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“Being Direct or Indirect?” Politeness, Facework and Rapport Construction in Chinese Interpersonal Business Requests

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Abstract: This article investigates how requests, either in direct or indirect forms, are associated with politeness strategies and facework in Chinese verbal business negotiations. Drawing on authentic data and Watts (2003) social models of politeness and (Kirkpatrick, 1991; Spencer-Oatey Helen. (2000)) rapport management, the authors analyze how business negotiators manage and interpret the notion of “being (in)direct” and its connection with linguistic politeness, facework and rapport construction in business discourse. The results reveal that there is no inherent connection between Chinese politeness and Chinese facework. Interpersonal rapport in business contexts is complex and dynamic owing to different communicative motives and business relations. The Chinese facework can be classified into self face and collective face at both non-professional and professional levels. The realizations of business requests embody business negotiators’ cognition of social and professional roles and sensitivity of interpersonal rapport, together with their evaluation of interactive contexts and linguistic forms, revealing the Chinese interpersonal communication system and discursal rapport construction in business contexts.

Keywords: Business requests: Facework: (In)Directness: Interpersonal rapport: Politeness.

1. Introduction

Making a request is a delicate and sensitive act in business communication. In the vein of Chinese communication studies, western scholars claim that the Chinese prefer an indirect style and using ambiguity in their requests (e.g., (Gudykunst, 1998; Kirkpatrick, 1991)), while other studies by Chinese scholars (e.g., (Kong, 1998; Yeung, 1997)) claim that these findings have ignored the context and linguistically sensitive nature of speech acts (such as requests) which are initiated to achieve institutional and social rapport. Cross-culturally, Yeung (1997) and Kong (1998), by comparing English data with Chinese data, proposed that the common notion of the written request as “an illocutionary act whereby a speaker (requester) conveys to a hearer (requestee) that he or she wants the requestee to perform an act which is for the benefit of the speaker (requester)” (Trosborg, 1995) should be expanded, especially when studying non-English data, concerning cognitive responses to requests (Han Kuei-Hsiang *et al.*, 2005). Regarding speech acts and politeness studies, while Watts (2003) saw politeness in speech acts as dynamic, interactional and negotiated, (Spencer-Oatey Helen., 2000;2002) claimed rapport management as an important issue for facework and politeness studies. She maintained that Brown and Levinson (1987) conceptualization of positive face had been underspecified, and that the concerns they identified as negative face issues were not necessarily face concerns at all. She suggested that rapport management (the management of harmony-disharmony among people) involved two main components: the management of face and the management of sociality rights. Hence, in order to achieve a comprehensive and well-balanced understanding of the interconnection between (in)directness and politeness of speech acts, we cannot afford to neglect the facework and rapport occurring therein in business contexts. In addition, a good understanding of facework and rapport and their projected (in)directness and politeness can obviously reduce misunderstandings and suspicion among business people so as to smooth their communication.

In this paper, politeness and facework are explored within cultural meanings and communication encounters in order to assess how members of a given community (e.g. China) and profession (e.g. trade people) choose and interpret the dynamism of (in)directness in spoken requests and their interconnection with interpersonal rapport management in business contexts. The research questions include:

1. How are directness and indirectness of requests associated with politeness strategies and facework in Chinese interpersonal business contexts?
2. What are the politeness and facework underpinnings of Chinese interpersonal rapport management and construction in business contexts?

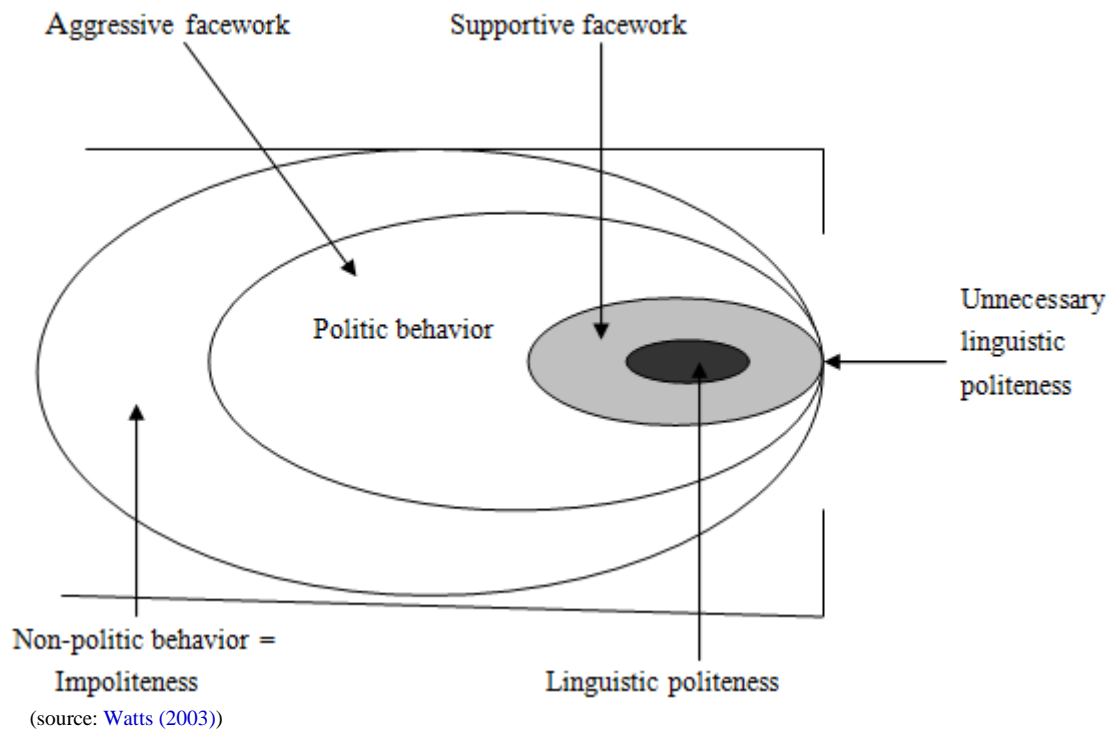
Through this empirical study, the authors wish to extend and enrich the notion of the “social model” of politeness developed by Watts (2003), rapport management theory raised by (Spencer-Oatey Helen., 2000;2002) and their interrelationship with facework and speech (in)directness.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Prominent Notions of Interpersonal Linguistic Politeness, Facework and Rapport Management

