

Communicative Stability and Interpersonal Closeness: On Explanation of Chinese Characters in Chinese Person's Names

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Abstract

To understand Chinese language and culture, it is essential to explore how Chinese people explain the Chinese characters in their names when introducing themselves. From the perspective of interpersonal communication, this paper generates a set of fictitious Chinese names and, after 533 tests, preliminarily summarizes five strategies used by Chinese people to explain the Chinese characters in their names, namely: 1) wording or phrasing, 2) constructing or reconstructing, 3) composing or decomposing, 4) indicating or transferring, and 5) acting or performing. According to the paper, Chinese people will decide which strategy to adopt when interpreting Chinese characters, depending on the specific relationship and occasion, to ensure communication accuracy. The less interpersonal closeness becomes, the more communicative stability is sought in people's strategies.

Keywords

Chinese Character, Communicative Stability, Interpersonal Communication

1. Introduction

The myths of virtual reality, digital twins, the metaverse and other modern information technologies have yet to free people from the shackles of the natural world, and face-to-face communication remains the primary form of everyday information exchange.

Like Japanese kanji and Korean hanja, the basic units of the Chinese lan-

guage—Chinese characters—are logograms, meaning that a character may be pronounced the same as different Chinese characters, unlike syllabary, which uses individual written characters to represent sounds directly (Cheon, 2018). In other words, the same pronunciation frequently refers to more than one Chinese character. However, this linguistic feature does not affect people's verbal communication, thanks to the presence of a particular context. Nevertheless, when individuals introduce something different or unfamiliar to others, it is necessary then for them to explain precisely which Chinese characters they are talking about, especially when people introduce their names at the first meeting—the Chinese are willing to use combinations of Chinese characters to express particular meanings and to emphasize such metaphors (Lu & Millward, 1989; Zheng, 2011). Bao and Cai (2021) highlighted that personal names could influence others' impressions and evaluations and even may affect individuals' psychology and behavior. It can be argued that studying how Chinese people interpret the characters in their names is essential for understanding Chinese names, language and culture.

However, as interpreting the Chinese characters in a person's name is an everyday occurrence in human-to-human communication, it has been little studied by Chinese scholars. Most related discussions are about the culture behind names and the preferences of how non-Chinese people give themselves Chinese names (Na, 2015; Chen, 2018; Zhu, 2019). Although some Japanese or Korean scholars such as Ooyama et al. (1996) have studied the interpretation of Japanese kanji and Korean hanja in personal names, both Japanese and Korean have kana and hangul as syllabary in their language systems, which barely occur indicative confusion. Therefore, understanding the activity of how Chinese people interpret the Chinese characters in their names could not only improve the understanding of Chinese names, language and culture, and even the communication of logograms, but also fill the academic gap, which is of great value in both theory and practice.

Based on the perspective of interpersonal communication, this paper attempts to investigate and analyze the methods and strategies of people's interpretation of Chinese characters in their names and then summarizes the basic laws of people's interpretation in different groups and different scenarios so as a reference for the academic community and the general public.

2. Materials and Methods

This study generated a set of fictitious names as material to simulate the self-introduction scenario. The generation rules of these fictitious names are as follows: Firstly, encoding the surnames sequentially from *Hundred Family Surnames* (Editorial Board of Zhonghua Chanting, the Action of Classics Recitation Reading Series, 2013). Secondly, determining surnames based on 52 random numbers generated by *Random Number Generator* (n.d.). Thirdly, generating given names of length from one to two characters alternately in groups of four

by **Name Generator (n.d.)**. Fifty-two fictitious names were finally generated on June 5, 2021, as shown in **Table 1**.

The FNGs, with their pinyin and the spacing between the surname and the given name, were made into cards for participants to randomly draw and test. Participants assumed the FNG displayed on the card they drew as their name and explained the Chinese characters in the FNG. The researcher recorded the content and methodology of the participant's explanation, along with the participant's gender, age, occupation, place of origin, education level, test scenario, and relationship to the researcher. Participants were randomly selected from the surroundings of the researcher to simulate real-life situations in which individuals introduced themselves. This self-introduction scenario cannot and need not take into account the representability of the participants due to its large randomness. Even then, the researchers sought as many participants as possible and tried to balance the differences between participants in different categories. The FNGs were tested 533 times between June 2021 and December 2021. **Figure 1** shows the demographics of participants in different categories.

