A Pragmatic Study of Politeness and Refusals in Mandarin Chinese

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Abstract

This paper discusses two common issues that relate to language use: politeness and refusals. To begin with, the paper demonstrates the extent to which Chinese cultures are based on the connotations of “politeness.” The paper also discusses how the people influenced by Chinese culture receive appreciation and offers based on the pragmatics of dialogue in the Chinese context. In addition, the issue of refusal in the Chinese context is addressed. Since refusals are acts in response to other acts, acts that prompt refusals play a crucial role in the choice of refusal strategies. This paper will categorize different situations of refusal such as direct refusal and indirect refusal in Chinese culture.

Politeness

According to Brown & Levinson (1987), we use politeness to develop strategies to deal with face-threatening acts in our daily life, and we cannot deny that politeness helps us to communicate more effectively. People have to deal with all kinds of individuals with different temperaments. A person who can get along with others successfully must have been equipped with politeness. However, although politeness refers to maintaining appropriate etiquette and speaking adequately to a person without offending him or her, there are still some instances where people from different cultures misunderstand each other due to the use of politeness strategies relative to their own cultures.

Culture and Politeness

Negative Face versus Positive Face

According to Brown & Levinson’s (1987) face theory, everyone has a public image that is related to the emotional and social sense of self which they expect others to recognize. Zhu & Bao (2010) state that negative face refers to the need to be
independent to have the freedom of action without being interfered with by other people, while positive face indicates the need to be accepted, liked, or praised by others, and even the knowledge that one’s desires are shared by others. In brief, negative face is the need to be independent and positive face is the need to be connected.

**Politeness between Chinese and Western Countries Culture**

Gu (1992) claims that Chinese culture has four basic concepts: respectfulness, modesty, attitudinal warmth and refinement. According to Gu (1992), respectfulness refers to one’s concern for another’s social status by showing positive admiration and appreciation. Modesty can be defined as the quality of not being proud or confident about oneself or one's abilities (Gu, 1992). In Chinese culture, people even debase themselves to show their modesty. Attitudinal warmth displays one’s consideration, kindness and hospitality to others. Refinement is the concept of behaving in an elegant way and avoiding vulgarities (Gu, 1992).

According to Zhu & Bao (2010), people’s behaviors are restricted by “politeness” and maintained by “face” in any society around the world. In every country and culture, the development of “etiquette” and its restrictions on people’s behaviors all have specific meanings that vary from one another. The difference between Chinese culture and the culture of Western countries is the connotation of politeness and the way of expressing politeness (Zhu & Bao, 2010). Zhu and Bao (2010) state that in Chinese society, the principle of politeness that is followed is different from that of Western countries because Chinese politeness focuses on class distinction. That is, class distinction indicates grade differences and a rigid hierarchy. In Chinese culture, there is a very clear boundary between teachers and students, parents and children, employers and employees. Therefore, Zhu & Bao (2012) claim that communicators need to reduce their aggressive tone toward people who are older
or have more power. By contrast, older or more powerful people have the right to give others advice, commands, requests, and warnings (Zhu & Bao, 2010). For instance, directive language can only be used by the elderly to younger people such as parents to their children. However, in Western culture, interpersonal relations are often initiated based on equality between people. Most people consider their individual power, privacy, and personal interest to be unassailable. Thus, communicators must have tact to decrease the impoliteness they might unintentionally communicate to people. According to Gu (2000), Westerners tend to use indirect speech in their communication whereas elderly people use imperatives or direct sentences to younger members of Chinese culture. Consider the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Western Cultures</th>
<th>Chinese Cultures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The elderly ↔ Younger people</td>
<td>The elderly → Younger people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ Will you close the door?</td>
<td>➢ Close the door.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ Can (Could) you close the door?</td>
<td>➢ Go to close the door.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ Would you mind closing the door?</td>
<td>➢ Door is not closed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ Could you possibly close the door?</td>
<td>➢ Would you mind me closing the door?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ I was wondering if you could close the door.</td>
<td>➢ May I close the door?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Zhu &amp; Bao 2010, p. 850)</td>
<td>➢ Could you please close the door? Thank you.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the table I, in Chinese culture, we can see younger people tend to use indirect sentences to ask the elders for favors, whereas the elderly do not have to ask younger members to do a task politely. Due to this point, the concept of politeness in Western countries is different from that of China.