Politeness and facework have been studied in many disciplines and cultures. The best known one was by Brown and Levinson (1987) who proposed three dimensions (power, distance and rank) which contributed to the determination of positive and negative politeness strategies. Although Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory has been challenged by a number of scholars on various grounds, many scholars (e.g., Pedlow *et al.* (2004); Bremner (2006); Yang (2009); Scollon and Scollon (2001); Wolfson (1988)) still preferred to use these three cultural dimensions to study speech acts from a perspective of interpersonal communication. Nevertheless, Watts (2003) developed a theoretically coherent model that focused on an actor’s perception of politeness in lieu of an imposed model of “politeness strategies” as in the classic study by Brown and Levinson (1987). Having integrated with Eelen (2001) notion of “social model”, Watts (2003) model (see Figure 1) provided researchers with ways of recognizing an utterance as simply polite instead of labeling it as inherently polite. He divided the politeness strategies into politic behavior and linguistic (im) politeness within social settings.

Figure-1. Facework, linguistic politeness and politic behavior



In Watts’ model, there were interconnections among the politic behavior, facework and politeness. While politic behavior was a kind of behavior that was interactionally constructed as expected and appropriate, non-politic verbal behavior was not interpretable as sanctioned aggressive facework, but often as impolite, rude, brash, etc.. Within the infinite forms of social practice, the forms of politic behavior were largely predictable on the basis of the objectified social structures of the community of practice in which the interaction took place. Aggressive facework relied on the boundaries of expected politic behavior for the interaction and was unlikely to use linguistic structures that might be open to interpretation as polite, while supportive facework was closer to that area in which linguistic behavior might be associated with potentially polite behavior. Watts’ social model framed politeness as a social commodity and a mediating force between individuals and their courses of action, which sought to avoid producing politeness models. Besides, face, as a socially and culturally attributed aspect of self and community, was temporarily on loan for the duration of the interaction in accordance with the line or lines that the participants had adopted. For instance, in Chinese society, face is a very complicated concept and it involves reciprocal social attribution. Lee-Wong and Song (2000) Stated that in modern Chinese society, “face maintenance is essentially an act of balancing – the perception of self in relation to other(s)”. In an empirical study of “small talk” in business negotiations, Yang (2012) argued that, “small talk” as a social and conventional interaction, could help to establish rapport and bonds of personal union between people. To extend the studies on interpersonal communication with

respect to rapport and facework management, [Spencer-Oatey Helen. \(2000\)](#) developed a five-domain framework for studying relational goals in interaction: the illocutionary, content, participation, stylistic, and nonverbal domains. However, as [Yang \(2012\)](#) pointed out that, most of the studies based on Spencer-Oatey's politeness, facework and rapport management fell in the first domain (illocutionary), while the other four domains received limited attention (see [Planken, 2005](#); [Spencer-Oatey Helen and Xing, 2004](#); [Zhu, 2011](#)) and needed further studies. Face and its related social meanings and people's cognition of it form a basis of facework and rapport management in communication.

In this research, the authors conduct an empirical research on interpersonal speech acts and focus on the overlooked stylistic domain (e.g., the choice of sentence patterns), as described in the research of [Spencer-Oatey Helen. \(2000\)](#).

2.2. Politeness and Facework in Chinese Contexts

Politeness and face work stem from our world knowledge of how to behave appropriately in a given situation and how to maintain smooth interactions and good social relationships with other people ([Yang, 2009](#)). [Scollon and Scollon \(2001\)](#) claimed that the Chinese differ from the Anglo-Americans since they organized their ideas, persuaded others and structured their conversations differently. The Chinese were postulated as having their own values and specific rhetorical patterns in discourse and different interpretive framework. Generally, they were very often characterized as favouring many linguistic strategies, such as being indirect (e.g. [Scollon and Scollon, 2001](#); [Zhang Y., 1995](#)) etc.), ambiguous ([Chang, 1999](#); [Zhang Q., 2008](#)), modest (e.g. [Gu \(1990\)](#)) in their daily communication, and being cautious in business communication (e.g. [Bilbow \(1996\)](#)). When the Chinese interact, they provided information about their subject matters, and simultaneously revealed such things as their sense of "self", the roles they were adopting or expecting others to adopt (age, rank and social differences). They also provided information about the values they wanted to express, their perceptions of the relevant interactions, their expectations of other negotiator's behaviours, and their anticipation of the outcome of said communication. In this case, Chinese language has potentially serious social consequences and effects on communication.

As [Yang \(2009\)](#) claimed, to understand Chinese linguistic politeness and facework, people needed to understand the unique concept of "face" (脸 *lian* or 面子 *mianzi*) which has existed in Chinese culture and Confucian thoughts for thousands of years (551B.C - 479B.C.). [Gu \(1990\)](#) stated that there were four notions underlying the Chinese perception of *limao*: respectfulness, modesty, attitudinal warmth, and refinement. In addition to these four notions, sincerity and balance were very important values. For decades, Chinese politeness and facework in communication have been studied mainly from a social perspective. To maintain harmony, the Chinese were preoccupied with the concept of face and are very sensitive to maintaining face in all aspects of social and business life. In a relative way, the social orientation and public self-image of the Chinese face complied more with the face notion of [Goffman \(1967\)](#), who claimed that face was a public image. It was on loan to the individual from society. [Mao \(1994\)](#) argued that "to be polite" in Chinese discourse was "to know how to respond to each other's *lian (mianzi)* as well as to perform speech acts appropriate to and worthy of such an image". The interactional dynamic of facework was positively reciprocal with both parties engaged in mutually shared orientation to negotiate, elevate, and attend to each other's face as well as one's own face. Thus, Chinese facework actually is "face-balance", which means giving face to others' face simultaneously enhances one's own face and depriving other's face simultaneously damages one's face" ([Zhang Y., 1995](#)). Both self face and group face (sometimes the community face or the public face) should be considered in communication.

