

## A Pragmatic Approach to Communication Styles in Radio Advice Talk Programmes in China and Britain

Qiufen YU

The University of Chester, UK

**Abstract:** This article proposes a pragmatic approach to addressing speakers with different cultural backgrounds and their use of communication style. It applies this approach to data collected in radio advice talk shows broadcast in China and Britain. This research indicates that the distinction between direct and indirect communication style, the term which was used to characterise cultures by early studies of culture and communication, is being redefined from a pragmatic perspective. The aim of this article is to demonstrate how Relevance Theory, a cognitive pragmatic model of communication proposed by Sperber and Wilson (1995/1986), offers significant insights into the processes involved in the production and comprehension of utterances, which may help explain the socio-cultural phenomenon. The findings from this study indicate that, in the context of radio advice talk shows, speakers from China and Britain – two cultures that have been characterised as using direct and indirect styles-both fall into the same category of using indirect communication.

**Keywords:** Communication style, cultural differences, China, Britain, Relevance Theory

### 1. Introduction

Over the past decades, research in the area of intercultural communication has mainly focused on cultural differences in communication (e.g. Brew and Cairns, 2004; Chan and Goto, 2003; Fujishin, 2007; Ladegaard, 2011; Ting-Toomey and Cheung, 2005). One major dimension of cultural variability used to explain differences in communication is Hall's (1976) model of high- and low-context cultures. A key claim in Hall's account is that people in high-context (HC) cultures tend to rely on "indirect" messages and "the listener or interpreter of the message is expected to read between the lines" (Ting-Toomey and Chung, 2005, p. 172). In contrast, people in low-context (LC) cultures tend to use "direct style" (e.g. Samovar *et al.*, 2009; Fujishin, 2007). Hall explained that cultures could be arranged on a continuum from LC to HC cultures. According to this continuum, China is located towards the high-context end of the continuum, whereas Britain is located towards the low-context end. They are therefore regarded as high and low context cultures, using indirect and direct styles respectively (e.g. Ting-Toomey, 1999; Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005). This indicates that what Hall meant by culture has been interpreted as national groups. In this study, like Hall and his followers, I employ culture to refer to a country where a large social group of people share a set of norms, values and beliefs.

Hall's model has been applied extensively to a wide variety of contexts by numerous scholars to differentiate one cultural group from another (e.g. Adair and Brett, 2004; Gao and Ting-Toomey, 1998; Samovar *et al.* 2009). However, while claiming that cultures can be

characterised by using styles, these studies do not provide any account of how they come to categorise one style as being direct and another style as being indirect, but give an explanation that Asians communicate indirectly because they are from high-context cultures or that Westerners communicate directly because they are from low-context cultures (see Gudykunst, 2004, p. 44 for a critical discussion). This does not explain why there are differences in the way people from diverse cultures communicate. I argue that the limitations imposed by cultural frameworks, such as Hall's distinction of high- and low-context communication, could be avoided if intercultural communication research was to draw on an alternative approach to communication: Sperber and Wilson's (1986/1995) Relevance Theory. This paper is an attempt to explore speakers' communication style in the context of radio advice talk shows in high context (HC) and low context (LC) cultures, by focusing on China and Britain, within the framework of Relevance Theory.

The remainder of this article is as follows. I begin in Section 2 by outlining the arguments postulated by Sperber and Wilson, focusing on the points central to the issue of communication style. In Section 3, I apply the insights from Relevance Theory to a variety of examples collected in the context of radio advice programmes and look at whether or not there are similarities or differences in speakers' communication style in host-caller interactions. This is followed by a discussion in Section 4. I conclude in Section 5 with suggestions for further research.

## 2. Relevance Theory and Communication Style

Relevance Theory is an inferential approach to pragmatics developed by Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995). The central claim of the theory is that communication is an inferential-ostensive process based on the transmission and recognition of intentions. What this amounts to is that a speaker produces an ostensive stimulus (e.g. an utterance) as evidence of her intention to convey a certain meaning, which is inferred by a hearer on the basis of evidence provided. If the hearer is able to infer the intentions made manifest by the speaker, then communication is considered to have been successful. This suggests that human communication involves a mixed process of both coding and inference. Applying the above insights from Relevance Theory into my early discussion of culture and communication, we may reach a conclusion that an utterance produced by a speaker from any culture is a piece of linguistic evidence of the speaker's intention, and a hearer from any culture needs to infer the meaning intended by a speaker.

For Sperber and Wilson (1995), an utterance conveys many assumptions, but the hearer attends to only those assumptions that seem most relevant to him. If a communicator intends her utterance to be understood, then she must produce her utterance to meet the criteria on which every act of ostensive communication creates in the audience a presumption that (a) the utterance is relevant enough to be worth processing, and (b) it is the most relevant utterance which is compatible with the communicator's abilities and preferences. From the perspective of a hearer, to find an interpretation of the speaker's meaning that satisfies the presumption of optimal relevance, he has to follow a path of least effort in constructing an interpretation of the utterance and stop at the first overall interpretation that satisfies his expectations of relevance: he must enrich the decoded sentence meaning at the explicit level, and complement it at the

implicit level by supplying contextual assumptions which will combine with it to yield enough conclusions to make the utterance relevant in the expected way.