As far as invitation and acceptance are concerned, Zhu & Bao (2010) suggest that Chinese tend to use a threadlike thinking model, and there are many words’ turns in their communication structure. That is, people negotiate with each other many times before coming to an agreement. In order to show the hosts’ sincerity, they tend
to make an invitation several times while the invitees refuse the invitation many times to show their politeness. Sapir (1970) develops a dialogue that takes place very often in Chinese culture based on hosts’ hospitality and their guests’ politeness. Consider the following dialogue:

Example I.

A: Please stay with us for the dinner tonight.

B: No, thanks. Please don’t bother.

A: No trouble at all. Just some dishes, they are not difficult to make. We will have dinner in just a few minutes.

B: I’m not hungry now so I will return home. Next time I will stay and bother you.

A: Since you are here, make yourself at home. All we can offer you is a simple meal, and we ourselves will have it. Please stay with us. You will give us face, won’t you?

B: Well, then…then…I shall stay. (p. 851)

This conversation exhibits a long process for coming to an agreement, and it reflects that the Chinese thinking model is threadlike and their language use is much less direct. However, as far as people in Western cultures are concerned, their thinking model is not always circular but linear. That is, when Westerners make an invitation or accept an invitation, they tend to use more direct ways to ensure if they want to invite someone or be invited by someone. Brown & Levinson (1987) proposed that the constant invitation may threaten the hearer’s negative face due to the fact that the hearer’s freedom is restricted by the host. According to Prosser (1978), there are three main steps for Westerners’ conversational style: A host makes an invitation. → An invitee politely refuses to the invitation if he or she cannot make it. → Then a host stops inviting. So as to express politeness, a host would not insist the invitation since the invitees refused it.
According to Zou (2012), due to the fact that Chinese culture is affected by Confucianism, implicitness and modesty are considered virtues and many people tend to use vague ways to respond to certain situations that they do not feel confident and positive about. Hence, people born in Chinese culture often use ambiguous words in their communication. For example, if they encounter certain questions that they do not really know the best answer to, they tend to use “probably, maybe, perhaps” to respond the questions (Zou 2012, p.1678). Nevertheless, people in Western cultures tend to use more direct ways in their communication, especially Americans, as they are more straightforward (Zou, 2012). Zou (2012) also claims that the ambiguity of Chinese expression infringes “clarity” of communicational principle because the ambiguous expression may lead to a failed communication. For example, the sentence “我会尽力 wo hui jin li (I will do my best)” is usually used to respond uncertain situations (Zou 2012, p.1678). Although the English translation seems like a positive response, there are two different connotations in the Chinese sentence. Zou (2012) states that one of the connotations is to decline, and the other one is to avoid taking responsibility. That is, when people say this sentence, it does not represent that their words are a complete promise. Therefore, once they do not accomplish the task, they can easily find a reason or an excuse to rationalize their carelessness.

**Refusals**

Ren (2012) suggests that people generally consider refusals as a speech act by which a speaker “denies to engage in an action proposed by the interlocutor” (Chen 1995, as cited in Ren 2012, p. 65). People frequently perform refusals in daily lives, so it is quite significant to do the pragmatic research for the speech act of refusals. According to the aforementioned face theory conducted by Brown & Levinson (1987), this section discusses the comparison of speech acts of refusal between Chinese culture and Western countries’ culture. Zou (2012) suggests that Chinese people
regard modesty as virtues (Zou, 2012). Therefore, when people engage in speech act of refusals, they tend to respond in an ambiguous way to save opposite party’s face. Honglin’s (2007) study also demonstrates that the speech act of refusals for most Chinese are more indirect than those for Westerners because Chinese people consider that refusals are face threatening acts even though they show their refusals in a sincere way. Therefore, in Chinese culture, people tend to make use of strategies based on politeness to minimize the negative effects on the listeners. Honglin (2007) suggests that cultural value is the main element for the cross-linguistic differences. In addition, Hofstede (1994) also proposes that Americans value equality and their belief is individualism, whereas Chinese value collectivism and they have a higher social power distance. Due to the intercultural communication issues, the speech acts of refusals must have a difference between Chinese culture and Western countries culture.