Despite pervasive discussions on social factors, Chinese politeness still needs to be studied in the context of conventional rituals which are not only socially motivated, but also historically, ethnically, emotionally and professionally as well, and are encoded as proper and contextual linguistic expressions. To understand it and its related facework, one has to look at its tradition, its historical truth, its context, and their changes. In the area of Mandarin Chinese, in particular, there are very few investigations that have followed a conversational analysis (CA) approach on business language and interpersonal communication studies ([Yang, 2009](#)), and most current studies of Chinese communication do not provide sufficient evidence to grasp the complexity of the negotiation styles and sociopragmatic preferences under different interpersonal relationships, which may reflect different social norms, cultural and linguistic conventions, politeness strategies and facework. These are addressed in this present study to fill the gap in a way.

2.3. Requests and Their Linguistic Directness and Indirectness

Cultural variations affect people's perceptions towards speech (in)directness and its projected facework and politeness strategies in communication. From the perspective of pragmatics, [Blum-Kulka et al. \(1989\)](#) identified the request structure on sequence and turn completing: "alerters", "supportive moves", "head act" on "strategy types", "perspectives", and "internal modifications: downgraders and upgraders". The core requests (the head acts) fulfilled the function of requests, and the peripheral elements, or alerters and supportive moves, mitigated or aggravated the force of requests. In their view, requests could only be realized by the core parts and the peripheral elements preceded or followed the core requests, which affected the realization of (in)directness. For instance, in off-record (indirect) requests, only the peripheral elements served as requests. [Blum-Kulka et al. \(1989\)](#) interpreted that the impositive was the most direct and explicit level of request which was syntactically marked as imperatives or by other verbal means that named the act as a request, such as "performatives" ([Austin, 1962](#)) and "hedged

performatives” (Fraser, 1975). Blum-Kulka *et al.* (1989) argued that language might differ in the relative position granted to individual strategy types on the directness scale, but a distinction between three main levels of directness had been empirically shown to be valid across several languages. Within these types of directness, the following nine directness levels of request strategies are distinguished. Nine strategies are listed in Table 1 according to the decreasing degree of directness and illustrated with examples taken from Blum-Kulka *et al.* (1989) findings and Chinese language traditions.

Table-1. Request strategies

Levels of directness	Strategies	Examples
Direct	1.Mood-derivable	You shut up. (你闭嘴)
	2. Performatives	I am telling you to shut up. (我说你别说)
	3.Hedged performance	I would like to ask you to shut up. (我想请你别说了)
	4.Obligation statements	You will have to move the car. (你得移动你的车)
	5.Want statements	I want you to shut up. (我想你别说了)
Conventionally indirect	6.Suggestory formula	Let’s play a game. (我们来玩个游戏)
	7.Query-preparatory	Can you draw a horse for me? (你可以为我画匹马吗?)
Non-Conventionally Indirect	8.Strong hints	This game is boring. (这游戏有点闷)
	9.Mild hints	We have been playing this game for over an hour now. (我们已经玩了一个多小时的游戏了)

(Adapted from Blum-Kulka *et al.* (1989))

Blum-Kulka *et al.* (1989) study of requests provides reliable linguistic evidences for politeness and (in)directness classification and their interconnection, and their project has inspired a number of subsequent linguistic studies on requests (e.g., (Fukushima, 2000; Trosborg, 1995; Zhang Y., 1995)) and request sequence (Fox, 2015; Li and Ma, 2016). By analyzing interpersonal business expressions, Charles (1996) found that the differences in directness and indirectness were embedded in the choices and constraints offered (imposed) by the systems of individual languages, interactive patterns and strategies in various sub-generic types of business discourse and in the interpersonal relationships of negotiators. Her findings demonstrated that both context and relationship determined the directness and indirectness of business language. Nevertheless, directness or indirectness is often seen as constituting politeness behavior which is latent in all verbal and intercultural interactions. Hence, it is significant to have a closer study of linguistic (in) directness and its reflected politeness and facework in different socio-cultural groups.

3. Data and Research Method

The subjects involved in the transcribed conversations all held college degrees or above with an average of 9.8 years of business negotiating experience, ranging from 2 years to 26 years. The data selected for this study were from a corpus of about 39 hours, 1178 conversations. It consisted of 30 naturally-occurring and similar length face-to-face business conversations among Chinese business people (27 women and 41 men), which were recorded in factories, trade fairs and business offices from 2004 to 2014, based on social business distance: business stranger (BS), business friend (BF) and business partner (BP)², and 10 for each respectively.

To record the conversations, the authors placed MP4s, mini recorders, mobile phone recorders on negotiation tables, or in negotiators’ pockets while they were working in trade fairs and offices. The authors did not present themselves in any of the recorded conversations for the sake of less interference. Subsequent to the recording of business communication and selection of the data, interviews (about 9 hours, 30 interviews) were conducted with the participants of the transcribed conversations in order to gain insights into their evaluation and interpretations of requests regarding (in)directness, politeness strategies and facework. Permission to use the data for research purposes was granted by the subjects who had participated in the recording work. Their company names, given names, products’ names and their prices were changed, deleted, or replaced by the pseudonym of “x”. The core parts of the requests were directly translated into English to demonstrate the linguistic equivalence concerning direct and indirect expressions. Complete English versions were given afterwards.

4. Findings

4.1. Direct Requests and Their Politeness Strategies and Facework

The applications of direct requests in Chinese business contexts are usually associated with how a speaker perceives interpersonal relationships and the imposition of requests with various linguistic devices in the contexts.

The most familiar ones include imperatives, coverb performatives, and want statements (Yang, 2009). In Example 1, the two interactants were BPs. After a short greeting, A requested B to have a cup of tea:

Example 1 The Use of Imperative Sentence

刘先生：老曾，过来喝杯茶，刚泡的龙井。

Mr. Liu: Lao Zeng, come here and have a cup of tea, (we) just have made a pot of Longjing tea.

曾先生：好啊。正口渴着呢。

Mr. Zeng: Sure, I am thirsty now.

