

The Study of the Chinese Speech Act

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The theoretical framework of this small-scale study is Grice's cooperative principles (CP), Leech's six maxims of absolute interpersonal maxims (1983) and Brown and Levinson's (1978/1987) four super-strategies for doing FTAS, and Gu's (1990) seven maxims of Chinese politeness and Liao's (1994) refusal strategies in Mandarin Chinese.

The purpose of this paper is to promote the understanding of Chinese communicative strategy and help Chinese learners to understand Chinese language and culture in the area of refusing.

The paper will first review the concept of face and politeness in different cultures, namely the western and the oriental worlds. The second part will review the research findings of Chinese refusal strategies. The last part of the paper will analyze the data of refusing based on these strategies.

Literature review

Brown and Levinson's Politeness

Brown and Levinson (1987) define face as "the kernel element in folk notion of politeness." It is "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself" (1987, p. 61). They distinguish between negative face and positive face. Positive face refers to one's want to be appreciated and approved by others and negative face has to do with one's want to be unimpeded by others and to one's claim to freedom of action. In Brown and Levinson's view that many things we do with words are potentially face-threatening, including ordering, advising, offering, promising, criticizing, contradicting, etc. They call these linguistic behaviors "face-threatening acts (FTAs)." They suggest that we adopt various speech strategies to minimize or eliminate such threats. Brown and Levinson propose five super-strategies with negative politeness. For the strategies of doing the FTA off-record, Brown and Levinson propose 15 sub-strategies. They indicate that three sociological factors are crucial in determining the level of politeness: Power, Distance and Rank. They propose the following formula:

$$W_x = D(S,H) + P(H,S) + R_x$$

Brown and Levinson regard politeness a universal phenomenon, indeed, it is found in every culture. However, what counts as polite behavior (including values and norms attached to such behavior) is culture specific and language-specific (Gu, 1990).

Mao's Research

Chinese equivalent for "face" is *Mianzi* and *Lian*. It originally appeared in the phrase "to

save one's face" in the English community in China and conveyed a meaning of "one's credit, good name, reputation; the phrase "to save one's face" "as a whole refers to the ways or strategies the Chinese commonly adopted in order to avoid incurring shame or disgrace (*The OED*, 1987). Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language (1951) simply defines "face" as a Chinese idiom meaning "dignity, self-respect, prestige." Both *Mianzi* and *Lian* encode connotative meanings which have to do with reputable, or to which they belong. (Ho, 1957, p. 883, cited in Mao, 1994)

Mao points out that there are two major differences between Chinese face and B/L's face.

The first difference has to do with their overall conceptualization of face. By defining face as "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself," Brown and Levinson center their definition upon the individual rather than the communal-aspect of face. The self is the principal constituent that informs and contextualizes the content of face. It is not susceptible to external pressure or international dynamics and it only concerns the individual's "wants" and "desires," while Chinese face encodes a "reputable image that individuals can claim for themselves as they interact with others in a given community; it is intimately linked to the views of the community and to the community's judgment and perception of the individual's character and behavior." Chinese face emphasizes the harmony of individual conduct with the views and judgment of the community. As a public image, Chinese face largely depends upon, or is determined by the participation of others. Chinese face is, to quote Goffman, "on loan ... from society."

The second difference lies in the content of face. *Mianzi* identifies a Chinese desire to secure public acknowledgement of one's prestige or reputation. *Mianzi* echoes the Confucian tradition, a tradition that advocates subordinating the individual to the group or the community, and regards self-cultivation as an act of communicating with, and sharing in, an ever-expanding circle of human-relatedness (Tu, 1985, p. 249, cited in Mao, 1994). An individual is presumed to seek the respect of the group or the community, but not to satisfy the desire for freedom. Brown and Levinson's negative face represents a desire to be left alone to enjoy a sense of one's "territory integrity"; whether or not one is interacting with the others becomes less important. In contrast, Chinese *Mianzi* foregrounds one's dependence on society's recognition of one's social standing and one's reputable existence; *Lian* seems to bear some resemblance to positive face. In varying degree, both identify an individual's desire to be liked and to be approved of by the others. *Lian* is more socially situated than positive face, it embodies the "imprimatur" of the society as a whole rather than the "goodwill" of another individual.

