

A Comparative Study on Culture Adaptation in Chinese and American Advertising Discourses

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[Abstract] According to Verschueren's theory of adaptation, using language must consist of the continuous making of linguistic choices and dynamic adapting to the setting, including linguistic setting and communicative setting. Advertising discourse is a kind of strategic communicative language, and adaptation is often used as an effective strategy by advertisers to publicize the products and lure the customers to buy the advertised products. The study is conducted to compare the differences of culture adaptation in Chinese and American advertising discourse, finding different orientations where Chinese advertising discourses and American ones respectively adapt to the potential customers: 1. Collectivism vs. Individualism in Standard of Value; 2. Monism vs. Pluralism in Thinking Mode; 3. Authority vs. Equality in Concept; 4. Past Orientation vs. Future Orientation in Culture Tradition; 5. Implicitness vs. Superiority in Culture Characteristics. The results will provide valuable implication and reference for the companies, advertisers and researchers, helping the advertisers design advertisements in line with the target culture and overcome the culture barrier to international advertising communication.

[Key words] advertising discourse; comparative study; adaptation; Chinese culture; American culture

1. Introduction

In modern economic society, business advertisements have been indispensable in our daily life. Advertising discourse is a kind of persuasive language expression, aiming to convey the relevant information of some products and services in order to motivate the potential customers to purchase them. Therefore, advertising discourse has typical pragmatic features, with advertising designers trying to make the audience accept the advertised products or services and lure them to take actions with some pragmatic strategies so that they can achieve the expected communicative goals. So far some scholars have done much research on pragmatic features, pragmatic functions, and pragmatic strategies of advertising discourse and abundant research results have been made, which offer a good background for further study of advertising discourse. (Geoffrey N. Leech, 1966; Vestergaard & Schroder, 1985; Greg Myers, 1994; Cook, 2001; Chen Xinren, 1998, 2009, 2012, 2013; He Ziran & Chen Xinren, 2004; Yang Yonghe, 2008, etc.) . And pragmatic adaptation is one of the important strategies which many advertisement designers often use to publicize the products and make an effective communication. Some scholars have conducted the study of strategy of pragmatic adaptation in advertising discourse and made useful practical results. (Cui Xiuzhen, 2011; Duan Yangyang & Bai Xuefang, 2016, etc.) . But few researchers have been involved in the study of comparison of the pragmatic strategies between Chinese advertising discourse and American discourse, which is so necessary, for both China and the U.S. are important commercial and business countries, which act as representatives of eastern culture and western culture respectively. Furthermore, the results of the study will helpfully provide some implication and reference for companies, advertisers, and designers and will further promote the intercultural pragmatic research of advertising discourse.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 The Theory of Adaptation

According to Verschueren's theory of adaptation, using language must consist of the continuous making of linguistic choices, consciously or unconsciously, for language-internal or language-external reasons. These choices may range over variety internal options, or they may involve regionally, socially or functionally distributed types of variation. (Verschueren, 2000). When making linguistic choices, language users choose not only forms of language but also strategies of

communication. Making choices can be understood in terms of three hierarchically related notions: variability, negotiability and adaptability, which enable the linguistic choice-making to go on smoothly in the course of using language. Among them, adaptability is the core of language use. Adaptability is the property of language. (Verschueren, 1999) Any linguistic choice-making is motivated by specific purpose during communication. Variability describes what linguistic choices are available, while negotiability describes how linguistic choices are made. Then adaptability explains why linguistic choices are made. Linguistic choices are made to approach points of satisfaction for communication needs. Adaptation is a cognitive process, also a mechanism for language use. Variability, negotiability are the chief components of adaptation, which enable human beings to make negotiable language choices from a variable range of possibilities to meet the needs of communication.