Chinese directness is often realized by conventionally formatted bald utterances, such as the use of imperatives to express intimacy and ingroupness. According to the interview, by using a direct imperative, Mr. Liu (the requester) wished to demonstrate his intimacy to Mr. Zeng (the requestee) through an unhesitating invitation, while Mr. Zeng, as a guest, also regarded this request as conventionally polite to show host's true intent, generosity and hospitality. Such a direct speech was a "face-supporting act" (Yeung, 1997) and a politic act, constructing an intimate rapport which involves solidarity. It is bald but appropriate because their collective face at non-professional level was observed.

Another widely applied direct request is realized by a want statement regardless of social distances. A want statement expresses a speaker's desires that the event denoted in the propositions come about. It is direct because a speaker's illocutionary intent is apparent from his or her locution, and such directness is a pragma linguistic category which lends itself to psycholinguistic validation, although his or her directness degrees are decreasing, as Blum-Kulka *et al.* (1989) suggest, when compared to direct imperatives. In Example 2, Miss Wang and Mr. Lin met for the first time and Miss Wang showed her interest in purchasing Mr. Lin's products.

Example 2 The Use of Want Statements

王小姐：我想(want)先看你们的产品，林先生，特别是你们产品目录中的第10款和14款。

Miss Wang: I want to have a look at your products first, Mr. Lin, particularly the items 10 and 14 in your catalogue.

林先生：好的，小刘，去拿给她。顺便看看新开发的37款有没有做好，我想(want)让王小姐也看看。

Mr. Lin: OK. Xiao Liu, go and bring it here. By the way, check item 37 to see if it is ready. I want Miss Wang to have a look at it too.

Syntactically, a want statement "I want..." is more speaker-oriented, intending to give and acknowledge more space or autonomy to the hearer. In Example 2, Miss Wang and Mr. Lin both agreed in the interview that it was imposition but the imposition degree was low because the request was associated with the requestees' job duties, i.e. Mr. Lin (the seller) and Xiao Liu (the assistant) had their professional obligations to demonstrate the products to Miss Wang (the buyer). All interactants in this conversation were aware that they should fulfill their job and communicate efficiently and directly so that business rapport could be established quickly.

Moreover, coverb performatives are typically conventional devices in speech acts. In Chinese, a coverb derives from a verb meaning "to do", which implies intentional manipulation of the object on the part of the omitted subject "you". In many cases, coverb performatives are in fact coverb imperatives (Zhan, 1992). The most prominent Chinese coverbs are "把grasp", "帮help", "跟go together with" which construct direct requests. Example 3, 4 and 5 are requests made by BFs.

Example 3 The Use of Coverb "把grasp"

杨先生：莫小姐，把(grasp)我们的样品拿出来比较一下。好像是放在第三个箱子里。

Mr. Yang: Miss Mo, bring our standard sample here and compare it with this one. It should be in the third case.

莫小姐：没问题。是要看标准包装还是简易包装的？

Miss. Mo: No problem. Do you want to see the sample in the standard package or the simple one?

Example 4 The Use of Coverb "帮help"

秦先生：帮(help)我拿包，我要找一下我的车钥匙。

Mr. Qin: Help me with this bag. I need to find my car key.

刘先生：好的，给我吧。

Mr. Liu: OK. Give it to me.

Example 5 The Use of Coverb "跟go together with"

周先生：都快12点了，反正都要吃饭，走，跟(go together with)我们一起去吃饭。

Mr. Zhou: It is nearly 12 o'clock, and we need to have lunch anyway. Come on, let's go and have dinner.

李小姐：不用了，我还有很多事儿忙呢，谢谢啦。

Miss Li: No, thanks, I have many things to do.

The subject of coverb (“把grasp” in Example 3) construction deliberately deals with the object (it is also viewed as pre-verbal reference) in such a way that some kind of consequence is registered in the complement with the following verb phrase “to compare with this one”. Coverb “帮help” in Example 4 lexically displays the request with low imposition because such a coverb was a conventional expression embedded in the speaker’s acknowledgement for the favor from the hearer. Similar to want statements, the two requests with coverbs are direct and task-oriented, and are less impositive by coming rapidly to the point, avoiding further imposition of prolixity and obscurity. Chinese people prefer using coverbs in requests when they feel face redress is not important or relevant, inferring that an intimate rapport has been created.

Coverb “跟go together with” in Example 5 embodies ingroupness, which contains a feeling of co-membership for performing the action together. It is usually followed by objective personal pronouns [e.g., 我们us or 我me] to construct the imperative request performed by positioning the hearer before the object and the main verb. This kind of coverb reveals some background information about the requested action which is associated with the main actor and verb [“we” + “eat (have) dinner”], through which the requester puts the hearer in a subordinate position to perform the act as a co-member or a follower, implicating the principal and the subordinate. Requests with this coverb sound direct but elaborative: both ingroupness and collective face construction are embedded in a solidarity rapport.

In data, the use of shifting references is also a good choice to show one’s directness in requests as well, implicating solidarity. In Chinese grammar, there are several antonymous auxiliary pairs like “回头come back vs. 下次next time”, “来come vs. 去go”, “进come in vs. 出go out” and so on in requests. By using “come back”, “come” or “come in” before or after the main verb, speakers can express the fact that the motion involved in the main verb is towards speakers; by using “next time”, “go” or “go out”, speakers express that “the motion is away from the speaker” (Zhan, 1992). These auxiliary verbs serve as the complements to the main verbs [e.g., 给give], indicating the directions of the action are towards or away from the speakers. In Example 6, Mr. Li and Mr. Zheng have been business partners for years and Mr. Zheng hoped Mr. Li could help him solve the problems of overstocked products.

Example 6 The Use of Shifting the References

李先生：回头(Come back: in a while)把积压产品的单子给(give)我。

Mr. Li: Give me the list of overstocked products next time (when) you return.

郑先生：好啊。回头给你。

Mr. Zheng: OK, I will give it to you when I return.

Through using auxiliary verbs towards the speaker, a speaker can successfully shift the reference point from an outsider (the hearer) to an insider (together with the speaker) by using a verb-complement construction with speaker-directed auxiliary verbs. This implies that the speaker shifts the reference point by placing the hearer in the speaker’s position so as to construct ingroupness and membership and to redress their collective face. As for Example 6, Mr. Li requested a business cooperation of Mr. Zheng, aiming to redress their collective professional face for problem resolution, creating a solidary business rapport. In Chinese, such shifting in direct imperative requests is seen as positively polite, implying harmony. It shows the speakers’ desire to draw the relation close or demonstrate sincerity.

