eighty thousand pounds to improve....(Beta's answer follows another presentation)

Beta: AS YOU KNOW, I HAVE SPENT FIVE HUNDRED AND SEVENTY THOUSAND POUNDS LAST YEAR TO ON THE MACHINERY AND COMPONENTS AND AH IF AH IF MR. AH LINCOLN WOULD LIKE TO INCREASE THE AH PRODUCTION IN AH THROUGH THE COMING YEAR, I THINK WE HAVE TO MAKE OUR BUDGET TEN PERCENT ON TOP OF THE AMOUNT FIVE HUNDRED AND FIVE HUNDRED AND SEVENTY THOUSAND POUNDS BECAUSE THERE WILL BE A TEN PERCENT ON UH INCREASE IN PRICE ON AVERAGE. AND, uh, in other words, I need another sixty thousand pounds to buy the same material and quality.

AND AS YOU KNOW WHENEVER THERE'S A SHORTAGE OF COMPONENTS ON THE( ) AMOUNT OF TIME AND AH ALTHOUGH WE HAVE ARRANGED DELIVERY OF NORMAL SUPPLIES FOR FOR FOR AT LEAST SIX MONTHS BUT WE STILL NEED AH AN EXTRA MONEY TO BUY AH THE REPLACEMENT WHICH COST US FIVE HUNDRED MORE. So in other words, I need at least six hundred thousand sorry six hundred thousand pounds for an extra, uh, extra money for the for the new ah budget for for our component.

(6)Chairman:Uh, Mr. Lincoln, do you think the new machinery that you just mentioned that will cost us sixty thousand pounds will cater for the the ( ) the new model, that is, the portable t.v. set that was just mentioned by Mr. Jeffrey?

Alpha: I think this new machine will certainly reduce the production cost. And uh AS WE HAVE AN EXTRA BUDGET OF ABOUT ONE HUNDRED EIGHTY THOUSAND POUNDS STERLING AND WE JUST SPENT ABOUT ONE THIRD OF THE TOTAL AMOUNT BUYING THIS NEW MACHINE AND AS THE SALES OF IT INCREASING, TO COVER THIS INCREASING TREND, WE HAVE TO REDUCE OUR COST OF PRODUCTION AND ALSO TO INCREASING THE PRODUCTION OF HOURS, therefore I think it is very worthwhile at minimal to invest in this new machine by buying a sixty thousand pounds sterling new machine.

I have also one thing to say. BECAUSE THE PERSONNEL MANAGER, HE MENTIONED A FEW DAYS AGO THAT UH THERE ARE SOME DIFFICULTIES IN THE EQUIPPING MORE NEW WORKERS AND ASK THE EXISTING WORKERS TO WORK OVERTIME BY PAYING THEM SOME EXTRA MONEY, AND therefore I think that we have no alternative but to buy a new machine or otherwise incur a lot of cost by using the existing one.

What is striking about the data is the similarity in the majority of the presentations, the smoothness of the interactions and the evident ease of comprehension among the participants. It demonstrates that the topic-comment effect can not be limited to an idiolect and reduces the possibility that these patterns may simply be chance occurrences.

Nonetheless, native English speakers experienced many difficulties with the discourse. The main point was initially lost on them because it laid buried in a mass of information. Adding to their confusion was a lack of understanding of how the important information was highlighted. In fact, their appreciation of the significance of any one feature proved elusive.

Moreover, sentence connectives, which play an essential role in guiding the listener's journey through the discourse, had been invested with meanings which are somewhat different from their usual associations in English. For example, the English-speakers were not fully cognizant of the fact that, in the Chinese discourse, single-word items such as "because", "as", and "so" had replaced whole-clause connectives commonly used in English, such as "in view of the fact that", "to begin with", or "in conclusion."

The English-speakers' attempts to sift through the information were compounded by another problem. The opening lines of the Chinese discourse did not provide a thesis or preview statement which would have oriented the listener to the overall direction of the discourse; the presence of a clear and concise statement of what was to be discussed would have made the discourse more precise, more dramatic and more eloquent. As it was, the clarity and the forcefulness of the main points were absent. Worst of all, the lack of precision and the failure to directly address the point led to suspicions that the Chinese speakers were beating around the bush.

Thus, the implication would seem to be that the presumed shortcomings mentioned above were influenced by the lack of the English-speakers' familiarity with, to use the Gumperz's (1976) term, the contextualization cues of the topic-comment format. It becomes easy to see how a basic unawareness of alternative linguistic structures and discourse conventions can shade into doubts concerning the reasoning abilities of the Chinese mind.