Social Power Distance

In Chinese society, people’s statuses are hierarchically ranked. Hence, this phenomenon must have a great influence on people’s communication. Honglin (2007) claims that people from a lower social rank should respect those from a higher social rank. Namely, people who have less power use more indirect ways to refuse the speakers who have more power. Nonetheless, Americans tend to directly refuse their elders or someone else who may be more powerful in a socially higher position. For example, say a host asked the guest to stay at his or her home for dinner. If the event took place in a Chinese cultural context, the guest may reject the host by saying a more objective and reasonable excuse instead of using the negative sentence such as “I cannot stay for a long time.” They would probably provide a reasonable excuse to give themselves more room to refuse the host by saying something like, “I need to go to school to take my child home, sorry.” However, Americans tend to politely refuse
the host in a direct way by using negation sentence such as “I can’t stay because…thank you anyway.” Compare these two sentences and we can find that Chinese speech acts of refusals are more indirect due to the fact that they do want help the host save face. They even sometimes have a sense of guilt when they refuse the speakers. This phenomenon also can reflect how Chinese do not like to be refused in a direct way.

Refusals Strategies in Chinese Culture

According to the aforementioned refusals, we can see that the speech act of refusals has to do with people’s social status. However, in Chinese culture, people also use certain direct speech acts of refusal as long as the speakers have higher social status or have closer relationships with the listeners. According to Yang’s (2008) definition, direct refusal refers to direct denial using negative words or statements showing unwillingness or inability. In Chinese culture, people say 不行 buxing (No) or 不可以 bu keyi (can’t be allowed) to show their unwillingness or inability when they refuse the opposite party. There are highly frequent direct refusal words in Chinese such as 不用 buyoung (not necessary), 不要 buyao (don’t want), and 算了 suanle (forget it) (Yang 2008, p.1044). People say these words to their peers or family members when they are not willing to do something that the speaker asks. Therefore, when people conduct the speech act of direct refusals, they do not need to have strategies. Nonetheless, it is essential for people to use strategies of indirect refusals when they face some people who are not socially close to them or whose social statuses are higher than theirs. Yang (2008) proposes certain strategies when people use indirect ways to refuse the opposite party. All examples are Yang’s (2008, p.1045), and I provide the explanations that support these examples:

Example II.

1. Statement of regret
對不起 duibuqi (sorry)
不好意思 buhaoyisi (feel embarrassed)

When people feel regretful for their previous promise to someone, they tend to do apologize to someone to show their inability or unwillingness.

2. Excuse, reason, explanation
我還有事 wo hai you shi (I still have some things to do)

When people want to refuse someone’s invitation or demand, they would explain their reasons or find excuses to support their refusals.

3. Statement of alternative
我可以明天再來 ni keyi mingtian zai lai (you can come tomorrow)

When someone does not want to promise that he or she can come to a certain place, he or she would use a statement of alternative to let the other party feel respected.

4. Set condition for future or past acceptance
他去我就去 ta qu wo jiu qu (if he comes, I will come)

Some people are unwilling to accept a host’s invitation, so they would make use of certain people who have already refused to the invitation to indirectly refuse the host. However, this strategy is not actually polite because the host may feel that this person has no personal opinion.

5. Promise of future acceptance
下次我一定來 xiatsei wo yiding lai (I will certainly come next time)

Due to the fact that most people believe a promise, this is a good strategy to indirectly refuse the host at the moment of time. Sometimes people do not want to disappoint the host, so they may make a promise for future to let the host feel respected and comfortable whether the promise will come true or not.

6. Statement of principle
我丈夫從來不收禮 wo zhangfu tsonglai bu shouli (my husband never accepts gifts)

If a married woman wants to refuse certain people’s gift out of courtesy, she will take the life philosophy of her husband or family members as an excuse to indirectly let the opposite party know that she cannot accept the gift. Therefore, the givers cannot insist their offer since they do not very much know about the woman’s family members or they cannot directly meet her family members at the moment.

7. Attempt to dissuade interlocutor

你不想做，你可以辭職 ni buxiang zuo, ni keyi tsizhi
(if you don’t want to do it, you can quit the job)

If managers want to lay off employees who do not work hard, they would firstly assume the employee’s unwillingness to work and ask them if they want to quit the job. Although this sentence does not sound very polite, it can give the employees more room to reconsider if their work ethics are appropriate or not.

8. Acceptance that functions as a refusal

你的要求我們會考慮的 ni de yaoqiu women hui kaolu de
(we will think over your requests)

If people’s requirement is beyond our ability and we cannot promise, we would let them know that we will consider it. They will realize our refusals due to the fact that we do not promise to help them at the moment.