There are three underlying motivations behind direct requests in Chinese. Firstly, professional needs. Interactants do not need to consider face redress because performing requests is connected with the requestees’ professional obligations or their business roles. Secondly, intimacy basis. Interactants prefer to be frank when they want to show their generosity and sincerity. In practice, many Chinese business people use this strategy as a face-giving or face-support device in speech acts. Thirdly, conventionally use. In Chinese business contexts, direct requests are “politic behavior” (Watts, 2003) which is interactionally constructed as expected and appropriate creating either business or personal rapport.

4.2. Indirect Requests and Their Politeness and Facework Strategies

Linguistic indirectness in Chinese is often realized by both conventional and non-conventional expressions, i.e. some indirect requests are made in formulaic or ritualized ways, and some are made with special intentions, considerations and motives.

4.3. Conventional Indirectness

Conventional indirectness in Chinese business communication is often realized by politeness markers, respective forms, interrogatives, tags and use of hedges, grounders, giving reasons etc (Yang, 2009). In Example 7, after exchanging the name cards, Mr. Zhang made a request:

Example 7 The Use of Politeness Markers and Respective Forms

张先生：我刚刚到贵公司，还要请(Please: politeness marker)您(you: a respect addressing form of “you” in Chinese)多指教。

Mr. Zhang: (Because) I am new here in this company, please feel free to give me any suggestions.

蔡先生：不敢不敢，大家共勉。

Mr. Cai: I don't feel comfortable doing that but we can help each other.

The politeness marker (please) and the respective form “you” were used to redress the hearer's self face by Mr. Zhang in Example 7. Such a request is common among BSs when they meet for the first time after self-introduction or name-card exchange (Yang, 2009). The politeness applied is conventional to display core features of distant and deference expressions, often redressing either hearer's individual or professional face. Other deference linguistic strategies soften the tone of requests. For instance, Chinese speakers often use syntactical grammatical device utterances, such as particle tails “嘛ma”, “吧ba” with low pitch, at the end of interrogative sentences, or use adverbial hedges (e.g., weakeners, minimizers), such as “一些some”, “一点儿a point / a bit of”, or “verb + 一下one time/once”. The request in Example 8 was made by a BS while the request in Example 9 was made by a BF.

Example 8 The Use of Interrogatives and Utterance Particle Tails

张先生：可以给我一张你的名片吗 (ma: utterance particle tail)?

Mr. Zhang: Could you give me a name card?

孙先生：好的，给你。

Mr. Sun: OK, here you are.

Example 9 The Use of Hedges (Imposition Minimizer)

莫小姐：劳驾你帮这个 (this one: minimizer) 忙，这对我们双方都是一本万利的好事。

Miss Mo: Please do me a favor, which can benefit both of us.

杨先生：可以这么说吧。但这个忙并不小啊。

Mr. Yang: You can say that, but it is a great favor from me.

Chinese conventionally indirect utterances are similar to English conventional indirectness in that question forms are used (see Example 8), or hedges are applied (see Example 9) to mitigate the force of speech, especially when the imposition in the request is high. These linguistic devices function as internal modifications in the speech to modulate the degree of indirectness. They can downtone the imposition or indicate the short duration with relatively modest nature (Wang, 1965), redressing the hearer's individual professional face in Example 8, and the speaker's professional face in Example 9 because his effort could bring business profits for both of them.

In general, Chinese formulaic and ritualized indirect devices are relatively restricted and often form internal syntactical parts of requests, mitigating the imposition of requests. The use of conventional indirectness has two purposes. One is to show the social alienation of speakers and hearers. Many business people are willing to conform to the tradition of business society, especially by following common social language conventions. Another one is to indicate the high imposition the request act itself embodies, and speakers are not certain about the performance of the requested act. Such requests of conventional indirectness are preferred not only by BSs and BFs, but also sometimes by BPs. Its connected politeness in negotiation practice is often viewed as politic to redress hearers' different face wants, creating a deference rapport situation. These politic behaviors and deference rapport constructions are often determined by the speakers' conventions: the collection of dispositions that directs a speaker to make requests appropriately in interaction, which is perceived to be appropriate to the social constraints of the ongoing interaction (Watts, 2003).

4.4. Non-conventional Indirectness

Non-conventional indirectness is complicated and is used in accordance with a speaker's knowledge of the way that negotiations are conventionally conducted in a specific social field, including their communication experience, interpretations of the imposition of the speech, and evaluation and negotiation of relationships (Yang, 2009). This type of politeness presentation is also politic, implicating speakers' special or extra intentions and motives which need to be understood by hearers. Being politically indirect to redress their interlocutors' face want, business requesters often use intimate markers (e.g., kinship terms), metaphors, ellipsis, and so on to realize their intentions. Requests in Examples 10 and 11 and 12 were made by BPs, BSs and BFs respectively.

Example 10 The Use of Kinship Term

李先生：看在校友 (schoolmate) 的份上，无论如何你得帮小弟 (little brother) 这个忙，把钱先付一些。

Mr. Li: Since we are schoolmates, no matter how difficult it is, you should help me, (your) little brother, pay some of the money.

郑先生：这个……你知道，我们国营单位做事比较慢，程序比较多。

Mr. Zheng: It……you know, as a state-owned company, we have many procedures to follow.

Example 11 The Use of Kinship Term

何小姐：大姐 (Big sister)，请给我看看你们的报价单。

Miss He: (My) sister, please let me have a look of your quotation sheet.

马小姐：给你...其实价钱是可以谈的。

Miss Ma: Here you are, and the price is negotiable.

Example 12 The Use of Kinship Term

严先生：大哥(old brother)，你可得好好帮忙说说。

Mr. Yan: (My) old brother, you should help me to persuade him.

赵先生：我也没有权啊，我找机会吧。

Mr. Zhao: I do not have the power, either, (but) I will try to find a chance.