A closer examination of the linguistic data provoked another interpretation that might shed light on the view that Chinese tend to minimize confrontation in social relationships. As mentioned before, the native English-speakers called attention to the indirectness of the discourse style. When asked to appraise the effectiveness of the presentations, they commented that the Chinese arguments lacked sufficient aggressive and persuasive power. In line with these sentiments were remarks concerning the construction of the discourse. The absence of a preview statement and the mere item-by-item listing of justifications, blocked the development of a positive tone in the Chinese arguments. As a matter of fact, the listeners sensed a reluctance on the part of the Chinese to have to make a request, that they had to inevitably slide into it as a result of a convergence of forces. Likewise, it was pointed out that instead of stating their proposition somewhere in the beginning and then proceeding to build their case, the Chinese first established a shared context with which to judge their requests. Only after carefully prefacing the request with an avalanche of relevant details, as if to nullify any opposition, did they present the requests.

In view of the fact that there are correspondences between linguistic behavior and social evaluation (Giles and Powesland 1975), the Chinese examples led some Westerners to the interpretation that the Chinese were employing a deference tactic so as to not press their claim too forcefully upon the other person. The framework provided by Brown and Levinson (1978) would lead one to conclude, then, that the user of such a discourse strategy was minimizing his particular imposition by operating on the basis of "negative politeness".

The aforementioned interpretation is not incompatible with Western writings on Chinese ethos. As a matter of fact, it obliquely lends support to Western impressions that the Chinese prize harmony in social relationships. Whether it is a genuine demonstration of deference or simply the consequence of a particular discourse style needs further investigation.

While such an examination lies beyond the scope of this paper, curiosity led me to make a few inquiries of several native Chinese-speakers. I asked each of them to perform a role play similar to the budget meeting of the tape. The result was that they all began by providing the rationale behind their requests. The overall consensus was that one must always state his request or his main point last, after first articulating the reasons for it.

They provided some illuminating comments when pressed further

as to the reasons for this and as to the kinds of consequences that can develop when the opening line of the discourse indicated their position. One person flatly stated that he would not listen beyond the first sentence as he already would have heard what was wanted. Two other individuals claimed that it would be rude. It would sound as though the person was demanding something. Moreover, it made the person seem immodest, pushy, and inconsiderate for wanting things. Another person elaborated on the preceding point: in giving the impression that you were demanding something, you would lose face for acting aggressively. He added that the use of such a discourse strategy might suggest that you are not considering the other members of the group. Thus you'd be hurting people by claiming something for yourself. And, finally, he said that if you started out with a statement that strongly hinted at a request for something, despite your eventual elaboration of the rationale behind it, and, furthermore, if the chairman didn't grant it, you'd lose the respect of the others. One other person stated that it would be a foolhardy approach to hint about or mention your desires at the outset, because you're not aware of what the chairman is prepared to give you and what the others are planning to ask. In such a situation, it's considered a smart strategy if you carefully delineate the justifications that will naturally lead to your request.

Generalizing from their responses, then, there is an attempt to refrain from making prestige-damaging statements when there might be an open recognition by others that the request may not be granted. Also, there is an effort to resist any appearance of presumptuousness and overeagerness. In addition, in clarifying the circumstances behind the individual's request, such a discourse strategy avoided disagreements as to the justness of the request and the rigidity of the individual's stance. More fundamentally, their comments and the data suggest that there are significantly divergent assumptions about the appropriate linguistic behavior for a given communicative task. The different ways of structuring information receive different valuation in English-speaking and Chinese-speaking cultures. Viewed callously, the Chinese discourse appears imprecise, unwieldy and downright inept. Cast more charitably, it is seen to emphasize cooperation, prudence, and clearheaded caution.

#### IV. FINAL REMARKS

Although people have been able to coexist in inter-cultural contact, there remains an undercurrent of tension. This tension is not just a product of resource competition and power relations; it can stem from the failures in the communicative process. The fact that there are different socio-cultural assumptions underlying message construction on the discourse level is not easily recognized. Speakers from different cultural or subcultural backgrounds, in attempting to formulate a sensible interpretation when faced by an unfamiliar or unexpected discourse style, fall back on their knowledge of the evaluative frameworks



conventionalized by their own culture. Unfortunately, in cross-cultural interactions, what is generally explained as problems in grammaticality at the sentence level oftentimes becomes interpreted as behavioral differences of motivation, attitude and personality on the level of discourse. It is no exaggeration to say that continuous misperception, misinterpretation and misunderstanding in face-to-face linguistic encounters can harden into stereotypes that are reinforced cumulatively over time.

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