Specifically, Sperber and Wilson have argued that what is inferred is not restricted to the assumptions that are implicitly communicated (i.e. implicature), but is attributed to the assumptions that are explicitly communicated (i.e. explicatures). This is because, according to relevance theorists (e.g. Sperber and Wilson, 1995; Carston, 2009), what is explicitly communicated has never reached its full explicitness. An assumption is an explicature if and only if it is derived by going through pragmatic processes such as “disambiguation, reference assignment and enrichment” (Sperber and Wilson, 1995, p. 185). Given that an explicature can only be constructed by developing the logical form of an utterance, Sperber and Wilson (1995, p. 182) conclude that “an explicature is explicit to a greater or lesser degree”. At this point of argument, therefore, the significance of Sperber and Wilson’s notion of explicature should become more apparent, and it suggests that even if the recovery of explicature needs some inferential work, then there is no such thing as explicit communication at all in any communication. What Sperber and Wilson’s argument indicates is that, the distinction between direct and indirect communication (on which previous studies on culture and communication are based to address cultural differences) does not exist in Relevance Theory.

While rejecting this distinction, Relevance Theory offers an alternative account which allows me to address the issue of communication style from a new perspective. Sperber and Wilson (1995) conceive that every utterance has a variety of possible interpretations, all compatible with the information that is linguistically encoded. However, a hearer does not need to consider an infinite number of possible interpretations and then decide on the right one. This is because in order to help hearers to recognise the intended interpretation, a speaker aiming at relevance may use linguistic devices to provide procedural information to guide a hearer. Relevance theorists (e.g. Blakemore, 1987; Wilson and Sperber, 1993) maintain that what procedural information does is to encode instructions, rather than to encode concepts in utterance interpretation, by providing hearers with the optimally relevant information to facilitate their interpretation process.

As indicated early in this section, within the framework of Relevance Theory, an explicature is conceived as being a matter of degree. A proposition (or a thought) may be more or less strongly communicated, with indeterminate cases between them, and consequently, implicatures are more or less determinate, with a varying degree of strength. If such views are accepted, this would predict that in the situation where an assumption is made strongly manifest to both the speaker and hearers, the frequency of occurrence of markers of procedural meaning will be low. Conversely, in a situation where an assumption is made weakly manifest, the frequency of occurrence of markers of procedural meaning will be high. It follows that in the latter situation, if a speaker does not succeed in indicating, by means of markers of procedural meaning, that what she has to impart is relevant to her hearers, then according to Relevance Theory, the hearers will not interpret what the speaker means by what she says. In other words, the hearers’ inferential process will not be triggered. However, on the relevance theoretic approach, a speaker’s communicative intention is to have her intention fulfilled or recognised. To that extent, as Sperber and Wilson argue (1995), a speaker actively helps hearers, based on her estimation of the hearer’s cognitive abilities and contextual resources, by formulating her

utterances in such a way that the first acceptable line of interpretation to occur to the hearer is the one intended by the speaker. Specifically, Relevance Theory stresses that the style of a speaker is the consequence of the speaker's aim of producing an utterance consistent with the principle of relevance. The implication is that a speaker must use markers of procedural meaning to guide hearers to identify her intended meaning because no communication is explicit. With these insights from Relevance Theory in mind, I argue that if there is evidence that native speakers of Mandarin Chinese (henceforth MC) and British English (henceforth BE) use markers of procedural meaning to guide the interpretation process, this would indicate that their styles are indirect. Therefore, if we aim to examine the issue under discussion, we need to look for evidence to indicate whether or not the two sets of speakers use markers of procedural meaning in their utterances.

In this paper, I restrict my analysis of markers of procedural meaning to prosody and discourse connectives only, because they are considered to be particularly effective in imposing procedural constraints on implicatures (e.g. Wilson and Wharton, 2006; House, 2006). My focus on these two markers is motivated by two reasons. Firstly, there is already evidence that prosodic features, sentence stress and intonation in particular, are used to encode procedural meaning in English (e.g. Baltazani, 2006; Blakemore, 1987, 2002; Clark, 2007; Escandell Vidal, 1996). On one hand, sentence stress is used to mark information focus of a sentence (e.g. Erteschik-Shir, 1997; Lambrecht, 1994; Selkirk, 1995; Szendrői, 2004). By doing so, it draws hearers' "attention to one particular constituent in an utterance" (Sperber and Wilson, 1995, p. 203). On the other hand, intonation can function to "facilitate the identification of the speaker's meaning by narrowing the search space for inferential comprehension, increasing the salience of some hypotheses and eliminating others" (Wilson & Wharton, 2006, p. 1571). In contrast, however, the changes in pitch in MC do not perform the same function as that of English because they serve to distinguish meanings. Despite this, evidence suggests that MC shares the property of having sentence stress with English, in that sentence stress is the primary strategy to distinguish sentence focus (e.g. Xu, 2004; Cheung, 2009; Kuo and Romsay, 2008; Schwarz, 2009). Therefore, it seems clear that both native speakers of MC and BE use prosody to encode procedural meaning.