To demonstrate ingroupness and intimacy, the Chinese like to use kinship terms which can either disclose communicators' intimacy and relational background or indicate that the speaker wishes to form a closer relationship with the hearer. In interviews, the business negotiators agreed that kinship terms could expedite the conclusion of business (e.g., settle the payment in Example 10), minimize the high imposition of request (e.g., get to know the price list in Example 11), and establish business networks (e.g., function as a business mediator in Example 12), if the hearers showed consensus in the communication, i.e. the hearers showed a willingness to cooperate and establish such intimacy. In the three requests, the speakers aimed to redress the hearers' individual face by observing their senior positions as (older) siblings so that their collective and in-group face was observed. Besides, the three requests were also concerned with the hearers' professional face because their business efforts, power and capability were appreciated and stressed. Although the utterances appeared to be politic and conventionally polite, the hearers might interpret them as very forceful and rigid if the tone was raised to a high pitch in the requests, because the hearers would interpret it as they having no options but to comply with the requests, which was often viewed as imposing and impolite.

Hinting is another popular politic politeness strategy widely used in Chinese business requests. It refers to those requests which are opaque or obscure in nature and speakers exploit their implicature while getting hearers to respond implicitly to requests. In other words, they lack transparency and clarity. Typical linguistic presentations are ellipsis and metaphor. Requests in Example 13, 14 and 15 were all made by BPs.

Example 13 The Use of Ellipsis

李先生：那我们这个季度积压的产品.....(ellipsis)

Mr. Li: Then how about our stocked products...

郑先生：好吧，我们尽快结。

Mr. Zheng: OK, we will try to settle the payment soon.

Example 14 The Use of Metaphors

李小姐：每次都吃你(eat you: you pay the bills)，你也不怕我们把你们厂子吃穷(eat poor: make you poor through eating too much)了啊？

Miss Li: You paid the bill every time when we had dinner together. Aren't you afraid of your factory becoming poor if you always do that?

周先生：哪里吃的穷啊！谁都要吃饭啊。

Mr. Zhou: You can not eat too much and make me poor. Everyone needs to eat.

Example 15 The Use of Metaphors

林先生：每次吃饭买单，你都哭穷(cry for being poor)，真是铁公鸡一个(an iron cock)。公司给你的年终奖又不少，不用你给你媳妇省钱呢。

Mr. Lin: You are always telling me how poor you are when you pay the bill. You are really a miser. The company has paid you a great bonus at the end of the year, and you do not need to save too much for your wife.

黄先生：嘿嘿.....在家不掌财权.....

Mr. Huang: heihei... I do not have financial power at home.

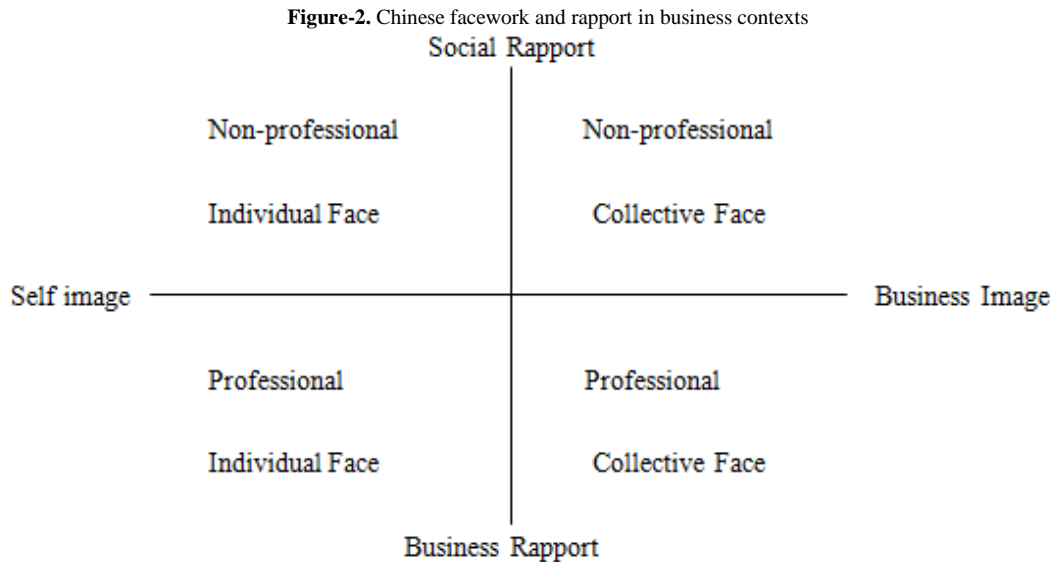
The indirect requests were deliberately made by the speakers with tactics not impinging on the hearer's professional face for business decision-making power (Example 13), on hearer's professional individual face by showing consideration for hearer's (Mr. Zhou) company financial situation (Example 14), and on the hearer's non-professional individual face by deliberately criticizing the hearer (Mr. Huang) for seldom paying for the bills, implying a request for his payment this time (Example 15). However, it should be noted that elliptical utterances are not preferred by people in deference relation who view them improper because the ellipsis calls for efforts for elaboration and interpretation. In addition, metaphors, as rhetorical devices in speech acts, can also function as different politeness strategies, such as being bald, negatively polite, positively polite, and off record (Yang, 2009).

While directness and conventional indirectness are usually associated with professional roles, non-conventional indirectness reflects interlocutors' cognition and evaluation of the social relations, degrees of linguistic imposition, and the development of emergent interpersonal networks. The emergent networks posit that every politic utterance

conveys implicature which must be responded to by a proper discursual act: building up an intimate rapport for the interaction. This typology of indirectness is mostly favored by BPs who have shared knowledge and know very well about each other's individual linguistic style. BSs and BFs only apply it occasionally, subject to their shared common knowledge and their evaluation of the interacting contexts.

4.5. Facework, (In)Directness and Politeness within the Interpersonal Practice of Rapport Management

The interpretations of facework and politeness in business contexts are interpersonally multilayered. Chinese business Facework can be classified into two levels: individual face and collective face at both professional and non-professional levels (see Figure 2).