Table 1. Fictitious Names Generated (FNG).

FNG	Pinyin	FNG	Pinyin	FNG	Pinyin
靳良工	<i>Jìn Liángōng</i>	宰書琴	<i>Zǎi Shūqín</i>	莘雅愛	<i>Shēn Yǎ'ài</i>
孔喜悅	<i>Kǒng Xǐyuè</i>	翟耘	<i>Zhái Yún</i>	寇雙	<i>Kòu Shuāng</i>
刁漪	<i>Diāo Yī</i>	余焱	<i>Yú Yàn</i>	卞水蕊	<i>Biàn Shuǐruǐ</i>
秦奕奕	<i>Qín Yìyì</i>	烏寄松	<i>Wū Jìsōng</i>	萬尋菱	<i>Wàn Xúnlíng</i>
庫珂	<i>Shè Kē</i>	巫馬澈	<i>Wūmǎ Chè</i>	馮若	<i>Féng Ruò</i>
譚韻	<i>Tán Jù</i>	鄂融雪	<i>È Róngxuě</i>	申屠涵瑤	<i>Shēntú Hányáo</i>
張香梅	<i>Zhāng Xiāngméi</i>	容春姝	<i>Róng Chūnshū</i>	段干丹	<i>Duàngān Dān</i>
軒轅芊	<i>Xuānyuán Qiān</i>	黃晟	<i>Huáng Shèng</i>	沈寒	<i>Shěn Hán</i>
蔣宏放	<i>Jiāng Hóngfàng</i>	南門宏偉	<i>Nánmén Hóngwěi</i>	百里初之	<i>Bǎilǐ Chūzhī</i>
卓和暖	<i>Zhuó Hénuǎn</i>	宣忠	<i>Xuān Zhōng</i>	蒲靚	<i>Pú Liàng</i>
薛光	<i>Xuē Guāng</i>	歐昌	<i>Ōu Chāng</i>	司馬奇致	<i>Sīmǎ Qízhì</i>
胡平良	<i>Hú Píngliáng</i>	厲奇勝	<i>Lì Qíshèng</i>	荀秀穎	<i>Xún Xiùyǐng</i>
亢火	<i>Kàng Huǒ</i>	籍羽	<i>Jí Yǔ</i>	房吉	<i>Fáng Jí</i>
鍾季	<i>Zhōng Jì</i>	笄蕙蘭	<i>Jī Huīlán</i>	東郭紫菱	<i>Dōngguō Zǐlíng</i>
東方晴霞	<i>Dōngfāng Qíngxiá</i>	蔣星晴	<i>Jiāng Xīngqíng</i>	吉寶	<i>Jí Bǎo</i>
晉炫	<i>Jìn Xuàn</i>	傅正	<i>Fù Zhèng</i>	何晏	<i>Hé Yàn</i>
詹采夢	<i>Zhān Cǎimèng</i>	韶覓雙	<i>Sháo Mìshuāng</i>	魯溫茂	<i>Lǔ Wēnmào</i>
微生敏智	<i>Wēishēng Mǐnzhì</i>				

Note: The boldface characters in column FNG are surnames.

