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Rhetorical Exigence and Coordinated Management of Meaning: Alternative Approach for Compliance Gaining Studies

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Abstract

Rubin and Graham (1994) pointed out that measurements designed specifically for one context might not provide reliable results in other contexts. Therefore, it might not be a proper move to study compliance-gaining techniques in an Asian context, for example, based on Western typologies. This paper aims to raise awareness of the possibility of applying inappropriate Western typologies in an Asian or other cultural contexts and to propose rhetorical exigence and Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) as an alternative approach to study compliance gaining.

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Compliance-gaining studies, Rhetorical exigence, Coordinated Management of Meaning, Culture and behavior

1. Introduction

In our daily lives, it is quite impossible for us to avoid engaging in compliance-gaining situations. Gass and Seiter (2003) stated in their work that, “we are surrounded by influence attempts” (p. 2). In most interactions, two participants may or may not be aware that they are trying to gain compliance from each other. Regardless of the awareness, once one interactant complies, another successfully gains compliance.

Compliance Gaining can happen from the most common contexts. Let us consider family as an example. Children get up and are getting ready for school and their mother tells them to have breakfast before they leave. If the children do so, the mother’s compliance gaining strategy obviously has succeeded. What if the children do not want to have breakfast, do they have to give their mother a reason? The children, to avoid long complaints from their mother, might have to come up with reasons to gain compliance from their mother. The reasons that explain their need to leave and unwillingness to have breakfast. To gain compliance, in this case from the mother, the children must know their mother well enough to know what kinds of reasons the mother will comply with. In a more obvious compliance-gaining context, a salesperson is trying to sell you a hotel membership while you are trying to

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say “No.” Both you and the salesperson definitely have to bombard each other with reasons and use different strategies to gain compliance from one another. The salesperson surely tries to sell the membership, and you, if you are not interested, probably figure out how to reject the sell. Apparently, both participants simultaneously engage in compliance gaining strategies.

What strategies should the children use with their mother? How do you and the salesperson know which strategy will work best? There is no absolute answer. There is no single strategy that can work well across situations (Gass & Seiter, 2003). Even though many researchers have tried to categorize and group strategies, none of them claim which one works best or even better than others. That is probably because there are many factors influencing the selection of compliance-gaining strategies. Those include, for example, situational dimensions such as short-term or long-term consequences (Miller, Boster, Roloff, & Seibold, 1977), emotional impacts (Hunter & Boster, 1987), and power (Levine & Boster, 2001).

The emergence of globalization has added another dimension to communication research. The process of globalization has brought individuals from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds together in families, public parks, and educational institutions. Based on the notion that people from different countries or cultures tend to act differently (Hofstede, 2001), cross-cultural studies have become pervasive in academic research, especially in communication. For instance, conflict management in the cross-cultural context has been vastly studied by many scholars such as Tang and Kirkbride (1986), Varner and Beamer (1995), Ting-Toomey (1999), and Knutson, Hwang, and Deng (2000). Even though the study of compliance-gaining strategies still has not been related much to cultural differences (Lu, 1997), there is no reason not to believe that it will be another popular topic for cross-cultural studies in the future.

My major concern regarding this type of cross-cultural study is the inappropriateness of applying Western perspectives to an Asian or other cultural contexts. Rubin and Graham (1994) pointed out in their work that measurement designed specifically for one context might not provide reliable results in other contexts. Therefore, it might not be a proper move to study compliance-gaining strategies in an Asian context, for example, based on Western typologies. As a matter of fact, from the early adopted compliance-gaining taxonomies of Marwell and Schmitt (1967) to the famous typologies of behavior alteration techniques (BATs) and behavior alteration messages (BAMs) of Kearney, Plax, Richmond, and McCroskey (1984), none of them are generated from Asian perspectives. Besides culture, another concern of mine is about the way compliance-gaining studies have been conducted. Most of the studies focus on first defining compliance-gaining taxonomies and then trying to find out the ones used by the research respondents. Kellermann and Cole (in press, cited in Seibold, Cantrill, & Meyer, 1994) were aware of problems concerning this type of study. Those include, for example, lack of exhaustiveness of taxonomies and unclear conceptual definitions of strategies. In my opinion, these problems are becoming worse when the typologies are applied in different contexts. Possibly, based on Hofstede’s (1980) notion of cultural differences, a certain type of BAT and BAM is perceived differently by people from different cultures.

My last two concerns are about the weakness of communication studies stressed by Rubin and Graham (1994). First, they maintained that a survey of most communication research might provide only recalled information, not actual behaviors. And, second is the concern that the information provided by one individual is often generalized to the dyadic level (Rubin & Graham, 1994). Though Rubin and Graham generally talked about these weaknesses in communication studies in general, it seems reasonable to assume that these flaws are embedded in many compliance-gaining studies.

In order to avoid or lessen the effects of the problems mentioned above, I would like to propose an alternative approach to study compliance gaining. Instead of relying on a survey method and Western typologies of compliance-gaining strategies and messages, we should study compliance gaining through a rhetorical approach. To be more specific, I would like to suggest that by relying on rhetorical exigence, a defective situation can be resolved through the effective use of symbols such as speech or writing (Hauser, 2002) enabling us to understand more about the selection of compliance-gaining strategies. Moreover, Coordinated Management of Meaning or CMM theory

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