The second reason is related to discourse connectives. Blakemore (1989, p. 21) argues that the sole function of discourse connectives "is to guide the interpretation process by specifying certain properties of context and contextual effects...to minimise processing cost". She classifies discourse connectives on the basis of the cognitive effects in the following three ways:

- (a) It may allow the derivation of a contextual implication (e.g. *so, therefore*);
- (b) It may strengthen an existing assumption (by providing better evidence for it) (e.g. *after all, moreover, furthermore*);
- (c) It may contradict an existing assumption (e.g. *however, but, nevertheless*).

It has also been argued (e.g. Unger, 1996; Feng, 2008) that all languages have a certain set of connectives that correspond in function to encode procedural meaning. For example, Feng (2008, p. 1687) writes:

In English and perhaps all other languages, there is a class of expressions which has been generally characterized as semantically non-truth-conditional and syntactically peripheral...A multiple array of terms have been used...However, recently it seems to be narrowing down to ‘pragmatic marker’ or ‘discourse markers’.

Now that almost all languages have a range of lexical expressions that encode procedural constraints on utterance comprehension, Mandarin Chinese is no exception. Although few systematic attempts have been made to investigate Chinese discourse connectives from a relevance theoretical perspective, recent work by Feng (2008) offered a detailed description of pragmatic markers in MC. Among those markers Feng (2008) outlined, I take three types of them as a class of linguistic expressions that can encode procedural meaning, because they “suggest a relation between messages” (Feng, 2008, p. 1707), and they “do not affect the truth conditions of a sentence that host them” (Feng, 2008, p. 1600). As a result, they fit well with the categories classified by Blakemore. For ease of comparison, I list discourse connectives in English and their Chinese counterparts in Table 1, according to the categories classified by Blakemore (2002, p. 95).

Table 1. Discourse Connectives in the Two Languages

	<b>English Discourse Connectives</b>	<b>Chinese Equivalents</b>
Introducing a contextual implication	So, therefore	因此 ( <i>yinci</i> ), 所以 ( <i>suoyi</i> )
Strengthening an existing assumption	After all, moreover, furthermore	並且 ( <i>bingqie</i> ), 再說 ( <i>zaishuo</i> )
Contradicting or eliminating an existing assumption	But, however	但 ( <i>dan</i> ), 但是 ( <i>danshi</i> ), 然而 ( <i>raner</i> )

Although evidence suggests that speakers of MC and BE rely on prosody and discourse connectives to guide a hearer’s interpretation process, there has been no evidence from empirical studies that they use the two types of markers in the context of radio advice talk shows, and my current paper is therefore an attempt to fill the gap.

### 3. Data Analysis

In order to present evidence found in this article, I analyse numerous examples of host-caller interactions from two sets of comparable radio advice talk programmes broadcast in China and Britain. In these programmes, callers phone in to the show for advice on issues related to family arguments, love relationships, personal dilemmas and everyday ups and downs. Because of the limited scope of this article, my analysis focuses only on those key utterances that lead me to identify the problem a caller is constructing – the intended meaning of a caller’s utterances.

Following Sperber and Wilson (1995, p. 46), I use the term “contextual assumption” to

refer to the assumptions which are brought to bear on the interpretation of an utterance. I use the term “contextual implication” (Sperber & Wilson, 1995, p. 109) to refer to the inferred conclusion drawn from the combination of the new information (i.e. an utterance) with old information (i.e. contextual assumptions) accessed by the hearer, which would give the new information some relevance for the hearer. Since “the idea that an expression may encode procedural constraints on the inferential phase of comprehension was first put forward by Diane Blakemore” (Wilson & Sperber, 1993, p. 11), I also draw on Blakemore’s (1992, 2002) account of procedural information in my analysis.

In what follows, I analyse some of the examples of utterances made by callers, with utterances made by English callers first, followed by those produced by Chinese callers.

