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A Comparative Study of Chinese and Myanmar Honorific Titles

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Abstract. Honorific titles, as an essential part of speech communication, occur in all languages. But due to the cultural diversity, there are many different laws and regularities in the choice of them. This paper is the comparative study of the characteristics of Chinese and Myanmar honorific titles and their pragmatic rules to reduce the barriers in language communication.

Keywords. honorific titles, address, Chinese, Myanmar

1. Introduction

The reason why people learn the language is to communicate with each other smoothly. And, polite forms of use are critical in social dealing. Choosing appropriate honorific titles is also important in social interaction. Moreover, selected honorific titles can reflect the impressions and feelings of the two speakers. In other words, honorifics aim at upgrading the status of the hearer(s). It can lead misunderstanding and misinterpretation, which will result break-down in cross-cultural communication.

Furthermore, the use of language is closely related to culture. Due to the cultural diversity, different languages require different laws and regularities in the choice of honorific titles. Depending on the regions and societies, there are one's honorific titles. The students who are studying Chinese language and Myanmar language must apply these honorific titles in their daily life.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze and compare Chinese and Myanmar honorific titles with the cultural background. It is my hope that a better understanding of these differences will benefit the use of languages and reduce the barriers in language communication.

2. Aim

The aim of this paper is intended to understand the differences between Chinese and Myanmar honorific titles. This paper is also intended for the students to select proper honorific titles when communicate each other.

3. Literature Review

Although there have been some separate studies of honorific titles in Chinese and Myanmar, there is still lack of comparative study of Chinese and Myanmar honorific titles from pragmatic point of view. Mr. Tian Yanping studied honorific and deprecatory in Chinese, English and Japanese. His research article **A Contrastive Study of Honorific and Deprecatory Address Forms in Chinese, English and Japanese** was published in 2010.

4. Material and Method

In order to carry out the research, Chinese honorific titles are collected from the Oxford University Press and the Commercial Press English – Chinese – English Dictionary (fourth edition) and Myanmar address forms are collected from Myanmar Dictionary (Myanmar Language Team, fifth edition). Descriptive method and comparative method are used in this paper.

5. Honorific Titles

Honorific is an expression or title that is used to show respect for the person you are speaking to (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 2008, P-943). It conveys esteem, courtesy, or respect for position or rank when used in addressing or referring to a person. In other words, honorifics aim at upgrading the status of the hearer(s).

Honorific titles can be used as prefixes or suffixes depending on the appropriate occasion and presentation in accordance with style and customs. Honorific titles play an essential role in both Chinese and Myanmar language, which are applied by people in their social contacts for the purpose of establishing and maintaining their interpersonal relationships.

6. Chinese Honorific Titles

In Chinese, an honorific title is attached after the family name of an individual when addressing that person. Aside from addressing colleagues or family of equal or lesser rank, it is considered impolite to refer to others by their name only. Generally, “先生Xiānshēng” and “公Gōng” are common honorific titles for adult man and “小姐Xiǎojiě”, “太太Tàitai”, “女士Nǚshì” and “夫人Fūrén” are common honorific titles for woman.

先生Xiānshēng

先生Xiānshēng literally means “one who was born earlier”. Nowadays, it is an honorific title for adults, used by all men and male law enforcement officers. It was originally reserved for teachers and other professionals (such as doctors and lawyers), but in the New China era, its use was expanded to include all male members of society. A person with a certain status, knowledge and qualifications can be called as “先生Xiānshēng”.

It can either follow the family name or full name. In ordinary speech, follow the family name is more common, for example, 孙先生Sūn Xiānshēng (Mr. Sun). But in a formal context, the full names are usually used, for example, 孙中山先生Sūn Zhōngshān Xiānshēng (Mr. Sun Yat-sen).

Example (1) 当年“国父”孙中山先生去世后，中山陵于1926年6月1日破土动工。

《宋氏家族全传》

After the death of Mr. Sun Yat-sen, the "father of the country", the Sun Yat-sen Mausoleum has been started building on June 1, 1926.

Example (2) 宋庆龄莞尔一笑说：“作为逃亡之人，哪有什么高论？我只不过是遵照中山先生的教导，在这里平静地读一些书，充实一下自己而已。”

《宋氏家族全传》

Soong Ching Ling smiled and said, "As a fugitive, how can there be any high opinions? I just follow Mr. Zhongshan's teachings and calmly read some books to enrich myself."

