

Social Script Theory and Cross-Cultural Communication

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When people are engaged in communication they have in their minds certain social scripts which they internalize through day-to-day interaction with other people, and which influence their presupposition, and hence their way of communication. This paper attempts to compare some social scripts in certain situations such as eating in a restaurant, giving and receiving gifts, and telephone conversations, in order to highlight the invisible effects that social scripts exert on the discourse in cross-cultural communication.

As people are engaged in varieties of day-to-day activities they internalize certain concepts in different situations in their minds. These internalized situational concepts are defined as social scripts (Schank & Abelson, 1977; St. Clair, 2005, 2006). Social scripts are culture-specific, i.e., if one is born and brought up in a certain culture community, they internalize social scripts with characteristics of that community. For example, the restaurant scripts of someone from China are, in one way or another, different from the scripts of someone from America that are depicted by St. Clair (2006). This paper tries to compare several situational schemas in Chinese and American contexts to show their respective similarities and differences under social script theory, especially with a focus on their significance in cross-cultural communication.

The Characteristics of Social Scripts

Social scripts are not innate, i.e., they are not instinctive, but something one acquires or learns from daily activities, from interactions with other people. The first cry of an infant, it should be noted, is not the externalization of a social script. It is an instinctive action. But the repeated crying of an infant urging the mother to breastfeed is a social script because the concept of crying and breastfeeding is imbedded in the mind as a social event that involves both the infant and the mother. In other words, crying and breastfeeding are forms of interaction between infant and mother and the infant has generalized the concept which has been gradually internalized. Consequently, the infant externalizes the concept when feeling hungry.

Social scripts are internalized through actions or interactions and they require a situation to externalize the concepts in the mind. It is concomitant with what Ratner (1996) describes as *activity theory*. The externalization of social scripts must follow the typical practice or social norms in particular situations. Social scripts are modified through interaction over time. In the process, they are enriched. The externalization of social scripts depends on the context of the situation, their richness in the mind, and the experience of the people in the situation.

Social scripts differ in complexity. Some are very simple, like the breastfeeding of a baby, whereas others are very sophisticated, like hosting a wedding ceremony. The complexity of social scripts depends on the procedure by which an event is accomplished.

Social scripts are both verbal and nonverbal. Since social activities are accomplished

both in words and in actions so social scripts are internalized in words and in actions and are externalized in the same way. The verbal and nonverbal aspects of social scripts are hardly separable. They coexist in the minds of people and require both verbal and nonverbal actions to externalize them.

Social scripts are not human-specific—animals also have social scripts. As mentioned above, social scripts are not innate, not something human beings are born with. In other words, anything human beings acquire and learn exists in mind as social scripts. Not all actions of animals are instinctive; instead animals learn and internalize what is important to them. And what they have learned or internalized are their scripts. For example, lions hunt in a family group. Hunting is a team effort. When they catch a prey, they eat according to the hierarchy of the family group. Usually the father lion eats the prey first, and then the mother lion, followed by the elder brothers and elder sisters, and finally the younger brothers and sisters. Instinctively each member of the lion family would like to eat their prey first as on some occasions to be the last ones to eat the prey means no meat left for them. Yet they still stand at a distance and watch their father or mother eating the prey. So eating their prey according to the hierarchical order of the family is the script internalized in every member of the lion family. It is their dining script.

Social scripts are not universal. They are different from one culture to another in one way or another. In some situations social scripts differ slightly whereas in other situations they differ dramatically. In the former case, people in a new culture will experience little or no culture shock while in the latter case people will experience culture shock to a great extent. In cross-cultural communication how to mediate the externalization of social scripts according to specific situations is a big question. On the one hand, social scripts are internalized in a particular culture, usually one's native culture. On the other hand, social scripts may occur across cultures. In this case, the proper externalization of social scripts will depend on one's intercultural experience, and which cultural norms should be followed remains a problem that social script theorists need to explain. For example, in recent years many in China have witnessed the tremendous influence of American culture through mass media and intercultural trade. English is becoming the commercial and educational lingua franca, so in most cases the externalization of social scripts includes the norms of American thought and social praxis. This means that some participants in this international language are using Chinese social scripts when speaking English and they are unaware of the fact that they should be using American social scripts in the process.