According to Mao, Chinese politeness is to know how to attend to each other's *Mianzi* and *Lian* and to enact speech acts appropriate to and worthy of such an image.

Gu's Research

Gu (1990) points out that there are four notions underlying the Chinese conception of politeness: respectfulness, modesty, attitudinal warmth and refinement. "Respectfulness" is self's positive appreciation or admiration of other concerning the latter's face, social status, and so on. "Modesty" can be seen as another way of saying "self-denigration." "Attitudinal warmth" is self's demonstration of kindness, consideration, and hospitality to other. "Refinement" refers to self's behavior to other which meets certain standards. According to

Gu, Chinese politeness is characterized by a tendency to denigrate oneself and respect the other.

He also points out that underneath the concept of politeness are two cardinal principles: sincerity and balance. Chinese notion of negative face is different from that of Brown and Levinson's. For example, offering, inviting and promising will not be considered threatening H's negative face, .e.g. impeding H's freedom.

He proposes four Chinese Politeness Maxims, namely the Self-denigration Maxim, the Address Maxim, the Tact Maxim, and the Generosity Maxim. In his thesis (1985) three more maxims are discussed which are the sincerity maxim, the balance maxim, and the moral maxim.

The self-denigration maxim consists of two submaxims: (a) denigrate self and (b) elevate other. This maxim absorbs the motions of respectfulness and modesty. The breach of submaxim (a), i.e. denigrate other, is perceived as being impolite or rude. The breach of submaxim (b), i.e. elevate self, is construed as being "arrogant," "boasting," or "self-conceited."

Liao's Research

Liao (1994) emphasizes that face refers to one's dignity, self-respect, feeling, and social esteem in front of other. This "another person" includes one's husband or one's wife; for example, a Chinese husband may feel loss of face because his educational background is not as high as his wife's.

Refusal Studies

Takahashi and Beebe (1986) in studying the differences between American and Japanese refusals find out that in American refusal they almost always started with an expression of positive opinion such as "I would like to." Then they expressed regret. They always give an excuse. Liao (1994a) also find out that Americans tend to apply the strategy of general agreement with excuses.

Liao and Bresnahan (1996) in their contrastive pragmatic study of refusal tactics between Mandarin Chinese and American English conclude that in Oriental countries, people use fewer strategies in refusing and apology in comparison with Western countries. They summaries 24 strategies in Mandarin Chinese refusal, they are:

- Silence, hesitation, lack of enthusiasm
- Offering an alternative
- Postponement
- Putting the blame on an third party or something over which you have no control
- Avoidance
- General acceptance without giving details
- Divert and distract the addressee
- General acceptance with excuse
- Saying what is offered or requested is inappropriate

- External yes, internal no
- Statement of philosophy
- Direct no
- Excuse or explanation
- Complaining or appealing to feelings
- Rationale
- Joke
- Criticism
- Conditional yes
- Questioning the justification of the request
- Threat
- External no, internal yes
- Statement of principle
- Saying I'm sorry
- Code-switching

Chen and Zhang (1995) in their study find out that Chinese and American acts of refusing are regulated by different face concerns. While American interaction is based on positive or negative face deriving from individual's "face wants" (Brown & Levinson, 1987), Chinese refusal is rooted in maintaining *Mianzi* and *Lian*, which are oriented towards a person's public image (Mao, 1994), realized through reciprocal avoidance of face-to-face confrontation. In refusing situations, Chinese perceive it as imperative to *Liu Mianzi* "preserve face" for the refuse, and to *Liu Hou Lu* "leave oneself a way out" for the refuser. A speaker's face cannot be preserved unless the other person's face is maintained. The refuser would be reluctant to refuse directly or immediately because she doesn't want to hurt the refuser's *Mianzi*, nor does she want to be at the receiving end of a blunt refusal when her turn comes to request, suggest, offer, etc. In their study, they divided Chinese refusal into two types, namely, substantive refusal and ritual refusal...By substantive refusal, the speaker says "no" and means "no." While ritual refusal means that speaker say "no" to offers and invitations etc when in fact they are willing to accept.