### Example 1

(1) Caller: *Yeah we’ve ALWAYS spent family er family Christmas together ALWAYS.*

(2) Host: *Um-hum.*

(3) Caller: *Erm **but** as I say they’ve just recently moved away.*

The context of the above exchange is that the caller explains that her niece has invited the caller’s family to spend Christmas at her niece’s home. In order to infer the problem the caller was intending to solve, I resolve the ambiguities in the language used and assign referents to deictic words. For example, I assume that the pronoun *we* in (1) refers to the caller’s own family. Eventually, the explicatures that have been recovered from utterances (1) and (3) by decoding and reference assignment are:

- (a) The caller’s family and the caller’s niece’s family have always spent Christmas at her niece’s home;
- (b) The caller’s niece has moved away and she is now living somewhere else.  
The fact that the caller uttered the word *always* with a raised pitch leads me to assume that the proposition (a) may strongly implicate (c) as a contextual assumption and (d) as a contextual implication:
- (c) If a sort of celebration is repeated for a number of years, then it has become a tradition.
- (d) The caller has the expectation that what happened in the past will happen in the future, that is, the caller’s family and the niece’s family will celebrate Christmas together in the niece’s home as what they did in the past.

However, the caller’s use of *but* in (3) draws my attention. According to Relevance Theory, the presence of *but* indicates that the *but* segment is intended to achieve relevance “by virtue of contradicting and eliminating a (possibly mistaken) assumption deducible from the first segment of the caller’s utterance” (Blakemore, 1992, p. 102), which in this case appears to be the assumption in (d). This connective leads me to activate the contextual assumption (e) in order to process (b):

- (e) If the niece had not moved away, then the caller’s family and the niece’s family

would have been able to spend Christmas as they normally do.

I combine (b) with (e) and draw the contextual implication (f):

- (f) There is some impediment to the caller's being able to celebrate Christmas as she normally does.

It is only when we come to this stage I can infer that the caller's problem is related to the factors that impede her normal Christmas celebration, although it is not made entirely explicit.

What can be seen from my above analysis is that the identification of the problem the caller was expressing is guided by the caller's use of prosody assigned to the word *always* and the connective *but*. In other words, the existence of these markers made my inference relatively easier.

I cannot find any more information relevant to the caller's problem until I go on listening to the latter half of the caller's story, where I encounter the following utterances:

### Example 2

(4) C: *He is refusing to go.*

(5) H: *Right.*

(6) C: *Which now causes the problem we just ... because I can't get to my niece otherwise I would have GONE.*

This is a situation in which the caller explains that the caller's husband is refusing to go to the caller's niece's home for Christmas, because the caller's children are unable to go. This fact has brought a problem to the caller, in that she is not able to get to the niece's home as the niece no longer lives locally.

After resolving the ambiguities in the language used and assigning referents to deictic words such as *he*, I identify the explicatures made manifest by the utterances (4) and (6) as something like (g) and (h) and (i):

- (g) The caller's husband refuses to go to the niece's home for Christmas;
- (h) This is the problem for the caller, because she is not able to get to the niece's home;
- (i) If it were not for this problem, the caller would have gone to the niece's home.

Note that the caller used an accented falling tone when she uttered the word *gone*. This directs me specifically to this constituent. I assume that by uttering *gone* in such a way, the caller is indicating that the preceding phrase (i.e. *I can't get to my niece*) is to be interpreted "as part of a larger piece of structure, thereby...indicating a wider context" (House, 2006, p. 1554). This leads me to process the propositions (g-i) at least in the following context:

- (j) Going to the caller's niece's home may involve travelling;
- (k) If an individual travels to somewhere, necessary transport is needed;
- (l) The caller's husband usually drives wherever the caller travels;
- (m) If the caller's husband does not drive, then the caller cannot travel.



- I combine the assumptions in (g-i) and (j-m) and draw the contextual implication (n):
- (n) There are some factors that impede the caller's being able to spend Christmas in the way she wants.

In the light of the assumption (n), I infer that the caller's problem is related to her being unable to spend Christmas in a way she wants.

The above examples show that the problem the caller was constructing is not literally communicated, but pragmatically inferred. It is the caller's use of prosody assigned to the word *gone* in a sudden loudness that constrained my interpretation, in that it guided me to activate the contextual assumptions (j-m), and finally reached the conclusion that being unable to spend Christmas in a way she wants may be the caller's problem.

The use of markers of procedural meaning is not limited to the utterances made by this English caller alone. There is a huge body of evidence on the guiding role that markers of procedural meaning play in the utterances produced by all the other English callers. Let us now consider Example 3, which consists of some of the utterances made by another English caller.

### Example 3

- (7) Caller: *My partner Mark (.) he is ok. I love him to pieces and all that **but** he is just ... he's not very happy with like all the stretch marks and all that.*
- (8) Host: *Right so he < > he thinks that you've kind of changed physically.*
- (9) Caller: *Yeah he is not happy with the figure and everything, he thinks I've put on a lot of weight during pregnancy.*
- (10) Host: *Have you spoken to him about it... have you actually talked to him about it?*

The context of the above exchange is that the caller has just had a baby. Building on my existing knowledge about British culture, I assume that the term *partner* refers to someone with whom the caller is in a long-term stable sexual relationship. I then identify the resulted explicatures made manifest by the utterance (7) as something like (a) and (b):

- (a) The caller loves her partner Mark very much;
- (b) Mark is not happy with the stretch marks the caller has.  
The assumption in (a) makes me activate the contextual assumption (c) and draw the contextual implication (d):
- (c) In UK, if two people are love partners, then they will have a sexual relationship.
- (d) The caller and Mark must have had a sexual relationship.  
However, the caller's use of *but* makes the proposition (b) immediately manifest in the context of (e) which then leads me to draw the contextual implication (f):
- (e) The sexual relationship between the caller and Mark has suffered because she has stretch marks, and Mark does not find her sexually attractive.
- (f) It is the caller's physical change that has impeded Mark from having a sexual relationship with her.