The American Social Script for Dining in a Restaurant

St. Clair and his colleagues (St. Clair, Thome-Williams, & Su, 2005) developed a model of the social script for dining in an American restaurant. In this work, they note that there are certain understood actions associated with negotiating one's behavior in a restaurant and there is a special vocabulary associated with these actions. Their research can be found in the following chart (Table 1) that they developed to express their theoretical model of praxis.

The Chinese Social Script for Dining in a Restaurant

There are numerous differences between the American model of dining in a restaurant and those of dining in a Chinese restaurant.

Cultural Differences Across Social Scripts

The restaurant schemas in American and Chinese situations are similar to a great extent, but several points are different and worth our attention in cross-cultural communication. The first person the customer approaches when he enters an American restaurant is a host who has someone direct the customer to a table but in most Chinese restaurants the customer goes to a waiter who directs him to a table or he finds a table for himself (which is usually the case in

Table 1 American Restaurant Social Script

The Restaurant Schema under Social Script Theory	
Event Frame	Dining at an American restaurant
Social Roles	Waiter, customer, cashier, busboy, manager, cook.
Episodic Functions	<p>Enter a restaurant.</p> <p>Approach the host.</p> <p>Have someone direct the customer to a table.</p> <p>Have someone bring a menu to the customer.</p> <p>The customer peruses the menu.</p> <p>Have the waiter approach the customer and ask for an order.</p> <p>The customer puts in his order</p> <p>The waiter leaves and eventually returns with the food.</p> <p>The waiter signals the end of the main meal by asking about desserts.</p> <p>The customer signals the end of the meal by asking for the bill.</p> <p>The waiter brings the bill or the check.</p> <p>The customer either pays the waiter or pays the cashier.</p> <p>The customer pays the cashier.</p> <p>The customer may leave a tip.</p> <p>The customer leaves the restaurant.</p>
Lexicon	Waiter, customer, table, main meal, deserts, tip, cashier, restaurant, the bill, the check, the menu, etc.
Script	Enter a restaurant, approach a waiter, go to your assigned table, accept the menus, read them, place an order, wait for the meal, eat your meal, discuss the topic of conversation during the meal, wait for the waiter to ask if you want to have a dessert, order the dessert (optional), receive the bill, leave a tip, pay the cashier, leave the establishment.

most Chinese restaurants). The second point is that in American restaurants the waiter signals the end of the main meal by asking about desserts (ice-cream, cakes, salad, etc.). However in a Chinese restaurant the waiter signals the end of the main part of the meal by asking about “the main food.” The third point is that in American restaurants the customer tips the waiter, normally between 10% and 15% of the bill. In contrast, in Chinese restaurants the customer seldom tips the servers or waiters.

Table 2 Chinese Restaurant Social Script

The Restaurant Schema under Social Script Theory	
Event Frame	Dining at a Chinese restaurant
Social Roles	Waiter, customer, cashier, busboy, manager, cook.
Episodic Functions	<p>Enter a restaurant.</p> <p>Approach a waiter.</p> <p>The waiter directs the customer to a table.</p> <p>The waiter brings a menu to the customer.</p> <p>The customer peruses the menu.</p> <p>The waiter approaches the customer and asks for an order.</p> <p>The customer puts in an order.</p> <p>The waiter leaves and eventually returns with the food.</p> <p>The waiter signals the end of the main meal by asking about “main food” (literally translated, which usually means steamed rice, noodles, dumplings, etc., from which the customer chooses one or two items).</p> <p>The customer signals the end of the meal by asking for the bill.</p> <p>The waiter brings the bill or the check.</p> <p>The customer either pays the waiter or pays the cashier.</p> <p>The customer pays the cashier.</p> <p>The customer leaves the restaurant.</p>
Lexicon	Waiter, customer, table, main meal, main food, cashier, restaurant, the bill, the check, the menu, etc.
Script	Enter a restaurant, approach a waiter, go to your assigned table, accept the menus, read them, place an order, wait for the meal, eat your meal, discuss the topic of conversation during the meal, wait for the waiter to ask if you want to have the “main food”, order the “main food” (optional), receive the bill, pay the cashier, leave the establishment.