The Present Study

Methodology

Ueda's (1974) sixteen ways of avoiding saying "no" seem to be based on her observation and intuition as a native speaker of Japanese. Rubin's study is based on her own observations, second-hand data from review of literature and by referring to one or two informants. Clancy (1986) tape-recorded the interactions between mother and children. Takahashi and Beebe (1986) uses DCT to get relevant data in studying the language transfer problems in refusal (cited in Liao, 1994).

The methods used for collecting data for the present study is multiplex-including the writer's intuition and observation as a native speaker of Mandarin Chinese, the writer's interview with people and second-hand data from review of literature. Liao (1994) termed her

research method inductive because in her research raw data were collected first, then they were analyzed and classified. The present study can be termed deductive because the literature on Chinese refusal strategies are reviewed first, then data are collected and analyzed using these strategies. Due to time limit, the study will concentrate on the following of substantive refusal strategies: excuse, reason or explanation; silence, hesitation, lack of enthusiasm; offering an alternative; postponement and ritual refusal.

Discussion and Analysis

Substantive Refusal

Excuse, reason or explanation

Chen, et al. in their research find out that reason is the most frequently used refusal strategy in Chinese. The following is the writer's own experience:

Friend: Wo men xing qi tian yi qi qu Lu Dun, hao ma? (Shall we go to London this Sunday?)

Writer: Wo shi hen xiang qu, dan shi wo xinqisi yao jiao lun wen. (I'd very much like to, but I have to hand in my pragmatics essay this Thursday.)

In this dialogue, the writer used Reason to refuse her friend's suggestion, It is an on-record, positive, polite strategy, It gives a way of refusing without running the risk of losing or hurting *Mianzi* on either side.

Silence, Hesitation, Lack of Enthusiasm. According to Liao (1994), silence is not the "state of naught," rather it expresses the opponent strongly, It has many aspects including negative implications although there are many times when silence must be kept; for example, when a lecturer is delivering a speech, the audience has to keep quiet to show their politeness or respect to the speaker, and /or to give the speaker face.

Rubin (1983) indicates that silence may mean lack of enthusiasm. In Mandarin Chinese, if a person responds by saying eng ("Uh"), zhe ge (this), zhe ge ma (concerning this, well...), it may mean that the responder is hesitate to say yes.

In many cultures in the world, being silent is a way of refusing an offer or an invitation or of giving an answer. Liao points out in Taiwan, keeping silent may mean yes, especially in public situations; but most of the time it means no, especially in private conversations. Silence is commonly used by children to their parents - they pretend not to hear their parents' request or command to eat dinner, to take a bath, to stop watching TV and go to homework, etc.

According to Brown and Levinson, this belongs to the super-strategy called off-record. Brown and Levinson point out that if a speaker wants to do a FTA, but wants to avoid responsibility for doing it, she or he can do it off-record and leave it up to the addressee to decide how to interpret it.

Offering an Alternative. Liao points out this strategy is often used in the commercial domain by the salesman when a customer is asking for an item which is not available.

The following dialogue shows the requester's offering of alternatives in Mandarin Chinese:

a. *Father: Ni bang wo qu mai bao yan. (You go to buy a pack of cigarettes for me.)*
 Son: *Jiao ge ge qu la. (Ask elder brother to go.)* (cited in Liao, p. 85)

This reminds me of my own experience as a mother. Sometimes when I ask my son to bring me something, he doesn't want to do it, he would say: "Jiao Ba Ba Qu Na" (Ask Daddy to bring it for you).

