

Speaking Appropriately

A foreigner once said to a western woman, "You're so white and so fat." He thought he was paying her a compliment, but his English, although grammatically correct, was inappropriate for that particular cultural situation and caused offence.

We know it's important to learn Chinese well. We also know we must acquire a thorough understanding of Chinese culture in order to know how to act in a culturally appropriate way. But, in all our learning, do we spend sufficient time focusing on the link between language and culture, i.e. how to speak *appropriately*? Learning to be a well-mannered foreigner is key to becoming accepted, and acceptance is vital in order to be effective.

As someone once said, "We don't just say anything to anyone for any purpose. We don't just talk at any time or in any place or by any means or in any way. We only talk to appropriate people about appropriate things for appropriate purposes. We talk at appropriate times in appropriate places by appropriate means in appropriate ways."

So, as we study Chinese, while we are busy memorizing vocabulary and getting to grips with the grammar, how can we also learn to speak appropriately? The more time we spend on this, the more Chinese people will enjoy spending time with us, for they appreciate and warm to the well-mannered foreigner.

Appropriateness is all about the *social rules* of the language. For example, supposing we need to ask the name of someone we have never met before, our language will vary according to the relative age, status and relationship we have with the person with whom we are communicating. We also need to be clear whether the situation is formal or informal.

Hence, we get the following:

AGE	STATUS	RELATIONSHIP
FORMAL -----	<i>or</i> -----	INFORMAL

Eliciting names

So, if the other person is someone older and the situation is formal, we would say, "Nin2 gui4 xing4?" but if the person is a young child whom we meet at a friend's party, it would be appropriate to simply say, "Ni3 jiao4 shen2me ming2zi?"

'Eliciting names' in linguistics is called a 'function'. Here are some other common functions: greetings, leave-takings, invitations, making appointments, expressing thanks, apologizing, expressing disapproval, interrupting, giving and responding to compliments, expressing doubt, correcting & disagreeing, giving opinions & advice, complaining, offering sympathy, asking for and denying permission, congratulating.

So, for each function, it is important to understand the appropriate way to express ourselves. A possible chart might look like the following:

AGE	STATUS	RELATIONSHIP
FORMAL -----	<i>or</i> -----	INFORMAL

Eliciting names:

formal/adult: Nin2 gui4xing4?

informal/child: Ni3 jiao4 shen2me ming2zi?

As regards some of the other functions, we are not just trying to learn how to put sentences together in a grammatically accurate way, but also to understand what are the social rules appropriate to that particular function. For instance,

invitations: how to know when the other person is giving a genuine invitation or is simply being polite (e.g. "you3 kong4 dao4 wo3 jia1 lai2 zuo4 zuo4").

apologizing: when and how it is necessary to express regret for a faux pas, or when no apology is needed (e.g. accidentally bumping into someone).

expressing disapproval: when to use silence or non-cooperation to show disagreement (e.g. "yi3hou4 zai4 shuo1, hao3 bu hao3?").

responding to a compliment: when to accept one and when to simply say, "na3li3 na3li3"

Knowing how to handle some situations may not be easy because, as westerners, an approach which is appropriate in a 'direct' society may be inappropriate in an 'indirect' society. For instance, *giving opinions:* when and how to state one's opinion can be quite different from what we are used to because the very way we do it sends a message in itself (e.g. we can sound rude, know-it-all or proud).

Not only is it important to be clear on the other person's status, it is also key that we are clear on our own status (e.g. as a teacher) because other people will expect us to behave accordingly. This is why I feel we should be careful about learning too much Chinese slang in our early days!

Seeing that speaking (and behaving) appropriately is so important, how can we go about learning how to do this?

Firstly, *cultivate an insatiable curiosity:* keep asking your teacher and trusted Chinese friends what is appropriate in a certain situation. People appreciate the foreigner who has a teachable spirit.

Be observant: notice how Chinese people interact – both in real life and on T.V. – and when you spot something that is different to how you would behave, ask foreigners who have been in China for some time and are themselves culturally sensitive how they view it.

Keep a notebook listing questions, observations and discoveries. Who knows, one day you might write a book about it! Talking of books, there are lots of excellent books available on this subject. Do read them as they will help you understand what is going on around you.

Finally, attitude is key. It takes humility, empathy and sincerity to learn how to speak and behave appropriately. But this will result in ever deepening relationships where Chinese people feel comfortable with you, which, after all, is key to becoming accepted and hence opening up opportunities to share your life with them.