The assumption (f) leads me to assume that the caller's problem is that her physical change



makes her sexual relationship with her partner suffer, and therefore she asks advice on this. My above interpretation is supported by the host's question in (10), which indicates that the host believes that the caller's problem has been expressed, and now comes to the stage of offering advice to the caller on how to solve her problem – by talking to her partner.

Again, this example shows that the caller's utterance does not explicitly encode her problem, and her problem is derived as a result of inference. The interpretation process is guided by the caller's use of the connective *but*.

In all the examples we have looked at so far, I have shown that I was apparently guided by callers' use of markers of procedural meaning in working out the problems the callers were intending to solve. However, what has been found is not merely a typical British phenomenon. As will be shown below, this also occurs in Chinese communication.

#### Example 4

- (11) Caller: *wo faxian ta you jia wo jiu tui chu lai le.*  
 I find he have family I **so** withdrew come (sentence final particle)  
 'I found he's married, so I withdrew.'
- (12) Caller: *wo bu li ta ke ta xian zai zong lai zhe wo.*  
 I ignore him **but** he now always cling to me  
 'I ignore him **but** he now always clings to me.'
- (13) Host: *na buxing ni bixude gaoshu ta ni you jia ni benshen jiushi qipianle wo*  
 That no you must tell he you have home you itself be cheat me  
 'Oh, no, you must tell him. Since he's married, he's cheated on you.'

The caller provided a context that she found that her boyfriend is married. In order to work out the proposition expressed by the utterances, I assume, in the context of discussing the caller's romantic relationship with her boyfriend (i.e. *he*), the possible meaning of the term *tuichulai* (i.e. *withdraw*) is that it refers to splitting up with her boyfriend. I then derive the explicatures (a) and (b):

- (a) The caller's boyfriend who would potentially be her husband is married;
- (b) The caller would prefer to split up with her boyfriend.

Hearers may notice that the caller uses a connective *so* to introduce her second segment of her utterances in (11). The presence of *so* implies that a causal relationship holds between (a) and (b). It leads me to assume that the caller is indicating that the *so* segment is relevant by virtue of being a contextual implication derived from the segment that precedes *so* (Blakemore, 2002), which in this case appears to be the assumption (a). Based on my understanding about the issue raised by the caller, I assume that the presence of '*so*' makes the contextual assumption (c) immediately accessible:

- (c) In Chinese society, if one knows that the person one is going to marry is already married, then the individual would not allow the romantic relationship between them to continue.

- The consequence of my combining (a) with (c) is the contextual implication (d):  
 (d) The caller wanted to break ties with the man she has been seeing romantically.

The assumption (d) leads me to infer that the caller's problem is related to the caller's action of not allowing her romantic relationship with the man to continue, although I am not entirely sure whether this is the problem the caller intends to solve.

The phrase *buli* (i.e. *ignore*) may have a number of possibilities. It could either refer to taking no notice to whatever happens to somebody, or to the situation in which one person does not talk to another. In the situation where the caller has decided not to allow her relationship with the man to continue, I assume that the latter function is more appropriate for this context. Moreover, the phrase *laizhe* (i.e. *cling to*) in this context refers to harassing the caller. The resultant explicatures that have been recovered from the utterances (11) and (12) are (e) and (f):

- (e) The caller does not talk with her boyfriend;
  - (f) The caller's boyfriend keeps harassing her.
- The recovery of explicature (e) leads me to activate the contextual assumption (g) and draw the contextual implication (h):
- (g) If one does not talk with the other, then one treats the other as a stranger.
  - (h) The caller treats her boyfriend as a stranger.
- However, the caller's use of *but*, when she introduces her second segment of utterances in (12), makes the explicature (f) immediately manifest in the context of (i):
- (i) The caller cannot treat her boyfriend as a stranger because he persistently harasses her.
- By combining (f) with (i), I draw the contextual implication (j):
- (j) The caller feels that it is difficult to end the relationship with the man.

My interpretation (j) is supported by the host's utterances in (13), which indicate that the host believes that the caller's problem has been expressed, and is trying to offer advice on how to stop the man's harassing.

As we have seen, the caller's utterances require a lot of inferential work on the part of a hearer, and it is the caller's use of the connectives *so* and *but* that has led me as a hearer to draw the conclusion (j).