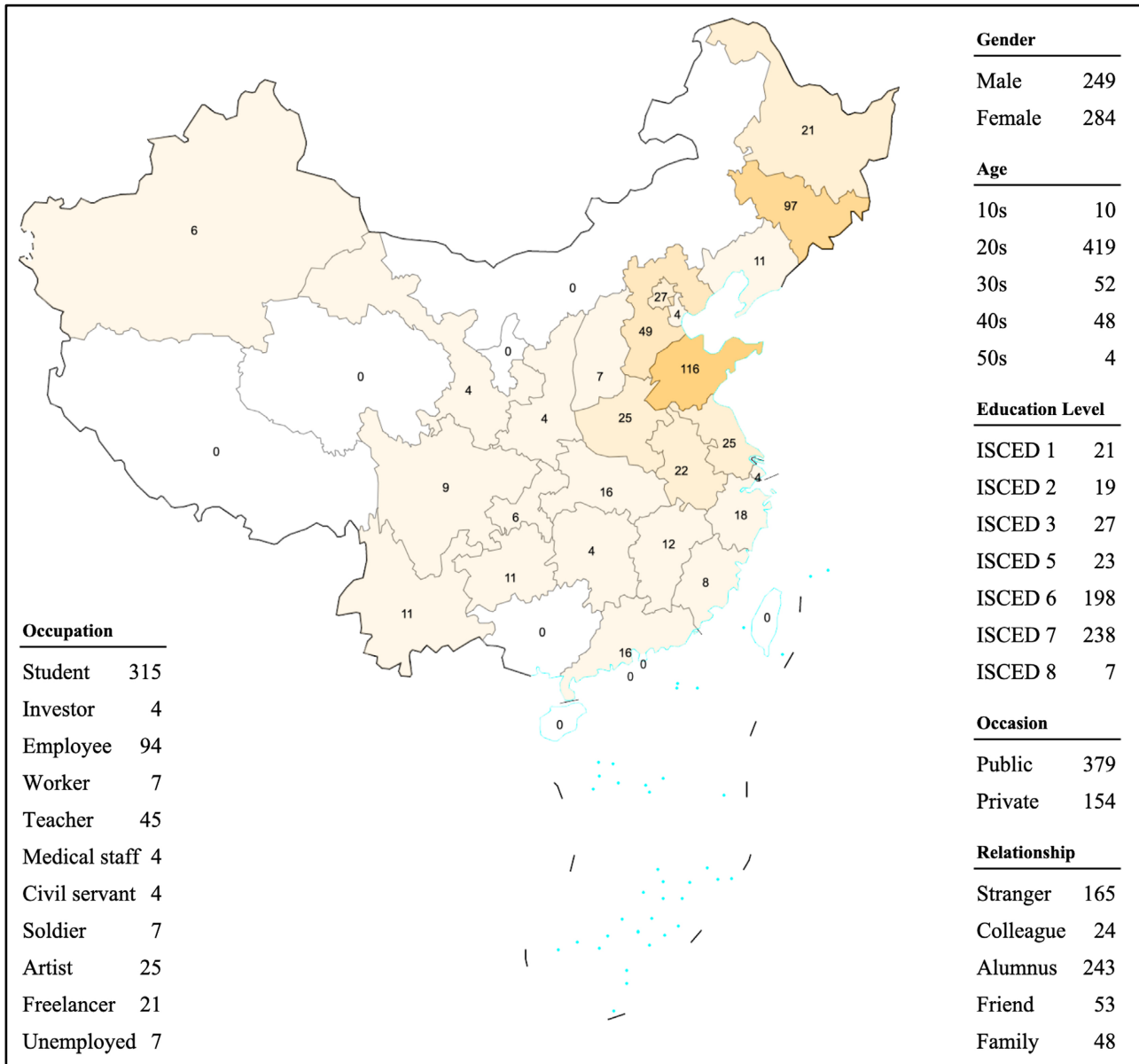


Figure 1. Demographics of participants. Note: The classification in column education level refers to the United Nations educational, scientific and cultural organization, 2011.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Strategies

Through a comprehensive, in-depth analysis and deconstruction of participants’ explanations, this study found that people mainly used five methods to explain FNG when introducing themselves, namely: 1) wording or phrasing, 2) constructing or reconstructing, 3) composing or decomposing, 4) indicating or transferring, and 5) acting or performing. Each of these five strategies is explained below. It is important to note, however, that participants do not use only one method but a combination of methods when interpreting the Chinese characters in their names. For example, the 段 of 段子 (“joke”; M1), the 干 illu-

strated by writing it by hand (M5, M3), and 丹 of 丹東 (“Dandong”, a city in Liaoning Province, China; M1) in 段干丹 (case 239).