Teacher: (During the break between classes) Jin Hua, dao ban gong shi na zuo wen hui lai fa. (Jinhua, you go to the office to get the composition to be returned to the class)
 b. *Wei shen me bu jiao zhi ri sheng ne? (Why don't you ask errand runner to?)*
 c. *Lao shi, ni zen me bu jiao zhi ri sheng qu? (Sir/Madam, why don't you ask the errand runner to do it?)*
 d. *Wo you bu shi zhi ri sheng. (I am not the errand runner today.)*
 e. *Wo jian yi lao shi jiao zhi ri sheng qu. (I suggest teacher to ask the errand runner to go.)*

Therefore, Chinese ways of offering an alternative, like English ones, can be in a positive assertive (a), a performative verb plus a positive assertive (e), a negative assertive (d), or a question form (b & c) functioning as a suggestion.

Liao has done quantitative studies on politeness ranking judgment of different ways of offering alternatives. The study shows the ranking order from the least polite to the most polite is (d) "I'm not..." (b) "Why not..." (c) "Sir/Madam, why not..." (e) "I suggest..."

A hint, like (d) is judged to be the least polite. This confirms the study of Blum-Kulka (1987), in which she claims that the most indirect is not judged as the most polite.

Chen and Zhang (1995) in their research point out that Alternative provides a way to avoid a direct confrontation. It illustrates the operation of preserving H's *Mianzi* by showing S's concern for H's need. Although S cannot do what H asks him/her to do, Alternative can possibly meet H's need or at least show S's concern which might otherwise be concealed by S's refusal. This is a positive on-record polite strategy because S notices H's interests, wants, and needs to have his things/desire fulfilled by someone. It is used to soften the threatening power of refusals and shows the influence of the notion of "respectfulness" and "modesty" in Chinese politeness conceptions (Gu, 1990).

Postponement. The most commonly used Chinese postponements are:

Wo zai kao lv kao lv; wo hai yao kao lu kao lu (I'll (have to) reconsider about it)
Zai shuo ba (Let's talk about it later);
Zai yan jiu (Let's study the problem later)
Gai Tian (Another day) and so on.

The examples like the following are quite common in Chinese:

A: *Zou, dao dui mian fan dian, wo qing ni chi fan, (Let's go to the restaurant across the street. Let me treat you.)*

Gai tian. Gai Tian ba. Gai tian hao ma? (Another day. Another day. How about another day?)

b: Zhang lao shi, ming tian ju can yao lai? (Mr. Zhang (teacher), will you join in the getting-together-dinner tomorrow?)

c: Wo zui jin shen ti yi zhi dou bu tai shu fu. Wo zai kao lv kao lv, yao bu de huo, wo da dian hua gei ni. (I've been sick recently. I will consider it and if I want to go, I will call you.)

Putting the Blame on a Third Party or Something over which You have No Control. The idea of Rubin's "My husband doesn't want me to, or I'll have to ask my husband" is deemed a useful strategy. Liao comments in Taiwan, one great difference between men's language and women's language is that women like to say "I have to ask my husband," "My husband says this," or "My husband says that." This is also the writer's own experience. Once a friend from an insurance company came to my house to persuade me to buy insurance, instead of refusing her directly, I said I would check with my husband.

Avoidance. In Mandarin, "I don't know" is commonly said to be a strategy of avoidance. Wo bu zhi dao (I don't know) doesn't mean lack of knowledge. This is a conventional answer when Chinese people answer an impolite inquiry. It is also a possible answer to one person who wants the other to explain some complicated ideas. When the addressee feels that s/he has no time to answer, s/he will simply say Wo ye bu zhi dao (I don't know, either). Wo bu zhi dao can be used when one doesn't want to get in trouble, for example, if someone is trying to ask about another person and the person being asked has nothing good to say, he will simply say Wo dui zhe ge ren mei you hen duo liao jie. (I don't understand the person a lot).

If the inquirer is asking for a thing having already happened, the response of refusing to answer is Wo wang le (I have forgotten) which is also a strategy of avoidance as in the following example:

A: Ni jiang hua hao xiang gao zhong ying yu di si ce di jiu ke de jui hua. (You talk like a rife in the conversation of Lesson 9, Volume 4 of the English textbook for junior high school.)

Oh, na shi zen yang de dui hua? (Really?! What kind of conversation is it?)