As there is no evidence that the caller's problem has been expressed, it is quite natural for us to continue listening in order to find out what the caller's problem would be.

### Example 5

- (14) Host: *ruguo ni yao zai lai jiuchan wo wo jiu keyi [baojing le.*  
 If you want again cling to I I then will call police final particle  
 'If he keeps harassing you, then you can call the police.'
- (15) Caller: *[keshi ta xian zai geng wo zai yige wu li zhu ya!*  
 But he now and I in one room in live (!)  
 'But now, he is living in the SAME ROOM with me.'

- (16) Host: *na buxing ni yinggai rang ta chuqu.*  
 That no you should let him out  
 'Oh, no, you should let him move out.'

Here, the caller uses a *but* in (15). The presence of *but* gives me a clue that the *but* segment is intended to achieve relevance by contradicting and eliminating an assumption which has been made manifest in her preceding utterance. However,

In many cases the assumption which the speaker intends the hearer to eliminate is not derived from the interpretation of the first segment of the *but* utterance at all, but is simply an assumption which the speaker has reason to believe is manifest to the hearer (Blakemore, 2002, p. 109, emphasis original).

The point that Blakemore makes appears to be true in this case. I am aware that when the caller utters *keshi* (i.e. *but*), it is in overlap with the utterance *baojing* (i.e. *call the police*) made by the host in (14), as indicated by the symbol “[” in the transcript. Such an overlap seems to indicate that this may well be what the caller was indicating at this point. I then assume that the eliminated assumption manifest to the hearer (i.e. host) is “provided by the utterance made by the hearer herself” (Blakemore, 2002, p. 109). Given the overlap function, I accept that the given assumption made manifest by the host refers to the second segment of her utterance in (14), where the host was giving advice on how to persuade her boyfriend to leave the caller alone in a way that the caller can call the police.

The phrase *baojing* (i.e. *call the police*) in (14), based on my own understanding of Chinese culture, may have a number of possibilities: it could refer to the assumption that in an emergency, people can call the police to report a crime; it could also refer to the assumption that people can call the police to help them deal urgently with something that they are unable to cope with. In this particular context, my understanding of the caller’s issue assumes the latter: to call the police to stop the caller’s boyfriend’s harassing. After developing the logical form expressed by (14), I derive the resultant explicature (k):

- (k) The caller can call the police to help her get rid of her boyfriend if he keeps harassing her.  
 The recovery of (k) makes the contextual assumption (l) immediately accessible:  
 (l) The caller is living together with the man in the same room.

In producing the utterance (15), the caller uttered the phrase *zaiyigewulizhu* (i.e. *live in the same room*) with a lengthened duration. I am led to assume that this phrase carries the main point of the caller’s utterance and it makes me activate the contextual assumptions (m), (n) and (o) and draw the contextual implication (p):

- (m) When two people in a romantic relationship live in one room, they normally live together consensually;  
 (n) If they live together consensually, it would be difficult for one of them to get rid of

the other;

- (o) As long as they do not break the law, even the police have no right to set them apart.
- (p) The caller feels unable to get rid of her boyfriend.

In the light of the above inferential work, I assume (p) is the problem the caller intends to solve. If we compare the implicature (j) with the implicature (p), we can find that (p) remains unaltered. However, with the evidence provided in (l), the contextual implication (j) is obviously strengthened. This indicates that the man's living in the same room with the caller makes her feel even more difficult to get rid of him. This further confirms that how to get rid of her boyfriend is the problem the caller is intending to solve. My interpretation is supported by the host's utterances in (16), which indicate that the host confirms that the caller's problem has been made explicit, and which also indicates that she is coming to the stage of offering the advice by telling the woman to let her man out of her room.

As with examples in English, this example demonstrates that the caller's problem is not explicitly communicated. It is the caller's use of discourse connective and prosody that led me to identify the problem she was constructing.

There are many examples of Chinese callers demonstrating the use of markers of procedural meaning, as Examples 6 and 7 illustrate.

#### Example 6

- (17) Caller: *wo xihuan shang le yige bi wo da yi lun de yige nude.*  
 I like up (particle) a than I big a round of a lady  
 'I'm in a relationship with a lady who is A ROUND OLDER than me.'
- (18) Host: *Ah (hahaha).*  
*Ah (hahaha)*  
 'Ah' (hahaha).

The caller uses a term *yilun* (i.e. *one round*) in (1). My knowledge about Chinese culture leads me to assume that *yilun* refers to Chinese traditional twelve year lunar circle which in this case means 12 years. The recovery of the utterances in (17) leads me to derive the explicature (a):

- (a) The caller is in a romantic relationship with a lady twelve years older than the caller himself.  
 The caller assigned stress to the phrase *dayilun* (i.e. *twelve years older*) by uttering it with a lengthened duration. This led me to assume that (a) may implicate (b) and (c) as a set of contextual assumptions and (d) as a contextual implication:
- (b) If there is a large age difference between two lovers, then their romantic relationship is not seen as appropriate in Chinese society because it appears to be unnatural;
- (c) If a woman is a lot older (say, 5 years or more) than a man in a romantic relationship, then this relationship is even more inappropriate.
- (d) The romantic relationship between the caller and his lady is seen as inappropriate in Chinese society.