3.1.1. Wording or Phrasing (M1)

Wording interprets Chinese characters by forming verbs, nouns, adjectives, numerals, function words, and idioms. For example, 喜 of 喜歡 (“like”) in 孔喜悅 (case 6), 寶 of 寶貝 (“baby”) in 吉寶 (case 129), and 放 of 改革開放 (“the Reform and Opening”) in 荆宏放 (case 216).

Phrasing interprets Chinese characters by forming phrases, short sentences, and quoting poetry. For example, 融雪 of 雪的融化 (“the melting of snow”) in 鄂融雪 (case 58), 宰相家裏有琴棋書畫 (“there is guqin, go chess, calligraphy, and painting in the prime minister’s house”) in 宰書琴 (case 263), and 何 of 何以解憂，唯有杜康 [“What can kill sorrow mine? Nothing but Dukang wine”. See “Poems Translated by Zhao Yanchun in English—A Short Song Ballad (Cao Cao)”, 2018] in 何晏 (case 530).

The percentage of this method used was 77.36%.

3.1.2. Constructing or Reconstructing (M2)

Constructing interprets Chinese characters by describing their constituent parts. The Chinese characters with the following four structures are mainly interpreted in this way: left-right, upper-lower, enclosed, and sandwich. For example, 馮 of 兩點水一個馬 [“two points of water (冫) and a horse”) in 馮若 (case 1), 笮 of 上竹下旦 [“the upper is bamboo (竹) and the lower is dawn”) in 笮蕙蘭 (case 164), and 庫 of 厂車 [“factory (廠, simplified) and car”) in 庫珂 (case 261). As in daily life, participants in this test also use three Chinese characters to form a short sentence in the structure of “character part A + character part B + complete character” to create a sense of rhythm. For example, 張 of 弓長張 in 張香梅 (case 389). Some participants explained each stroke of specific Chinese characters. For example, 之 of 一點、一橫、一撇、一捺 (“one dot, one horizontal, one throw, and one press”) in 百里初之 (case 371). In addition, some participants emphasized the core parts of Chinese characters to distinguish them from other homophones. For example, the 蕊 of 三個心 (“three hearts”) in 卞水蕊 (case 428).

Reconstructing interprets Chinese characters by citing a more common Chinese character and then removing or replacing some parts of it. The Chinese characters with the following two structures are mainly interpreted in this way: left-right and enclosed. For example, 亢 of 抗洪救災的抗去掉提手旁 [“remove the radical hand (扌) in 抗 (fighting) of flood fighting and disaster relief”) in 亢火 (case 40), and 庫 of 車庫的庫沒有一點 [“庫 (garage) of car garage without a dot”) in 庫珂 (case 223).

The percentage of this method used was 12.17%.

3.1.3. Composing or Decomposing (M3)

Composing interprets Chinese characters by combining two or more Chinese characters at a time. For example, 奇勝 of 出奇制勝 (“surprisingly success-

ful”) in 厲奇勝 (case 41), and 奕奕 of 神采奕奕 (“in great spirits”) in 秦奕奕 (case 209).

Decomposing interprets Chinese characters by separating compound surnames. For example, the 南 and 門 of 東南西北 (“east, south, west, and north”) and 大門 (“gate”) in 南門宏偉 (case 160), and the 巫 and 馬 of 巫師 (“wizard”) and 馬匹 (“horse”) in 巫馬澈 (case 232).

The percentage of this method used was 6.81%.

3.1.4. Indicating or Transferring (M4)

Indicating interprets Chinese characters by describing the meaning of Chinese characters. For example, 鄂 of 省份 (“province”, since 鄂 is an abbreviation for Hubei Province, China) in 鄂融雪 (case 58), and 梅 of 花的梅 (“plum of flower”, since plum is a category of flowers) in 張香梅 (case 214).