Example (3) 爸爸，我愿意为孙先生的铁路宏图献出我的一切！《宋氏家族全传》

Dad, I am willing to dedicate everything to Mr. Sun's railway ambition!

Example (1) is the formal context and used the full name with honorific 先生. In example (2) and (3), the speakers want to show their respect and esteem, honorific 先生 is used with family name and personal name.

Gōng 公

Gōng 公 literally is a respectful honorific title for an elderly man, use as “公+ family name or personal name, for example: 张公 zhāng gong (Mr. Zhang). In the imperial period, this was an aristocratic title equivalent to a duke, for example, Confucius was named 孔公, Kǒng gōng (the Duke Kung). Whenever it is used, it always follows the surname or the name of the person.

Example (4) 奶奶还说：陈家的福田是远祖荣善公植下的。《青春只有一次》

Grandma also said: The Chen family's happiness was planted by the ancestor Mr. Rongshan.

In example (4), grandma used the title “Gōng 公” since she wants to pay respectful to her ancestor.

小姐 Xiǎojiě

小姐 Xiǎojiě in Chinese has three basic meanings: (1) a title of respect prefixed to a woman's name or surname or position, like Miss, Ms; (2) A young lady; (3) Slang: A prostitute. When it follows a person's surname and means “Miss ___”. It follows the family name and personal name of the woman or can be used alone as a title of address. Addressing someone as 小姐 would typically only occur in formal situations when addressing young women. 小姐 indicates only that the maiden name is being used and does not refer to marital status anymore. However, in northern China, it is used as a slang term "prostitute" or a waitress, through verbal changes in tone or other instructions.

Example (5) 回头看见苏小姐孙太太两张空椅子。《围城》

Looking back, I saw Miss Su and Mrs. Sun two empty chairs.

In example (5), it can be seen that 小姐 Xiǎojiě is used as honorific term before the family name of an unmarried woman.

太太 Tàitai

This honorific is used to refer to married women. It literally means madam; wife. It is added after the husband's family name, or it can be used alone as the title of the address. It is used in family and personal relationships, but it does not exist at all in formal business contexts since it emphasizes age and marital relationships.

Example (6) 陪陪新回国的沈先生沈太太，大家可以谈谈。《围城》

You can talk with Mr. Shen and Mrs. Shen, who is accompanying the newly returned home.

In example (6), it can be seen that 太太 **Tàitai** is used after the family name of husband.

女士 **Nǚshì**

It is a polite term for a woman, married or unmarried and this title follows a woman's name or family name. It is always the preferred term in more formal contexts, especially if the age or marital status of the person being noted is not known, for example: 女士们, 先生们 **Nǚshì men, Xiānshēng men** (ladies and gentlemen).

Example (7) 他的夫人淑琴女士, 是非常爱文学的。《悼亡支储皖峰》

His wife, **Mrs. Shuqin**, loves literature very much.

Example (8) 从文太太身上, 梅女士又联想到别的相识者。《虹》

From Mrs. Wen, **Ms. Mei** thinks of other acquaintances.

In example (7), 女士 **Nǚshì** is used to address a married woman and in example (8), it is used to call an unmarried woman.

夫人 **Fūren**

Traditionally used to refer to a lady of high rank; the wife of a feudal lord; the wife of a high official, for example: 第一夫人 **Dì-yī fūren** (First lady). It also used for the wife of a diplomat, for example: 各国使节和夫人 **Gèguó shǐjié hé fūren** (foreign diplomatic envoys and their wives). It is used following the husband's full name or surname, or can be used as title on its own.

Example (9) 面容美丽的女性, 就是当时的国民党中央执行委员、孙中山夫人亦即“国母”宋庆龄。《宋氏家族全传》

In Example (9), it can be seen that President Mr. Sun Yetsin's wife is addressed as 孙夫人 **Sūn fūren** (Mrs. Sun).

7. Myanmar Honorific Titles

Myanmar language has various ways to address people of different ranks, ages, and relationships. There are no surnames or family names to properly address a person. Myanmar people always use honorific when addressing each other. The use of honorifics before personal name is the norm, and it is considered rude to call a person just by their name without the honorific.

In Myanmar language, honorific titles are generally used in accordance with the age. The age of that person can be guessed just by hearing honorific titles used in front of the name, for example: in the book of “Life Story and Thoughts”, the author Shwe U Daung said that he wants to divide his life into five parts: (1) ဖေသိန်: Phae Thein (his name), (2) မောင်ဖေသိန်: Maung Phae Thein, (3) ကိုဖေသိန်: Ko Phae Thein, (4) ဦးဖေသိန်: U Phae Thein and (5) ဆရာကြီး: Sayargyi (Sir). The author shows that honorific titles are change in accordance with his age.

