

Politeness in Acculturation: How Power Dynamics Shape Intercommunication Between Chinese and Western Culture

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Abstract. This research focuses on the attempts of individuals at different social levels within Chinese and Western cultural backgrounds to communicate and collaborate harmoniously. Based on the politeness principle proposed by American professor Grace, the research will explore the specific application in both China and Western cultures from three dimensions: hierarchical relations on honorifics and conditional sentences, implicatures and indirectness in a turn-taking. In detail, the research applies Jenny Thomas's theoretical framework on Leech's conversational maxims and the four factors influencing directness and aspires to examine and investigate the differentiated applications of the politeness principle in specific cultural dynamics. The researcher will examine dialogues in four classical texts such as King Lear, Pride and Prejudice, Dream of the Red Chamber and A New Accounts of Tales, alongside with the views of different scholars across the globe from different disciplinary angles. Ultimately, the research aims to provide theoretical insights for enhancing communication among multilingual talents in the post-pandemic era. These insights could facilitate more effective interactions and collaborations in an increasingly interconnected and acculturated world. Through this analysis, the researcher aims to bridge cultural divides and promote effective dialogue across diverse international business and social settings.

Keywords: Politeness principle; Honorific language; Indirectness; Implicature.

1. Introduction

In the post-pandemic area, global strategic cooperation and communication encounter significant challenges. Breaking down the cultural contextual barriers between China and Western cultures requires multilingual talents to weave the politeness principle, which refers to the societal norms of etiquette that ought to be observed in verbal communication, to create effective collaborative environment. Across Eastern and Western cultural texts, numerous dialogues have provided examples of the employment of politeness principles on a hierarchical basis. However, few existing articles have provided a comprehensive summary of the differential application of politeness principle within different context on a hierarchical perspective. Drawing upon Leech's Cooperative Principle as our theoretical foundation, this paper incorporates Jenny Thomas' four factors influencing indirectness and builds upon Leech's conversational maxim theory, classifying and elucidating the manifestations of hierarchy relations, indirectness, and implicature in various textual contexts. Ultimately, the researcher aims to offer novel insights into textual microanalysis and promote cross-cultural understanding, thereby facilitating more nuanced and respectful interactions between Eastern and Western societies.

2. Organization of the Text

2.1. Hierarchy Relations

In pragmatic dimension, hierarchy is an important factor that influence interpersonal communication by the aspects of politeness forms, power relations and social status. Therefore, to communicate with different levels of people with respect for their feelings are crucial[1]. American Professor Grace proposed the Cooperation Principle and defined its purpose as to ensure that conversations can proceed smoothly and successfully[2]. British linguist Leech further developed the politeness principle, emphasizing that effective conversational behavior cannot be divorced from

politeness, as its application makes the interlocutor feel respected and facilitates pleasant communication[3]. Leech categorizes the politeness principle into six maxim dimensions: tact maxim, generosity maxim, approbation maxim, modesty maxim, agreement maxim, and sympathy maxim[3]. Edward Hall further applied this theory into his high-context and low-context theory. He argues that in high-context cultures, people tend to convey information in a more conservative and indirect manner; thus, expressions of politeness are often associated with indirect communication and non-verbal cues. In contrast, in low-context cultures, people are inclined to use explicit language rather than relying on contextual information to express respect for hierarchical relationships[4]. China is classified as a high context culture society, while Western societies belong to low-context cultures. Consequently, there are notable distinctions in the mindsets and methodologies employed by each in managing hierarchical relationships.

2.1.1.Honorific Language

The principle of humility in Chinese context is often manifested through the use of honorific language. Sun observes the premier role of “defying oneself and worship others” in the adaption of honorific language, whereas Western honorific languages do not necessarily emphasis this contrast[5]. In Chinese culture, terms of address for those in higher positions are typically accompanied by respectful adjectives, such as ‘*your esteemed father*’ (Your father), ‘*worthy young brother*’. A series of euphemistic expressions is employed to denote actions performed by those of higher status, including phrases like ‘*to arrive with great fanfare and make the atmosphere of the place radiant*’ (Your honored presence), ‘*to long admire and esteem your name*’ (I have long admired your name), and ‘*to hold high your esteemed hand*’ (Kindly show mercy). Additionally, adverbs may be included to enhance the tone of respect, such as ‘*may I ask boldly*’ and ‘*may I trouble you*’.

Conversely, terms of address used for one's own side may carry a demeaning connotation. in Dream of the Red Chamber, when Jia Yucun, who has fallen on hard times, seeks help from Lin Ruhai, the latter, despite his higher status, displays great humility and consideration for others. He expresses this sentiment as follows: ‘*It is serendipitous that due to the passing of my cheap wife, our family has sent boats to pick up my inferior daughter for her education, but she hasn't fully recovered yet, so we have yet to proceed. At this moment, I reflect on your kindness in teaching her, which remains unreciprocated. Since I have encountered this opportunity, how could I not do my utmost to repay this favor?*’ Here, his reference to ‘my inferior daughter’ (my daughter) and ‘my cheap wife’ (my humble wife) illustrates his principle of never put someone in a difficult situation as a person of merit[6].