My conclusion (d) is supported by the host's surprising tone when she uttered *ah* (i.e. *ah*) in (18), followed by her laughter, and I take this to indicate that she confirms my interpretation.

The above example shows that in inferring the problem the caller was constructing, I am again guided by markers of procedural meaning, which is in the form of prosody in this case.

After a few more exchanges, we hear the following continuation of this conversation:

### Example 7

- (19) Caller: *women shijian chang le women jiu xihuan shang duifang le.*  
 We time long (particle) we **so** like up opposite (particle)  
 'We meet each other frequently due to our geographical proximity, **so** we've gradually fallen in love with each other.'
- (20) Caller: *ni shuo zhe jian shier wo yinggai zenme chuli ne?*  
 You say this issue I should how deal with ?  
 'Do you think I should maintain the relationship and become closer to her?'
- (21) Host: *ni bi xu de tuichulai zhe shi cuo ai.*  
 You must withdraw this be wrong love  
 'You must end the relationship and this is wrong love.'

Previously, the caller indicated that the lady the caller is in a relationship with has a shop next door to the caller's workplace, which gives them opportunities to frequently meet each other. Based on my knowledge about Chinese culture, I assume it is morally impermissible if one has a romantic relationship with someone who is married, and also it is not seen as appropriate for an older woman to have a romantic relationship with a younger man. Therefore, the expression *zhejiانشier* (i.e. *this issue*) in (20) refers to the fact that the man has a morally impermissible romantic relationship with an older woman. By inferentially enriching the incomplete logical form of the caller's utterances, we have obtained explicatures (e), (f) and (g):

- (e) The caller and his lady met each other frequently due to close geographical proximity;
- (f) The caller and his lady have developed a romantic relationship;
- (g) The caller is asking whether he should maintain his morally impermissible relationship with the older lady.

I am aware that the caller uses a connective *so* to introduce his second segment of utterances. I assume the presence of *so* implies that there is a causal relationship that holds between (e) and (f). It indicates that the proposition introduced by *so* is relevant, by virtue of being a contextual implication of the assumption which has been made accessible by the interpretation of the preceding utterance (Blakemore 2002), which in this case appears to be the assumption in (e). The presence of *so* makes the contextual assumption (h) immediately accessible:

- (h) If one is geographically closer to the other, then it is relatively easier for this one

to develop a romantic relationship with the other.

By combining the assumptions in (e-f) with the assumption (h), we can derive the contextual implication (i):

- (i) The caller and his lady are geographically closer to each other. As a consequence, they have developed a romantic relationship.

The assumption (i) makes me infer that the caller's problem is related to the geographical proximity between the caller and his lady.

The recovery of explicature (c) makes me activate the contextual assumption (j) and draw the contextual implication (k):

- (j) The caller is trying to find out whether he should maintain his morally impermissible relationship with the older lady.
- (k) The caller wants advice on whether he should maintain his morally impermissible relationship with the older lady.

From (k), I can infer that the caller's problem is that he does not know whether he should maintain his morally impermissible relationship with the older lady. This interpretation is supported by the host's response in (21), which indicates that she believes that the caller's problem has been made explicit and comes to the stage of giving advice to the caller, in that she is telling the caller to end the relationship straightaway.

This example shows that the identification of the caller's problem was guided by the caller's use of discourse connective.

So far I have analysed examples of host-caller interactions in the context of radio advice talk programmes in China and Britain. In the next section, the markers of procedural meaning used by the callers and their relationship with the callers' communication styles are discussed in greater detail.

#### 4. Discussion

My analysis reveals a clear picture of utterance production and interpretation in the context of radio advice talk programmes. It has shown that the markers of procedural meaning are found in the utterances made by both sets of callers. This evidence suggests that both Chinese and English speakers actively help hearers to work out with the least processing effort the problems they were attempting to articulate. Now, I would like to turn to Examples 1 and 4 for a detailed discussion, one from each set of data. For ease of illustration, I repeat the examples below:

##### Example 1

(1) Caller: *Yeah we've ALWAYS spent family er family Christmas together ALWAYS.*

(2) Host: *Um-hum.*

(3) Caller: *Erm but as I say they've just recently moved away.*

##### Example 4

(4) Caller: *wo faxian ta you jia,*

- I find he have family  
 'I found he's married',  
 (5) Caller: *wo jiu tuichu lai le*  
 I *so* withdrew come (particle)  
 'So I withdrew.'