Wo wang le. (I have forgotten it)

Avoidance is an off-record strategy.

Ritual Refusal

While substantive refusal is a face-threatening act, ritual refusal is closely tied to Chinese culture values. Its surface value is refusal, but it means external no, internal yes for acceptance. It tacks place in response to an offer or an invitation. It is a polite act to indicate the speaker's consideration of the hearer. As in the following example, in responding to an invitation to dinner, the speaker would say (example from Gu, 1990):

Bu Lai Le, tai ma fan . (I'm not coming, it's too much trouble for you.)

Na ye dei shao wa. (you still need to cook)

Another example is from Mao (1994):

*Bi eke qi le .Ni zhi you liang ge xing qi de jia qi ,yi ding you hen duo shi qing yao zuo.
(Don't be polite. You have only two week's holiday and I'm sure you have a lot to do with your family.)*

Zhe ci jiu bie ma fan le, zhe yang tai hua shi jian le (Please don't bother this time; it takes you too much time.).

In the above situation, the S's replies are oriented toward the concern of the cost such an event will involve for the inviter. The inviter knows that it is a ritual to say "no." Therefore he invites again and again to show hospitality and sincerity. If the inviter accepted the face value of the guests' refusal, then the guests usually complain about the insincerity of the inviter behind his backs. If the invitee says "yes" without first saying no, then the inviter will complain that the guest is not polite.

Gu (1990) draws a general pattern of a successful inviting-transaction from his data:

A: inviting

B: declining (giving)

A: inviting again (refuting B's reasons, minimizing linguistically cost to self)

B: declining again (defending his / her reasons, etc.)

A: insisting on B's presence (refuting, persuading, minimizing linguistically cost to self)

B: accepting (conditionally or unconditionally)

The writer had an interview with Louise, a native speaker of English who had been teaching English in Taiwan for two years. She commented that she must sound very rude to Chinese people in Taiwan because every time she was invited to dinner, she accepted it at once without indicating the cost to the dinner. Being a cultural outsider in China, she is not expected to behave exactly like a Chinese, her instant acceptance of an invitation or an offer will not be judged as rude (although it may be perceived as rather direct and sudden). The following dialogue happened between she and Fendi, a Taiwanese, after she had learned some Chinese and after studying Chinese politeness theory:

Fendi: Ming tian shi yuan xiao jie, wo zuo xie yuan xiao gei ni. (Tomorrow is Chinese Yuan Xiao Jie, I 'll make some Yuan Xiao for you.)

Lousie: Bu yong le, tai ma fan le. (No need, it's too much trouble.)

Fendi: Bu ma fan, han jian dan. (No trouble, it's easy to make.)

Lousie: Bie zuo le ,wo hai you cookie. (Don't make it, I've still got some cookies.)

Fendi: Wo hai shi zuo yi xie gei ni chang chang. (I'd like to make some for you to taste.)

Lousie: Na hao ba, (All right then, thank you.)

As shown above, in ritual refusal, the invitee constantly gives reasons derived from consideration of costs to the inviter. She refuses the invitation for fear of causing too much trouble to the inviter. While in substantive refusal, the invitee gives give reasons, excuses, etc. in order to mitigate threat to both parties' *Mianzi*.

Conclusion

As indicated in the introduction, the first part of the paper has tried to give a brief review of the concept of politeness from both a western and Chinese point of view. The second part has reviewed some research findings on refusal studies. In Chinese culture, when the speaker says “No” and means “no,” it is substantive refusal. Ritual refusals in interpersonal interactions happen in offering and inviting situations. One is not supposed to accept an invitation or an offer right away. In the last part of the paper, some data of refusals are analyzed based on the politeness theories.

Understanding the Chinese notion of politeness and the concept of *Mianzi* can provide guidance in the observation and study of this speech act. As mentioned at the beginning of the paper, the purpose of the paper is to promote cross-cultural communication and help learners understand the politeness theory and better understand Chinese language. The factors that influence language use such as Power, Distance, Rank, Gender, Age need to be considered in further study.

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