2.1.2. Conditional and Interrogational Sentences

Guo points out that in cross-cultural communication, Chinese individuals would also employ a ‘top-down’ logic and use euphemisms in English to consider how not to offend their leaders or senior colleagues. For example, they avoid using declarative sentences and instead opt for interrogative ones to make their expressions more polite, thus providing the other party with more options. For instance: ‘Is it ok if we proceed with the project?’ Additionally, the use of conditional sentences also reflects politeness and respect, as it takes the feelings of the other party into account, making the speaker appear more humble and considerate. An example would be: ‘If I may suggest, we should reconsider this situation,’ instead of directly expressing concern. Presenting objections in this way can help reduce the other party's resistance[7].

There are also circumstances that one emphasize their views bluntly due to the unwillingness to cooperate with another party. In King Lear, Cordelia, displaying integrity instead of coaxing in the test of demonstrating ‘love’ for land, failed to utilize the politeness principle in the test set by King Lear in the name of ‘love’[8].

Example 1

Lear: What can you say to win a third more opulent than your sisters?

Cordelia: Nothing.

Lear: How? Nothing can come of nothing. Speak again.

In this case, Cordelia chooses not to embellish her 'loyalty' to her father with words, which results in King Lear, who holds greater power, feeling uncomfortable and offended. According to Grice's Cooperative Principle, individuals should ensure that the information they convey during communication is truthful; otherwise, it may lead the interlocutor to perceive that the conversation cannot continue. Thus, Cordelia, operating from the perspective of their father-daughter relationship, deliberately refrains from overstating her 'loyalty', which instead makes King Lear feel uneasy and offended. From the perspective of a throne holder and a benefactor of patriarchal interests, King Lear does not assume a foundational space for cooperation with Cordelia.

2.2. Indirectness

Indirect speech acts occur when a speaker performs a primary speech act with a literal meaning while simultaneously executing another act that has a different pragmatic intention or propositional content[9]. According to John Austin's theory of speech acts, a speaker may simultaneously perform three types of actions when conveying content: locutionary acts, illocutionary acts and perlocutionary acts[10]. John Searle, one of Austin's students, criticized Austin that he focuses too much on an isolating perspective. He pointed out that language is governed by subjective conscious behavior, just like many other social activities of humans and refined Austin's theory into five categories: representative, directive, commissive, expressive, and declarative[11].

Indirect speech plays a significant role in the cohesive function of language.

Jenny Thomas categorizes the factors influencing linguistic indirectness into power, social distance, imposition, rights and obligations[12]. Spencer Oatley[13] categorized the different types of power as legitimate power, referent power, and expert power. Social distance refers to the level of indirectness in requests or commands based on the degree of intimacy between the interlocutors. The greater the social distance between conversational partners, the more polite the language used should be. Imposition refers to the speaker's assessment of the degree of obligation associated with the interlocutor's request. Furthermore, in contexts where power dynamics are clearly established, direct and explicit language is utilized to express requests or commands, whereas indirect and ambiguous language is employed to gauge the interlocutor's response when such power relations are less defined.

The following are two passages from Chinese and Western texts that explore the scope of indirect language:

Example 2

Throughout history, there has not been a sage who can compare to Zhou Gong and Confucius. Neither of these two figures is without faults, nor do they lack teachers. Although you may be a great sage, there is still a considerable gap between you and Zhou Gong or Confucius. You currently have an inflated opinion of yourself, believing that no one in the world can match you. You regard opinions that align with yours as good, while dismissing those that do not as bad. How can this approach attract honest officials to you and keep petty individuals away?

In this case, the indirect factors in language include power relations, social distance, and the degree of imposition. Wang Anshi was a reformer of the Song dynasty whose reform proposals faced strong opposition from conservative officials, particularly his former friend Sima Guang. Jiang points out that Si Wang employs the principle of politeness to enhance the possibilities for collaboration with his political rival[14]. He noted that Anshi's reforms alienated many officials and failed to win the appreciation of the common people, yet he was highly valued by the Song dynasty emperor. Jiang observes that Sima Guang, representing the conservative side, went so far as to compile numerous historical examples in an attempt to persuade Wang by showing that with such a wealth of historical experience, there was no need for reform[14]. To achieve this objective, he even disregards the principle of moderation and piles up a large number of examples, making the article overly verbose.

In Jane Austen's novel 'Pride and Prejudice', when Elizabeth Bennet declines Mr. Collins' proposal, Mrs. Bennet attempts to persuade her husband to intervene and counsel Elizabeth. Mr. Bennet employs indirect language to convey his inability to assist. Below is a concrete example from Yang[15]:

Example 3

'What do you mean, Mr. Bennet, by talking in this way? You promised me to insist upon her marrying him.'