Individual face concerns the negotiator's self face, referring to his or her non-professional self-image and ego. Collective non-professional face encompasses the negotiators' (both the speakers' and hearers') joint and in-group face, referring to their communal images and social/personal relationship as friends and intimates who have common non-professional interests. Individual professional face considers the negotiator's individual business image, together with his or her professional qualifications, business role, job obligations and capabilities. Collective professional face encompasses the negotiators' (both the speakers' and hearers') collective business image, together with their cooperation, joint efforts, mutual benefits and interests as BPs, intimates and cooperators. The construction of facework is associated with the communicators' cognition of the communicative world and application of (im)politeness strategies which are reflected through linguistic devices and forms, i.e. people under different contexts wear different kinds of faces and use different politeness strategies for different interactional purposes.

In the transcribed conversations from the corpus, the authors find that there are preferred patterns of requests (466 requests: 109 by BSs, 164 by BF and 193 by BPs) concerning interpersonal directness and facework.

Table-2. Interpersonal distribution of (in)directness and facework in requests

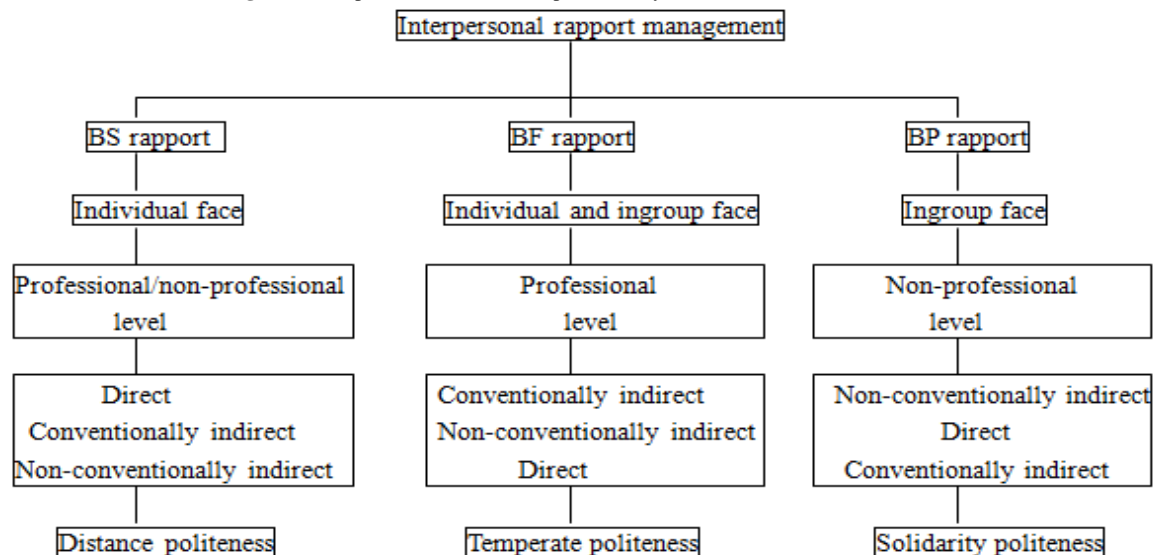
Category		BS 109 (%)	BF 164 (%)	BP 193 (%)
(In)directness	Direct	41 (38%)	37 (23%)	59 (31%)
	Conventionally indirect	49 (45%)	74 (45%)	51 (26%)
	Non-conventionally indirect	19 (17%)	53 (32%)	83 (43%)
Facework	Non-professional face			
	Individual face	25 (23%)	39 (24%)	55 (28%)
	Ingroup face	6 (6%)	34 (21%)	63 (33%)
	Professional face			
	Individual professional face	52 (48%)	51 (31%)	37 (19%)
	Ingroup professional face	26 (24%)	40 (24%)	38 (20%)

The statistical results in Table 2 show that, generally, BSs and BF pay more attention to their interactants' professional face and prefer conventionally indirect requests while BPs prefer non-professional face and both direct and non-conventionally indirect requests, followed by direct requests. It shows that as business relationships develop, facework changes and business-oriented communication switches to personal-oriented communication; i.e. in communication, business people would like to redress their interactants' professional (48%+24%) face in the BS relation, both professional face (31%+24%) and non-professional face (24%+21%) in BF relation, and more non-professional face (28%+33%) in BP relation. Such an inclination demonstrates that the facework develops from the

professional to the non-professional level, and from the individual to the ingroup consideration. In the face discursial process, however, negotiators' language selection becomes more complicated because of the use of more non-conventional expressions in the requests. The interpretations of (im)politeness strategies are associated with the negotiators' understanding of the types of facework they employ at the time in the communication, people's evaluation of the social relationship, and the degree of imposition of a request, through which the communicators produce their request strategies, and create an interpersonal rapport for the interaction.

Face-changing is an important aspect of Chinese business communication, which should be carefully observed by negotiators who use different linguistic strategies to demonstrate their understandings of it. As Jia (2001) saw it, (Chinese) groups maintained a status or reputation, and individuals were concerned about not only their individual face but also the face of their groups. The interpersonal rapport system can be sketched as (see Figure 3):

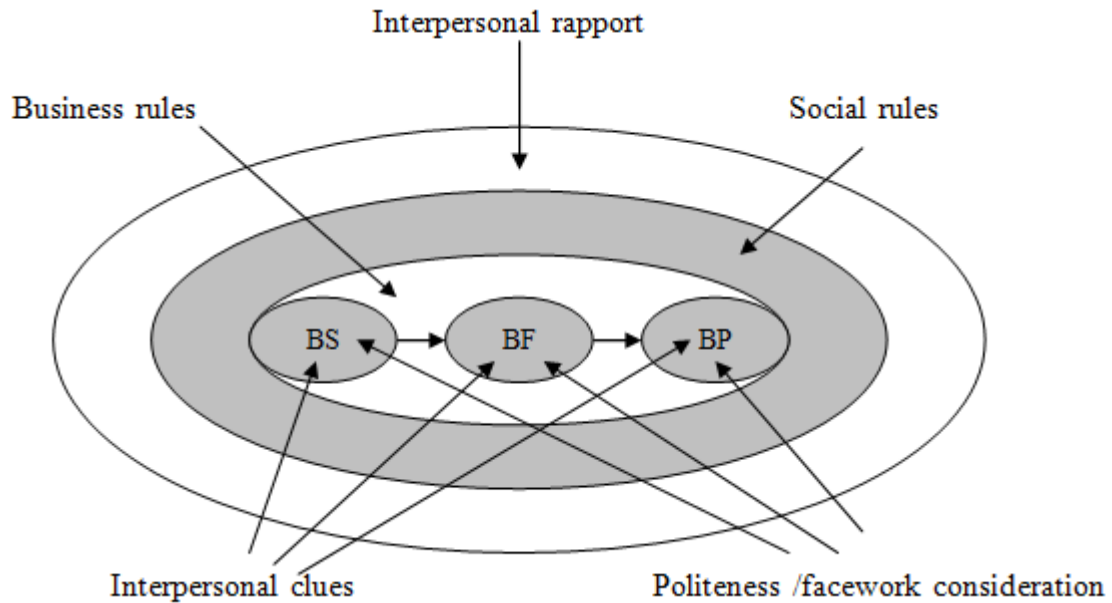
Figure-3. Interpersonal facework and politeness system in business communication