Myanmar honorific titles are generally used as follows:

Myanmar honorific titles	Usage
ဦး (U)	Addressing an elderly man
ကို (Ko)	Addressing a middle-aged man

မောင် (Maung)	Addressing a young boy
ဒေါ် (Daw)	Addressing an elderly woman
မ (Ma)	Addressing a middle-aged woman or a young girl

ဦး (U)

In Myanmar Dictionary, ဦး literally means “head; top”. It is a respectful honorific title for an elderly male. It also used for government official or somebody of high social status. When addressing a male teacher or a male officer, the honorific title ဦး (U) is always put in front of his name and his age is not considered.

Example (10) ဦးချိုကို အဆောင်နည်းပြအဖြစ် ခန့်ထားလိုက်သည်။

U Cho (Mr.Cho) was appointed dormitory coach.

In Example (11), U Cho is a teacher who is over 20 years, but in honor of the teacher, the title ဦး is used in front of his name.

ကို (Ko)

“ကို+ PN (personal name)” is the most commonly used honorific title for male, it is used between the same age or the same social status and commonly used in verbal communication. It is also used among the elderly male when addressing each other.

Example (11) ဗိုလ်ကိုလှမြင့် ဘယ်ကပြန်လာသလဲ။

Hey, Ko Hla Myint (Mr.Hla Myint), where did you come back?

မောင် (Maung)

“မောင် + PN” is addressed to a younger boy or a male child. Parents and teachers always use “မောင် + PN” to address their sons and students, because it is a fundamental honorific title for male. Some male authors use the title မောင် (Maung) in front of their name, although they become old, they still use this title, for example: မောင်ခင်မင်(ခန့်ဖြူ), မောင်ထင်.

ဒေါ် (Daw)

ဒေါ် (Daw) is a respectful honorific title for an elderly female or a female official, address her with ဒေါ် (Daw) in front of her name. When addressing a female teacher or a female officer, the honorific title ဒေါ် (Daw) is always put in front of her name and her age is not considered, for example: သမိုင်းပညာရှင် ဒေါ်မြစိန်

မ (Ma)

When addressing a female of the same age or a female of younger age, or a girl, the tile မ (Ma) is used in front of her name. “မ+ PN” is a fundamental honorific title for female.

Like မောင် (Maung), parents and teachers always use this title when address their daughters or students.

While the honorific titles are used in accordance with the age, in some situation, the usage of this titles would be changed. For example, parents in their 80s will address their 60-year-old son as မောင်ဖေသိန်း Maung Phae Thein. And U Phae Thein's friends will call him ကိုဖေသိန်း Ko Pe Thein even though he is 60 years old.

8. Findings

China and Myanmar are the countries where people highly appreciate the polite expressions and use of language. We can say that honorific titles in two languages play the essential role. According to the above study, the major similarities and differences in Chinese and Myanmar address use as follow:

	Honorific titles	Age	Male	Female	Marital status	Official	Esteem	Special Features
Chinese Honorific Titles	先生	>18	+	-	-	+	+	
	公	>18	+	-	-	-	+	
	小姐	<30	-	+	+	-	+	
	女士	>18	-	+	-	+	+	
	太太	>18	-	+	+	-	+	
	夫人	>35	-	+	+	+	+	
Myanmar Honorific Titles	ဦး	>35	+	-	-	+	+	When address a government official, age is not considered.
	ကို	18-35	+	-	-	-	+	
	မောင်	<18	+	-	-	+	+	
	ဒေါ်	>35	-	+	-	+	+	When address a government official, age is not considered.
	မ	<35	-	+	-	+	+	

It is found that most of Chinese honorific titles are based on gender and marital status but the age can not be guessed by using honorific titles. And Myanmar generally address people using honorific titles based on their gender, age and social relationship to one another. In Myanmar, the age can be generally guessed by using honorific titles, but marital status is not involved. In both languages, addressing strangers without honorifics is considered rude.

9. Conclusion

Honorific titles take place so frequently in social interactions that it is an important component of communication competence. In studying this paper, the students who are studying Chinese language and Myanmar language will have knowledge to use appropriate honorific titles in social contacts so as to facilitate communication.

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