Verschueren (2000) states that a coherent pragmatic approach to language use should be carried out from four inter-related angles, namely, contextual correlates of adaptability, structural objects of adaptability, dynamics of adaptability, and the salience of the adaptability processes. Context will identify contextual correlates of adaptability, including all the ingredients of a communicative setting which communicative choices have to be inter-adaptable with: language users, the mental world, the social world, the physical world, and the properties of the linguistic channel that is used as well as the linguistic context in which the event take place.

2.2 The Theory of Cultural Difference

The theory of cultural dimensions put forward by Hofstede is the most influential intercultural theory in the world, which consists of six dimensions of culture values, including Individualism versus Collectivism, Uncertainty avoidance, Power distance, Masculinity versus Femininity, Long-term orientation versus Short-term orientation, Indulgence versus Restraint, with the first four original and the last two added later. (Fernandez, et. al. , 1997)

First, Individualism versus Collectivism. According to Hofstede's theory, (Hofstede, 1983) in individualistic culture, the values of individual achievement, freedom, and competition are stressed. People give priority to the task and are supposed to look after their own self-interest. While in collectivistic culture, the values of group harmony, cohesiveness, and consensus are very important. And priority is given to relationship with people and group interest.

Second, Uncertainty avoidance is the tendency to behave so as to arrange things in a way that minimizes unforeseen consequences. In strong uncertainty avoidance culture, people tend to be rigid and intolerant. In weak uncertainty avoidance cultures, people are more easygoing.

Third, It is about Power distance. The degree to which a country accepts the fact the differences in its citizens' physical and intellectual capabilities give rise to inequalities in their well-being. In high power distance cultures, inequalities are allowed to persist or increase and organizations tend to be hierarchical and inequality is accepted.

Fourth, Masculinity versus Femininity. According to Hofstede, masculinity is a way to characterize culture that value assertiveness, competitiveness, and material success; femininity characterizes cultural preference for collaboration, nurturing, and harmony.

Fifth, Long-term orientation versus Short-term orientation. In long-term orientation countries, people value towards the future, like thrift and persistence. In short-term orientation countries, people value towards the past and present, and maintaining personal stability or happiness and living for the present, they are concerned with short-term results.

Sixth, Indulgence versus Restraint. Indulgence stands for a society that allows relatively free gratification of basic and natural human drives related to enjoying life and having fun. Restraint stands for a society that suppresses gratification of needs and regulates it by means of strict social norms.

3. Language Material and Method

30 pieces of Chinese advertising discourse and 30 pieces of American advertising discourse are collected, including drinks, cars, foods, etc. , which are both very classical and common ones that have been advertised in recent years. Altogether 31 pieces of Chinese advertising discourses and American ones among them are especially focused on to compare the different orientations of culture adaptation. The study methods of descriptive statistics and quality analysis is used to analyze

the advertising discourses to get the results about the different orientations of culture adaptation between Chinese and American advertising discourses.

4. Comparison on Culture Adaptation in Chinese and American Advertising Discourses

Culture is the total accumulation of beliefs, customs, values, behaviors, institutions and communication patterns that are shared, learned and passed down through the generations in an identifiable group of people. (Hall, 1976) Advertising is an effective way for traders and businesses to communicate information about their goods, services or ideas to the consumers. It is primarily concerned with attracting the purchasers' interest by building acceptance for a product or a service and by developing confidence and respect for the firm and its products or services. Advertising is a cultural product, and it means nothing outside of culture. (O' Guinn, 1998) Different ways and languages in advertising have different effects on consumers from different cultures. So smart advertisers do value the factors of culture, and they are not only familiar with target consumers' culture, but also try to make the advertising discourse be adapted to corresponding culture when designing advertisements.

This study shows that both Chinese advertisers and American ones mainly make their advertising discourses adapt to the target consumers' cultural values, thinking modes, cultural traditions and philosophic concepts so as to get satisfactory communicative effects, among which the dimensions of Past Orientation, Collectivism, Authority make up 30%, 29% and 22% in Chinese advertising discourse (See Table) And it can be concluded that the above three dimensions are more often used by Chinese advertisers in designing Chinese advertising discourse. But the dimensions of Implicitness and Monism only make up 7% and 12% in Chinese advertising discourse. As for the American advertising discourse, minor difference has been found between each dimension, with the dimension of Individualism, Future Orientation, Superiority making up 23%, 22%, and 20% respectively, and Equality and Pluralism making up 18% and 17%.