'My dear,' replied her husband, 'I have two small favors to request. First, that you will allow me the free use of my understanding on the present occasion; and secondly, of my room. I shall be glad to have the library to myself as soon as may be.' (p. 174)

In this dialogue, Mr. Bennet ingeniously dismisses Mrs. Bennet by citing the time she occupies in his library as leisurely pursuits. He conveys an imperative message through the guise of advice, effectively communicating his unwillingness to engage in the topic with his wife[15]. Mr. Bennet employs indirect speech to convey the power dynamics, reflecting the significant authority men held as heads of household during Jane Austen's era. His perpetual retreat to the library, physically distancing himself from the rest of the family, serves as evidence of this, alongside the near-exclusive handling of domestic affairs by Mrs. Bennet. The combination of social distance and gender-based power relations prompts Mr. Bennet to utilize humorous, indirect speech as a means of refusal.

2.3. Implicature Received by Interlocutors

Jenny Thomas cited five dimensions that Grace proposed in which a interlocutor may fail to understand the implicit meaning of the speaker participant due to their failure to conduct maxims correctly: 1). flouting a maxim; 2). opt out of a maxim: the interlocutor is unwilling to adhere to ways that the maxim requires

3). violating a maxim: the speaker conceals part of truth about the matter.

4). infringing a maxim: the speaker lacks the ability to weave a maxim due to imperfect command of a language or nervousness.

5). suspending a maxim: occasions when the interlocutor does not expect to receive implications from the speaker, for example when interacting with family members, the interlocutor does not urge the speaker to provide precise information, unless he has a guarded attitude towards his family[12]. Keenan points out that suspending a maxim can also be specific to culture[16]. For example[12]:

'Last time you were with that FBI man—asking about the one who got killed,' she said, respecting the Navajo taboo of not speaking the name of the dead. 'You find out who killed that man?' (p. 76)

Thomas further concluded the principle of flouting the maxim defining it as a speaker blatantly fails to observe a maxim due to the clash of maxims faced by the speaker. For example: *It was either Graham Mitchell or Roger Hollis and I don't believe it was Roger Hollis.* In this case the author, Rupert Allason is trying to discuss the identity of a "fifth man", but Thomas pointed out that Allason failed to observe the maxim of Quantity (he could have said 'the fifth man was Graham Mitchell) and speculated that Allason might want to convey more information instead (the maxim of Quality). In this case, the speaker prompted the interlocutor to speculate the implicature themselves[12].

There are examples in both Western and Chinese cultural backgrounds where interlocutors fail to comprehend the implication of the speaker due to the politeness integrating into these conversations. As in the above example 3, Mr. Bennet, in concern of manner to Mrs Bennet, combines the maxim of quantity (he gives clear regulations on his free time in his library) but fails to convey that Mrs. Bennett is not allowed to enter his library now (failure of the maxim of manner). His speech therefore caused Mrs. Bennet trouble with bitter complaints.

Here is an opposite example in the short story collection *A new account of Tales of the world*. In the case listed below, a friend arranged to meet Chen Taiqiu at his home but arrived late. In response to the friend's anger, Chen Taiqiu's son offered a straightforward criticism.

Example 4

'You arranged to meet my father at noon, but you didn't show up. That is a sign of being unreliable. It is also impolite to scold his father in front of the child.'

Chen Yuanfang, the child who directs this speech, does not concern about indirectness but instead the explicitness (maxim of manner) and the correctness of his discourse by pointing out the problems

the friend possesses according his observation in the intercourse (maxim of quality). The friend therefore realizes his absurdness and made an apology.

Thomas pointed out that Graces' principles are based on the assumption that in conversational interaction, people work on the expectations that everyone else follows the certain set of rules[11]. In example 4, if Chen Yuanfang is a grown adult, his ensuing behavior of walking through the door without looking back would leave an impression of arrogance rather than integrity and straightforwardness. Shen further analyzed the problem in Chinese cultural settings. Shen points out that '*Shudao*' (the principle of forgiveness) embodies a flexibility that extends beyond principles in traditional Confucian culture and constitutes an important aspect of resolving interpersonal conflicts. Chen Yuanfang evidently failed to uphold this principle[16-17]. However, his young age allowed his friends to exercise tolerance, reasoning that he has not yet received a complete education in traditional Chinese culture.

3. Conclusion

In this review, the researcher analyzes the application of politeness principles in hierarchical relationships at three levels under Western and Eastern backgrounds: hierarch relations, indirectness and implicature received by interlocutors. Hierarchical relations the speaker to use honorifics, conditional and interrogational sentences when addressing to those of higher status. Indirectness refers to a way of not expressing the speaker's true extent, while implicature received by hearers discusses the unintended meanings that arise spontaneously from the speaker's words, which may be misunderstood by the recipient. Besides, different cultural perspectives also facilitate the positioning of politeness, for example the '*shudao*' in the Wei and Jin dynasty and the patriarchal system in rural families during the regency period in England. In an era where global communication is becoming all times high, employing politeness principles to examine Western and China cultural dynamics contributes to the reconstruction of cultural communication and the discoveries of commonalities. On the above basis, the research findings can also help to cultivate cross-linguistic talents and facilitate more effective communications and acculturation.

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