Transferring interprets Chinese characters by using different words with similar meanings that are more widely used and easily understood. For example, 若 of 好像的那個若 [“若 as 好像 (seem like)”, since 若 is a sophisticated way to say 好像] in 馮若 (case 145), and 雙 of 倆的雙 [“雙 as 倆 (two)”, since 雙 and 倆 are the same in indicating the meaning of two] in 寇雙 (case 334). Some participants used foreign languages to indicate the characters. For example, 愛 of 愛してる (“loving” in Japanese, since the Japanese kanji 愛 has an identical meaning to the Chinese character 愛) in 莘雅愛 (case 463).

The percentage of this method used was 3.21%.

3.1.5. Acting or Performing (M5)

Acting interprets Chinese characters by using body movements. For example, writing 張 in 張香梅 in the air (case 72), and representing strokes of 奕 in 秦奕奕 in the air by finger (case 286).

Performing interprets Chinese characters by directly indicating objects in the surrounding reality. For example, pointing at the door (門) in 南門宏偉 of the office where the test happened (case 397).

The percentage of this method used was 0.45%.

3.2. Preferences

The frequencies of the methods used in each group are organized and shown in **Figure 2**. Demographic classifications have been changed to post-contrast differences with test performer identity to examine the influence of different factors on participant preferences. For example, the participant in case 234 is a female in thirties and the researcher who prompted the test is a male in twenties, so her preference data will be classified into the opposite group in terms of gender and the senior group in terms of age. The values in each table of this figure were weighted and obtained by cross-analysis.

Examining the above values, it can be found that:

1) Regarding gender: There was no difference in preferences between the same and opposite groups.