Table 3 American Gift Giving Social Script

Event Frame	Giving and Receiving Gifts between Americans
Script	Buy or make gift.
	Wrap the gift and attach a card.
	Give the gift and say something.
	Receive the gift graciously and thank the giver.
	Open the gift or immediately use it.
	Write a thank-you note or thank-you card.

Table 4 Chinese Gift Giving Social Script

Event Frame	Giving and Receiving Gifts between Chinese People
Script	Buy or make gift.
	Wrap the gift and attaching a card.
	Give the gift and say something.
	Receive the gift with much denial.
	Seldom open the gift or immediately use it. Put the gift away and open after the giver leaves.
	Seldom write a thank-you note or thank-you card.

The Social Script of Gift Giving in America and in China

Social script theory can also reveal major cross-cultural differences. Of particular interest to those visiting China is the social script of giving and receiving gifts.

Giving and receiving gifts in cross-cultural communication is a common practice. We can recognize a few different parts in the schema by comparing American and Chinese ways of giving and receiving gifts. Both Americans and Chinese wrap gifts but attaching cards is more often than not missing in Chinese customs. It is especially worth noticing that Americans usually accept gifts graciously and thank the giver, and in most cases they immediately open the gift and make use of it if the gift is something functional, because for them receiving gifts graciously is a way of showing their appreciation for what the presenter has done for them. But Chinese people usually receive gifts with much denial and reserve and seldom open the gift in the presence of the giver because, for Chinese people, receiving gifts with denial and reserve is to show modesty. Another practice which differs is that after giving-and-receiving events Americans usually write a thank-you note or card while we Chinese seldom do this.

The Social Script of the Telephone Conversation in America and in China

As stated above, social scripts exist in the minds of people both in verbal form and nonverbal form because human communications are performed mainly in these two forms. Both forms are internalized in the course of communication and when a situation stimulates, communication begins. Take telephone calls for instance; since there is no opportunity to observe body language, it is done mainly in verbal form. But the interaction procedure is, to

some extent, in existence before the interaction starts. In other words the social script of a telephone call is embedded in the mind and it requires a stimulus for externalization. If the content of a telephone call is beside consideration the procedure is, to a great extent, standard. For example:

Receiver: Hello.

Caller: Hello. This is Daniel Johns. Can I talk to Prof. Clair?

R: Prof. Clair can't come to the phone right now. Can I take a message?

C: Please tell him to call me.

R: OK. Can I have your phone number?

C: Five-one-five, eight-three-one, six-eight-five-two.

R: Five-one-five, eight-three-one, six-eight-five-two?

C: That's right.

R: OK, Daniel. I'll tell him you called.

C: Thanks. Goodbye.

A typical telephone call between Chinese people may go like this:

A: Hello! Is Prof. Jin in the office?

B: Hello! He is not. He went out a moment ago.

A: Could you tell him that the afternoon class is changed to classroom 204?

B: OK. No problem.

A: Thank you.

B: Not at all.

A: Goodbye.

B: Goodbye.

Though the telephone call is conducted verbally, its social scripts are actually embedded in the conversation. In the American situation it is the receiver that speaks first either by saying "Hello," telling his name, telephone number, or the name of the institution. But in Chinese situations it is the caller who speaks first by giving a greeting. Taking a message for the person the caller wants to speak to is also of significance in terms of social script. In the American situation, the receiver does not merely tell the caller that Prof. St. Clair is not in at that moment, but he offers help by volunteering to take a message. He verbalizes what is the common practice of telephone calls. In the Chinese situation, more often than not, it is the caller that asks the receiver to take a message.

Conclusion

Because people internalize social scripts by observing and experiencing similar problems in natural situations in different cultural backgrounds, it is by "being in the situation" that one comes to recognize and know the social scripts of their own culture (St. Clair, 2006, p. 14). Once one encounters a new cultural situation, most probably they will transfer what is internalized in their mind and feel the cultural gap. It is from actual cross-cultural situations

that one is able to develop social scripts of the events and actions when encountering a new culture.

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