Table. Different dimensions of culture adaptation

Dimensions	Chinese ad discourse(30)	U.S. ad discourse(30)
Collectivism vs. Individualism	29%	23%
Monism vs. Pluralism	12%	17%
Authority vs. Equality	22%	18%
Past Orientation vs. Future Orientation	30%	22%
Implicitness vs. Superiority	7%	20%

4.1 Collectivism vs. Individualism in Standard of Value

Cultural values guide actions and communication. (Samovar, Porter & Stefani, 2000) Different cultural background determines different standards of values among people. One of the main differences between Chinese and American people lie in collective orientation vs. individual orientation. The Chinese have a strong group orientation, and group interest always ranks first. So Chinese consumers often choose to buy those products most people buy because they tend to think that products or services favored by the majority are good ones. Also according to Chinese standard of value, personal value lies in the selfless dedication and personal happiness must be subject to collective benefits. Therefore, Chinese people pay more attention to national affairs, family affairs,

everything concerned, and give others considerate and concerning care. While American people lay much emphasis on individual development and self-actualization. As for shopping habits, American people like those which are distinguished from others. Any linguistic choice-making is motivated by specific purpose during communication, and language users always try to adapt to the communication setting consciously or unconsciously. (Verschuere, 1999) So advertising discourses are reflection of different value orientations, which are the defining expressions of culture. It is strongly believed that effective advertising discourses all successfully express and affirm the own values, beliefs, thinking modes and cultural traditions of the targeted people. Every country has its own standards of values. Chinese society is collectivistic and the Chinese tend to put the benefits of group or society in the first place, while American society is individualistic and thus more prone to strive for self-achievement and self-satisfaction. These standards of values are often reflected in advertising discourses. For example:

- (1) 你好, 我好, 他好, 大家好, 才是真的好。(Houdy shampoo ad.)
- (2) 中国人的生活, 中国人的美菱。(Mei Ling fridge ad.)
- (3) 妈妈, 我又梦见了村边的小溪, 梦见了奶奶, 梦见了您。妈妈, 我给您捎去一样好东西。威力洗衣机, 献给妈妈的爱。(Weili washing machine ad.)

In the cultural context of collective orientation, following the majority is considered as the best way in decision making. So the above advertising discourses are adapted to Chinese consumers' standard of values, which may be persuasive in the Chinese culture with such words as "we, everybody, all people". However, these advertising discourses may not be acceptable in the American culture because American people stress individual initiative and achievement, and well appreciate the pursuit of personality and freedom, which can be shown clearly in the following examples.

- (4) Confounding your neighbours is more fun than impressing them. Find your own road. (SAAB car ad.)
- (5) What Sort of Man Read Playboy? He's his own man. An individualist. And he can afford to express himself with style——in everything from the girls he dates to the way he dresses. (Playboy ad.)
- (6) The box fits in my jeans or jacket and doesn't get crushed. That makes a difference. Winston's taste makes a real difference, too. No cigarette gives me more taste. For me, Winston is real. (Winston cigarette ad.)
- (7) Just do it. (Nike ad.)

In the above advertisements, we can easily find the words or phrases which stress uniqueness, differences and individual development such as "your own", "his own", "individualist" and "difference". The advertisers make use of such cultural consciousness to give American consumers a strong sense of individuality and originality, and to arouse their desire to take actions. Obviously, these advertising discourses succeed in complying with the standards of value and adapting to the consumers' social world and mental world.