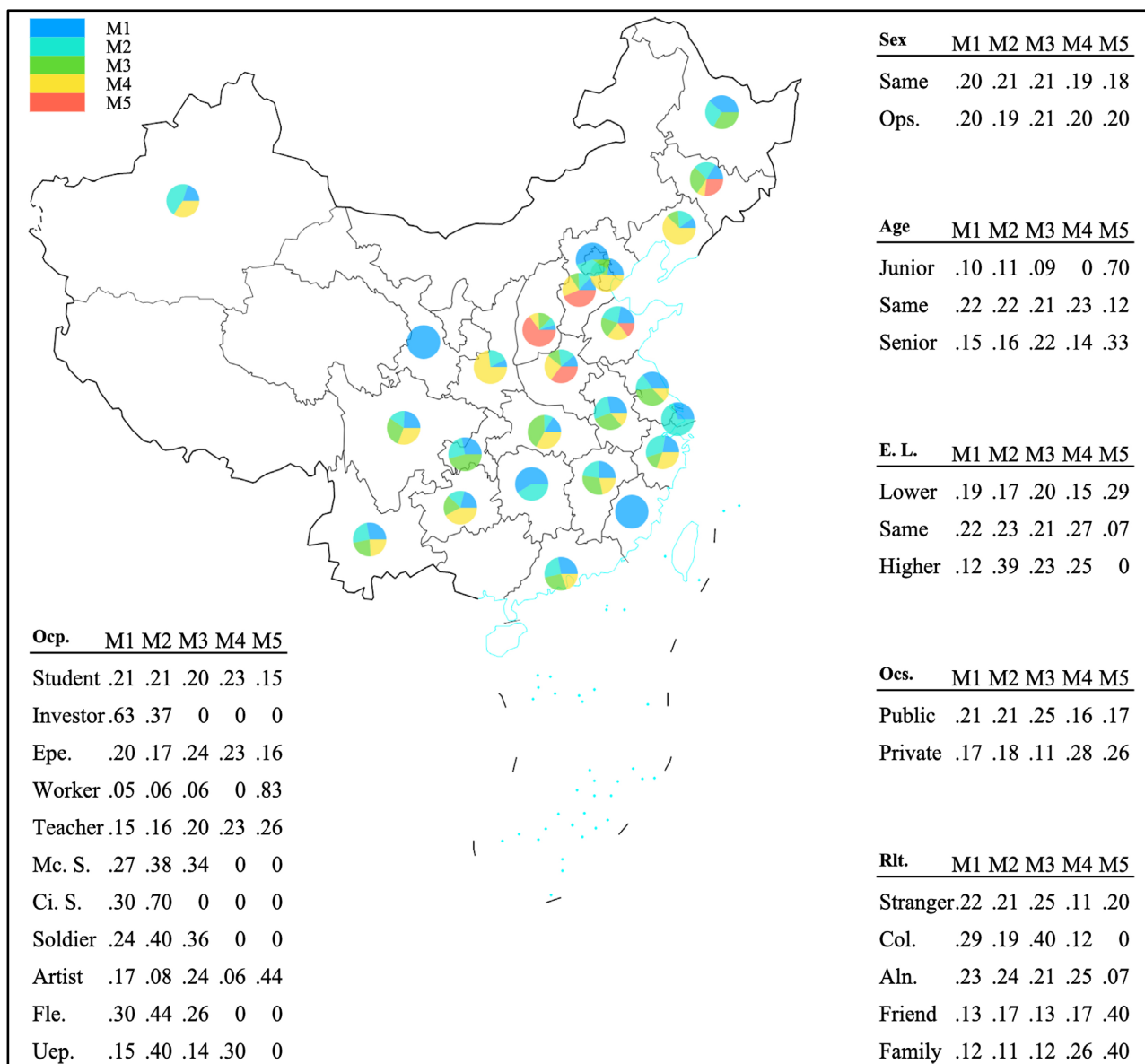


Figure 2. Frequency of methods.

2) Regarding ages and education level: People using the M1 to M4 were more evenly matched with people of the same age and education level, but the M5 was used less frequently; people tend to use the M5, which relies on body movement, for people of a different age or education than themselves; faced with a lower level of education, people tend to use more M2 to interpret the structure of the characters.

3) Regarding occasions and relationships: The more public the occasion, the more people tend to abide by the meaning (M1) and structure (M2) of Chinese characters; the more private the occasion, the more people tend to use different methods to interpret the meaning of the Chinese characters themselves (M4), and even beyond the form of verbal explanation (M5); similarly, the more distant the relation, the more people tend to use M1 and M2; the closer the rela-

tionship is, the more people tend to use M4 and M5.

4) Regarding occupation and place of origin: Researchers are made up of both full-time and part-time students located in different locations, making it challenging to determine preferences for different professions and locations. However, in terms of occupational similarity and relevance, there is a tendency to use multiple approaches to interpret characters in the same profession or similar professions, for example, teacher to student; conversely, people tend to use M1 and M2 in situations where the occupations are different or unrelated; the same is true of the place of origin.

4. Conclusion

By generating fictitious names, making FNG cards, asking participants to introduce the Chinese characters in the names, and analyzing the content, methods, and strategy preferences of the participants' explanations, the study concluded that the closer to the researcher the participant is, or the more compatible their identities are, and or the more intimate the scenario is, the more willing the participant is to use their preferred way of interpreting the character rather than to conform to the other person's preferences or cultural background. In turn, once there is a certain distance between the participant and the researcher, there is a tendency to adopt a more robust and rigorous approach—sometimes elementary and even naive—to accomplish a stable exchange of information to ensure communication accuracy.

This approach to seeking communicative stability removes the factors that interfere with the successful and accurate achievement of communication activities, such as superfluous information, noise in the communication environment, and lack of common meaning—mainly the subjectivity of the sender and receiver. In other words, in order to achieve the desired communication effect, when an unstable—as previously mentioned—factor appears in the communication process, one may shift the key to solving this instability issue to the stage of communication control, which means using an approach that will lead to the achievement of communicative stability to participate in the communication activity. The communicative stability achieved by this approach is negatively correlated with the closeness of the relationship.

Thus, when communicating with unfamiliar people and in the pursuit of accuracy in communication, a simple and competent communication strategy is more likely to achieve the desired goal. In contrast, a complex, individualistic approach to communication can affect the stability and thus the effectiveness of communication.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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