9. Avoidance

Nonverbal:

➤ Silence

In a school context, when students cannot answer their teacher’s questions, they would keep silent to avoid answering questions.
POLITENESS AND REFUSALS

- **Hesitation**
  
  Some people would show their hesitation without saying anything to let the opposite party know their difficulties, and the opposite party would stop making requests.

- **Physical departure**
  
  When we go to a shopping mall and a salesman tries to market the product to us, we would leave him and avoid him because we do not want to buy the product.

Verbal:

- **Topic switch**
  
  If people do not want to keep talking about a topic started by someone, they would shift the topic to show their lack of interest.

  **Joke**
  
  我不能跟你買保險，因為你太漂亮了，我怕錢花光。Wo bunan gen ni mai bao xian, yin wei ni tai piaoliun le, wo pa chian hua guan.

  Say an insurance saleswoman tries to persuade a man to buy the insurance, the man may make a joke to the saleswoman by saying “I can’t buy insurance from you since you are such a beautiful woman. I don’t want to spend all my money.”

  From the example, we can see the man tries to firstly praise the saleswoman so that he does not need to worry if the saleswoman is unhappy because of the refusal. In other words, the man tries to maximize praise of the saleswoman, so the saleswoman may be distracted by the man’s compliment and subconsciously allow herself to be refused. However, it does not really work since it depends on the opposite party’s personality or thought.

- **Postponement**
A: 可以借我錢嗎 keyi jei wo xian ma? (Can you lend me some money?)
B: 讓我考慮考慮 zhan wo kao lui kao lui. (Let me think it over.)

People would intentionally postpone the requirement if they are not willing to do it. For example, they would say “let’s think it over, shall we?” The opposite party would realize that the people do not want to promise him or her at the moment.

➢ Hedge (Chinese examples?)
A: 你可以幫我這個忙嗎 ni ke yi bun wo zhe ge mon ma? (Could you do me this favor?)
B: 我試一試, 但不保證 wo shi yi shi, dan wo bu bao jan. (Let me try, but I can’t promise.)

When people are not sure if they can do certain favors, they may say an ambiguous sentence to show their difficulties or unwillingness. For example, people would say “Let me try it, but I cannot guarantee anything.” Then the opposite party would understand that their request will not be fulfilled.

Ritual Refusals in Chinese Culture

According to Yang (2008), there are two kinds of refusals in Chinese society. The first kind is where a refusal such as "no", literally means "no" (Yang, 2008). An example would be a direct refusal to accept a gift or an act on all levels. The second kind of refusal is where the refusal is only on a superficial level (Yang, 2008). That is, the first kind of refusal can be called a real refusal, in the sense that its meaning is tangible in all ways; whereas the second kind of refusal can be called ritual refusal, in the sense that it is only seen as a symbolic act to show the receiver’s considerations to the one who is offering the favor. Although both of these refusals occur in cases of real offers or invitations, they each employ different strategies. They can also be
difficult to distinguish if the offer or invitation is actually real, or if it is only a ritual. A ritual refusal, marked by greater attention to the costs of the phenomenon, is made in order to resolve this ambiguity. If one who offers the favor does not insist on inviting, we can interpret the invitation as a ritual invitation. Then it is proper for the addressee to decline the invitation. However, if the assessment shows that the host is sincere and serious, ritual refusal is likely to lead to an eventual acceptance. Consider the following dialogue by using ritual refusal:

A: Let’s go out to have lunch together. It will be my treat.
B: No. I can cook. Thanks.
A: You don’t need to cook. I really want to treat you since you did me a favor last time.
B: Oh…ok, thanks.

**Conclusion**

Politeness is a very broad and complex human behavior. The definition of politeness is largely socially driven. There are numerous theoretical approaches that try to explain politeness. Therefore, politeness is basically dependent on situation and on the context in which interaction is taking place. Culture itself is associated with social groups. Therefore, the criteria for what qualifies as polite or impolite, varies from culture to culture.

Politeness in Chinese culture is a sophisticated concept, and we can conclude that most people’s interpersonal communications are based on 面子 mianzhi (face). Such communication also has to do with social power distance due to the fact that people’s statuses are hierarchically ranked. As far as the speech act of refusals are concerned, ritual refusal is closely tied to Chinese cultural values, but discourse conventions may result in cross-cultural miscommunication. This is especially true for the people in Western countries because Westerners generally cannot always
understand Chinese refusals due to the fact this group of people is typically characterized as linear rather than circular.
Works Cited