4.2 Monism vs. Pluralism in Thinking Mode

Different nations have different philosophic concepts and thinking modes, which certainly influence their linguistic forms and language use. The traditional Chinese view of universe, "the harmony of heaven and man", perfectly shows one of the Chinese philosophic concepts in Chinese traditional culture. It insists that human beings and nature should be in harmony. Therefore, Chinese regard human beings as just another form of the physical world. With such thinking mode, Chinese people often combine separate parts of an object or idea into a unity, while the American people often keep the view point of pluralism. These thinking modes and philosophic concepts can be reflected in the following advertisement discourses.

- (8) 天上彩虹, 人间长虹。(Chang Hong TV set ad.)
- (9) 取天上太阳, 用人间辉煌。(Hui Huang solar water heater ad.)
- (10) 扬子天地, 扬子电器。(Yangzi electric appliance ad.)
- (11) The Orangemostest Drink in the world. (Orangemostest juice ad.)
- (12) I'm more satisfied. (More cigarette ad.)
- (13) He just killed the last dragon! (Kodar ad.)

When people use language, negotiable language choices are made from a variable range of possibilities to meet the needs of communication. (Verschuere, 2000) The above-mentioned

advertisements all try to adapt to consumers' mental world and social world. Chinese advertising discourses appeal to consumers by bringing consumers a sense of harmony. Furthermore, the parallel structures in these advertisements increase the effect of the union of man and nature. On the contrary, the American culture insists on the view of pluralism, which emphasizes on the changes and differences of the matter, self-development, and enterprising spirits. And well cultivated in cognition and analytic thought, American people have their own thinking mode and the concept that the nature should be under the control of human beings. So the concept of the emphasis of man and conquest is frequently employed in American advertising discourses. And the advertisers are trying to satisfy the American customers by adapting to the philosophic concepts and thinking mode in the American culture.

4.3 Authority vs. Equality in Concept

According to Verschueren's the theory of adaptation, language choice-making and use may adapt to language users' mental world, such as personality, emotions, beliefs, desires or wishes, motivations or intentions, etc. (Verschueren, 2000) In China, people think highly of those who obey the rules and the high authority, which leads to the Chinese belief that people should obey the official and organizational rules without any doubt. So official authorities have great power to influence the purchasing behavior of consumers. In order to get the consumers' trust, the advertisers often enumerate honors and certificates to prove the good reputation of their high quality products. Such expressions as“免检产品”, “部优”, “驰名商标”, “金奖”, “奥运会指定产品”are frequently used in Chinese advertising discourses. Different from the Chinese consumers, American people are not easily attracted by official or authoritative recommendations. Instead, they give priority to personal concepts, values and interests, and only trust scientific research, facts and professional appraisal other than so-called authorities.

- (14) 400 年泸州老窖飘香, 70 年国际金牌不倒。中华的骄傲——泸州老窖。(Lu Zhou Old Cellar liquor ad.)
- (15) 上海皮鞋厂向花牌女鞋消费者致谢, 花牌女鞋被推荐为参加全国驰名商标评选。上海市著名商标, 轻工业部, 上海市优质产品。(Huapai women shoes ad.)
- (16) 临床验证高露洁牙膏安全有效; 中国和世界专业权威机构一致认证: 高露洁安全、有效; 中国及全球口腔护理专家一致推荐: 高露洁安全、有效; 全球公认: 高露洁安全、有效。用高露洁牙膏, 保护牙齿, 没有蛀牙! (Colgate toothpaste ad.)
- (17) Standard dual air bags. Steel safety cell construction. Side door guard beams. 24-hour roadside assistance. Available antilock brakes. Available all-speed traction control. Air conditioning. Electronic AM/ FM stereo cassette. Air filtration system. Dual remote beat mirrors. Rear defroster and more. (Ford car ad.)
- (18) “In your life, people always say that you can't do this or that. People always say that you are not good, not strong, and not intelligent: They still believe you don't have the right figure, the right physical conditions. They always say you can't. In your life, for millions of times they will resolutely and determinedly say you can't. Until you prove yourself that you can” (Nike ad.)
- (19) Obey your thirst. (Sprite drink ad.)