In each case, the caller's utterances may generate different interpretations according to context. However, in both cases, the callers use markers of procedural meaning to limit my possible interpretations. When I interpret these utterances, I am aware that the contribution of markers of procedural meaning does not add anything new to the proposition expressed in the utterances that contain them, but they provide a clue of how to select the contextual assumptions. As a result of this process, I am able to draw the contextual implications. For example, in Example 1, I was led by the prosody assigned to *always* to activate the contextual assumption that it has become a tradition that the caller's family and her niece's family spend Christmas together at her niece's home. It is only when I perceived the word '*always*' that I would be encouraged to derive the contextual implication that the caller would spend Christmas as she normally does. Thus, as I showed, my interpretation of the caller's utterances is under the guidance of prosody which led me to succeed in selecting the contextual assumption that it has become a tradition that the caller's family and her niece's family spend Christmas together at her niece's home and finally draw the contextual implication that the caller would spend Christmas as she normally does and finally draw the contextual implication that the caller would spend Christmas as she normally does.

Moreover, the propositions in (1) and (3) are not self-evident. If *but* were not there, it would have been hard to identify the logical connections between them, and thus it would be difficult to infer the caller's intention. I may possibly see (1) as a premise leading to the conclusion (3), or I may see (3) as a premise and (1) as a conclusion. However,

[F]or an utterance to be understood, it must have one and only one interpretation consistent with the principle – one and only one interpretation, that is, on which a rational speaker might have thought it would have enough effect to be worth the hearer's attention, and put the hearer to no gratuitous effort in obtaining the intended effect (Wilson and Sperber, 1992, p. 69).

It is the presence of *but* that gives me a clue that the *but* segment is intended to achieve relevance by contradicting or eliminating the assumption, that the caller would spend Christmas as she normally does, which finally leads me to successfully draw the contextual implication (iii) that there is some impediment to the caller's being able to celebrate Christmas as she normally does. It can be argued that, without the guidance of *but*, the assumption in (iii) would not be made so strongly manifest.

Similarly, the caller in Example 4 formulates her utterances by means of her markers of procedural meaning in the way that certain contextual assumptions are triggered before others. For example, the caller adds *so* in (5). The presence of *so* gives me a clue that the relationship between (4) and (5) the caller is envisaging is that the former is a premise for the deduction



of the proposition expressed by the latter. Under the guidance of *so*, I successfully reached the contextual implication that the caller feels that it is difficult to end the relationship with the man. Again, there is nothing in the linguistically encoded information that expresses the assumption indicated in the assumption that the caller feels that it is difficult to end the relationship with the man. It could be derived only by drawing the inference, guided by the connective *so*.

In light of the above discussion, it is clear that Relevance Theory provides a useful framework which allows me to account for the processes involved in utterance production and meaning generation. As such, it allows me to explain what makes an utterance more or less direct in a way that other approaches do not. As my analysis has shown, markers of procedural meaning contribute to understanding all forms of utterances produced by speakers from cultures that have been characterised as HC and LC. These results are significant, in that they indicate that the direct and indirect communication identified by early studies of culture and communication both fall into indirect communication. In other words, in the context of radio advice programmes, there is no difference in the use of communication styles between speakers of Mandarin Chinese and speakers of British English. On the basis of my empirical findings, I argue that if communication styles of the two cultures are indirect, this may indicate that communication styles in radio advice talk programmes in China and Britain are both high-context. This also indicates that the distinction between direct and indirect communication on which studies of culture and communication are based to theorise cultural difference needs to be rethought.

## 5. Conclusion

This study has explored the issue of communication style in the context of radio advice talk programmes broadcast in China and Britain and questioned the privilege of the distinction between directness and indirectness identified by studies of culture and communication. Drawing on Relevance Theory, I have shown that in this particular context, there is no difference in the use of communication style between speakers in cultures that have been characterised as using direct style and speakers in cultures that have been characterised as using indirect style, because they both use markers of procedural meaning to guide hearers' interpretation process. In this sense, the communication styles of both sets of speakers are both indirect. The findings are significant, and they indicate that communication styles in radio advice talk programmes in China and Britain are both high-context. This is in opposition to the view held by previous studies in the field. Therefore, a methodology based on Sperber and Wilson's inferential model can help explain the relation between speakers as a social entity and their use of communication style in a way that the approaches adopted by previous studies of culture and communication preclude. From this point of view, what emerges as important from this study is not just the existence of markers of procedural meaning which indicates the use of indirect style in radio advice talk programmes in high and low context cultures, but the way in which cultural differences in communication should be addressed. Clearly, the scope of this study means that it indicates a direction for further research in that it raises questions of how cultural differences in communication are actually realised in real life situations, rather than provides any conclusive evidence of the differences. What I hope it does provide is an indication of

how a pragmatic approach allows questions to be asked that can be of use to intercultural communication scholarship.

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### **Author Note**

Qiufen Yu (PhD) is Lecturer at the Department of Modern Languages at the University of Chester, UK, where she is programme leader for Chinese Studies.

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