In business communication, Chinese people need to consider a radically new way of looking at rapport management, and its association with interpersonal politeness, facework and (in)directness in the workplace. Interpersonal rapport management in fact implies interpersonal control of negotiators' relational diversities, projecting their assumption of pre-given social and business contents and customs by applying various interpersonal linguistic clues in business communication (Yang, 2013). Interpersonal politeness demands language appropriateness. For interpersonal rapport construction, facework and politeness strategies are interpersonally and contextually dynamic and negotiated with preferred linguistic strategies: BS uses more direct linguistic expressions, followed by conventionally and non-conventionally indirect linguistic expressions; BF prefers conventionally indirect strategies followed by non-conventionally indirect and direct linguistic expressions; and BP likes to apply non-conventionally indirect linguistic expressions, followed by direct and conventionally indirect linguistic expressions. Such interpersonal rapport and linguistic preferences in business contexts apply both politic and non-politic strategies which are situationally, relationally and culturally defined. These form the interpersonal rapport system in which distant politeness, temperate politeness and solidarity politeness provide interpersonal continuity for negotiators to perceive and interpret the discursial contexts and process of interpersonal business negotiation.

5. Discussion

Owing to various considerations of linguistic imposition, business and social factors, and the need to create business rapport in workplaces, Chinese business people apply different types of politeness and facework to realize and control their communicative motives and orientations. While they find themselves in a situation where a face-threatening act may have to be performed, the Chinese contextual calculations and facework inference lead to various linguistic realizations and interpretations of speech acts as well. The imposition of requests relating to the relative politeness value and facework attached to (in)directness is contextual, dynamic and subtle. Chinese requests in practice, either being direct or indirect, are associated with much broader and dynamic choices and interpersonal clues embedded with linguistic strategies, facework, politeness interpretations and situational consideration (Yang, 2013). Chinese interpersonal politeness consideration and rapport construction is historically and culturally variable, constituted by and through social and business relations. Politeness does not necessarily involve indirectness and impoliteness does not necessarily involve directness, and the politeness should not be ranked linearly and intrinsically for its dynamic interpretations (Yang, 2009). Thomas (1995) and Sifianou (1992) also argued that politeness phenomena should be discoursed with the integration of linguistic, contextual and social considerations. Besides, the possible realizations of polite or impolite behavior and the way to assess how the speakers themselves may have evaluated that behavior can determine the linguistic practice (Watts (2003).

Figure-4. Interpersonal rapport constructions in business contexts

On the one hand, many of the requests with various linguistic strategies are not in themselves (im)polite, but they are employed to carry out a certain type of or more than one type of facework and interpersonal clue in the workplace (see Figure 4). As [Nguyer and Miller \(2012\)](#) argued that “business communication has changed partly because business people’s perceptions of communication effectiveness have been influenced by other external factors of the corporate world. Communication in a specific community often embraces a set of established norms and conventions developed by the members of the community.” In Chinese business communication practice, interactants are constrained to accept that they are distributed face socially in accordance with the social and business rules they have adopted for the purpose of communication to create a rapport environment. This leads to two logical and rational options. One is that negotiators may be assigned with different faces on different occasions and the other one is that all social interactions can be predicated on negotiators’ cognition of non-professional and professional face needs, i.e. they can never get away from face consideration and interpretation in the workplace. Negotiators’ face cognition suggests that a business negotiation is in fact a rapport and face negotiation, the results of which determine the communicators’ interactive actions.

On the other hand, facework in professional contexts consists partly, although by no means totally, of utterances that are open to interpretation as “(im)polite” or “(in)direct”. Most forms of direct and indirect Chinese speech behavior contain highly conventional and non-conventional sequences through which interactants aim to regulate their perception of interpersonal clues taken in interactions and to ensure the overall face observation and maintenance needed for proper interpersonal situation and rapport. These have a regulatory force in social and language conventions. In other words, a wide range of linguistic patterns are available to communicators, which are greatly associated with communicators’ interacting experiences, cognition of the interpersonal clues and business contexts, and prediction of proper politeness and face-work involved. All of these reflect how business people interact, making up instances of interpersonal rapport and its required proper linguistic conventions.

6. Conclusion

Being direct or indirect is neither a linguistic nor a politeness problem in Chinese society. Rather it is a cognitive, contextual and interpersonal rapport problem, reflecting how business people interact with each other by wearing different faces and changing face instantaneously, which certainly could not be addressed in this study comprehensively from the perspective of a stylistic domain. Just as [Watts \(2003\)](#) proposed that, “all human social interaction consists of facework of one kind or another, and it may sometimes include linguistic politeness as one of its aspects.” Nevertheless, politeness strategies and faceworks twine around each other, and their associated rapport management in communication depends on the amount of knowledge the interactants have about language convention, their evaluation of the social and linguistic world, their communicative habits, and their interpersonal rapport cognition. The specific modes of interpersonal rapport and its associated politeness and facework application have become canonical as part of the objectified structure of the interpersonal communication field and they represent reproductions of discursive formats that have become institutionalized as expectable behavior for interactions.

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Note:

Interpersonal business relationships:

Business Strangers (BSs): business people who just meet for the first time.

Business Friends (BFs): business people who have met before and are known to each other but without any business contracts to bind their business obligations.

Business Partners (BPs): business people who have met many times and have either a written or an oral business contract to binding their institutional obligations.

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