So the above examples indicate that the advertising discourses do try to adapt to consumers' concepts, desires, emotions, beliefs etc. and keep consistent with cultural background of the society to make the advertisements publicized effectively.

4.4. Past Orientation vs. Future Orientation in Culture Tradition

According to the theory of cultural dimensions, in long term oriented societies, people value actions and attitudes that affect the future: persistence/perseverance, thrift, and shame, while in short term oriented societies, people value actions and attitudes that are affected by the past or the present: normative statements, immediate stability, protecting one's own face, respect for tradition, and reciprocation of greetings, favors, and gifts.

China is a country with a long history, a refulgent civilization and age-old tradition, so past orientation is a typical value orientation of Chinese cultural tradition. Chinese people take great pride in their five-thousand-year civilization and splendid culture created by their intelligent and diligent ancestors. Correspondingly, anything related to long history and tradition is considered to

be valuable and reliable. On the contrary, future orientation prevails in the western culture. American people tend to believe that all will be better in the future. The word “new” is often employed in American advertising discourses. People always value and accept almost everything that is “new” in the American cultural tradition.

- (20) 百年老字号, 广州皇上皇。(Emperor Huang sausage ad.)
- (21) 传奇品质, 百年张裕。(Zhang Yu wine ad.)
- (22) 千古佳酿, 万代留香, 中华酒宗, 汝阳杜康。(Du Kang liquor ad.)
- (23) Instead of soap, try a whole new way to wash your face. New pond’s leaves your skin feeling soft and smooth. Try it and see. (Pond’s ad.)
- (24) A new moisturizer made from pure Johnson’s Baby Oil, swirled light and creamy . Try it. And strike it rich. New! Johnson’s creamy baby oil. (Johnson ad.)
- (25) The choice of a new generation. (Pepsi Cola ad.)

In order to achieve the desired communicative effect, language use may try to adapt to the language users’ social world such as social settings, institutions, culture, etc., (Verschuere, 2000) That is why the above-mentioned advertising discourses stress repeatedly that the advertised products are “old” or “new”. The advertisers are trying to cater to the customers’ cultural tradition by readily touch a chord in their hearts and trigger their desire to buy the products someday.

4.5 Implicity vs. Superiority in Culture Characteristics

Contextual correlates of adaptability potentially include all the ingredients of the communicative context with which linguistic choices have to be inter-adaptable. The range goes from aspects of physical surroundings to social relationship between speakers and hearers and aspects of the interlocutor’s state of mind. (Verschuere, 1999). So successful advertising discourses do adapt to the target audiences’s social recognition and awareness and culture characteristics, trying to make the potential customers appeal to the information of the products and accept the advertisements by applying multi-modal approaches, including sounds, images, special texts and language expressions, etc.

- (26) 格兰仕微波炉—— 中国第几品牌? (Galanz microwave oven ad.)
- (27) 我来迟了, 因为我走了几万年。(BiYuanDong mineral water ad.)
- (28) 凯歌牌全自动洗衣机就一个缺点, 如果能自动晾衣服就好了。(Kai Ge automatic washing machine ad.)
- (29) Every 27 seconds the average man thinks about sex. The rest of the time; he’s all of ours. (ESPN ad.)
- (30) Del Monte Natural Resources Try all four Del Monte. You’ll get the 100% pure taste of fruit in its own juice, with no sugar added. And no preservatives or artificial flavours. Just a natural abundance of taste. WE GROW DEL MONTE NATURAL TASTE, QUALITY
- (29) Take the Pepsi challenge. (Pepsi drink ad.)
- (31) The best beef and soy bean throughout America! (Stockley Man Foodstuff Company ad.)

From the above advertising discourses, we can see that the difference between the two groups of advertising discourses lies in that American advertising discourses directly and confidently proclaim the top-ranking status while Chinese ones indirectly or implicitly indicate leading position of the products in their respective sectors. In Chinese culture, modesty and implicity is regarded as a traditional virtue. Because Chinese people are strongly influenced by feudalism and have been taught to be polite and modest so that they look reserved and conservative. On the contrary, westerners, especially American people, have culture characteristics of being highly self-esteemed and self-confident to make achievements. So they are superior, open, direct and even arrogant. Therefore, the advertising discourses are designed to adapt to the Chinese and American customers’ culture characteristics respectively.

5. Discussion

Advertising is not only a product of economy, but also a product of culture. There are some differences as well as the similarities between Chinese and American advertising discourses. These differences derive from their respective cultures. The study shows that what advertisers do is trying to make the advertising discourses consistent with the values, beliefs, thinking modes and cultural traditions of the target consumers so as to effectively publicize their products. After comparing the

different culture orientations between Chinese and American advertising discourses, some connections are also found between the above dimensions, that is, Monism, collectivism, power distance, past orientation, modesty and restraint are related to each other. Conversely, pluralism, individualism, equality, future orientation, superiority and indulgence are in the same situation, which are also related to each other.

However, there are still some other exact facts that need to be discussed here. Firstly, with the trend of globalization and economic integration, goods flow more freely in the world market. More and more products need to be exported and imported. International advertising is an inevitable trend, and then advertisers must consider the cultural difference, because the ignorance of cultural difference may lead to failure of promoting the products in foreign countries. According to Verschueren, Contextual correlates are not static extra-linguistic realities which themselves are subject to variation and negotiation in interaction with aspects of the unfolding speech event in relation to which they can be seen to function. All communication is adapted to these three aspects: physical, social and mental world. (Verschueren, 1999) Nowadays the increasing globalization of the economy has turned the whole world into a large marketplace. So Chinese culture which typically represents eastern culture has to be integrated into western culture, especially American culture, which may be a representative of western culture. And to create effective advertisements, advertisers should try to adapt the advertising discourses to the potential customers' standards of value, thinking modes, cultural traditions and social and cultural psychology, otherwise the advertisements will fail to publicize. Many companies spare no efforts to cater to the deep-rooted national cultural characteristics of target audience. Take the brand of Coca-cola. Its American advertising discourse frequently utilize such values as independence and individual enjoyment by depicting a picture of one young man who is drinking Coca-Cola joyfully, whereas its Chinese advertising discourse draw on distinctive Chinese culture characteristics of group consensus and conformity and highlights the collective pleasure of enjoying the drink of Coca-Cola, inviting the stars of S.H.E and Liu Xiang to demonstrate the glamour of the drink so as to bring about the affinity of the product with Chinese general consumers and expected inter-cultural communication effects. Secondly, with the development of economy and society, the international communication increasingly strengthen Chinese consumers' modern awareness and concepts, who tend to accept the goods of fashionable and western styles. Perhaps it can be considered as one of the reasons for the dimension of Implicity only making up 7% among 30 pieces of Chinese discourses. Furthermore, based on the property of advertising, Chinese advertisers now strongly realize the essence of advertising publicity and the appropriate strategies needed, so that they reasonably make the advertising discourses be adapted to the target consumers' social world, mental world and physical world. Thirdly, although the study mainly focuses on the different orientations of culture adaptation between Chinese advertising discourses and American ones, there are also some similar features among both groups of advertising discourses, about which the follow-up study will be conducted in the future.

6. Conclusion

Based on Verschueren's the theory of adaptation and Hofstede's theory of cultural difference, the study compares and analyzes the different orientations of culture adaptation between Chinese and American advertising discourses and research results have been obtained. The study indicates that both Chinese advertising discourses and American ones are designed to be adapted to target consumers' standards of value, thinking modes, concepts, culture traditions, culture characteristics to make the information of the products accepted by the consumers and motive them to take actions to buy. And also the paper discusses the flexible practice of culture adaptation in the localization and globalization setting. The research results will provide helpful implication and reference for advertisers and scholars.

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