

## Courtesy Expressions Between China and Japan: On Face Theory

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### Abstract

Courtesy expression, as lubricant, is a method of interaction with people by which using moderate praises and compliments which in an effort tries to build harmonious relationship with others. In this paper, I devote myself to figure out the feasibility of courtesy expression in daily using between China and Japan at the condition of Face theory proposed by Brown and Levinson, even though these two countries share many a similarity with each other. The insights of this paper emphasize how Chinese and Japanese behave diversely during daily communication in aim of mutual understanding and better communication with westerners.

**Keywords:** Courtesy expression in daily using; Face theory; China; Japan.



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### 1. Introduction

In language intercourse, the use of courtesy expression, which has been honored by time, is not only a simple communication and transmission among languages, but also an external manifestation of their own cultures, for each country has respective manners to communicate with others in specific way.

The body of research has improved our awareness on courtesy expression development by exposing people to social intercourse environment and by constructing language skills to meet the needs of conversation. The concept of “face” firstly raised by Hu (1944), an anthropologist in China, and went to English in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, which, then, was introduced into academia by Erving Goffman through his theories of ‘face’ and ‘facework’. Therefore, it was widely discussed by people from different cultures for many years. Among those views from scholars, Brown and Levinson’s theory of politeness was regarded as the most influential and practical one in the western field.

While in the oriental culture, China and Japan have been widely concerned, and stereotypically regarded as the representatives of eastern culture for scholars around the world to study and who successively built relationship with the west after the new world pattern had been formed. It would be a fair way to study the mode of Sino-Japanese communication based on the reference of western politeness theory.

The purpose of this research is to study the cultural connotations of Chinese and Japanese courtesy expressions and their cultural essence in a western view. Through a detailed analysis of courtesy expression and using multiple theoretical perspectives, mainly the Face theory, this paper aims to explain the diversity these two countries behave in manners at the condition of Brown and Levinson’s theory followed by these two questions: 1. What’s the difference between Chinese and Japanese politeness when using Face theory of B&L? 2. what can Chinese and Japanese learn from each other in order to have a good communication with westerners?

### 2. Methodology

The data and findings presented in this paper were collected qualitatively from views of parts on sociolinguistics. I will discuss the ways in which the conceptual and methodological approaches to this research in aim of explaining different behavior between China and Japan. During the introduce part, two questions are put forward for answers. Then, I collected people’s study of politeness in recent time and lay them out in the part of the theoretical background. Later, detailed information for analysis will be displayed to supplement present study situation which also step forward for further research based on it. As an English major student and Japanese lover, data collecting isn’t a hard job. Examples whether in English or in Japanese are found either from books of linguistics or Japanese textbook.

### 3. Theoretical Background of Courtesy Theory

Among the Western politeness theories, the most widely known and recognized theory was produced by (Brown and Levinson, 1978;1987). But scholars who do research in Eastern languages, especially Japanese and Chinese, found the theory put forward by Brown and Levinson couldn’t survive in Eastern countries well. And this made people develop more theories to supplement it. Just like Leech’s “East-West divide” in Leech (2007), which was discussed by Rong *et al.* (2013). And Chinese scholars like Gu Yueguo who proposed four maxims to account for Chinese politeness: respectful (appreciation of others), modesty (self-denigration), attitudinal warmth (demonstration of kindness, consideration, and hospitality toward others), and refinement (behavior meeting certain social standards) (Gu, 1990).

### 3.1. Face Theory

China and Japan, as the typical representatives of Asia, are both not suitable to the Face Theory well. However, their mismatching with the theory differ in a diverse ways. Politeness theory, or face theory, accounts for the amending of affront to save people's face which was originated in China and came to the west in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Even if the ways of showing politeness in various cultures have been studied for many years, Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness is the most influential one. For them, "face" was regarded as "a public self-image that every member wants to get." Face, as the public self-image that every person wants to protect, contains two aspects: positive face and negative face: Positive face: the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others; Negative face: the want of every "competent adult member" that his actions be unimpeded by others. (Brown & Levinson, from He Zhaoxiong, 2003:564)

In most of the cases, people's communication will be done through language. However, when talk with others, we sometimes will hurt someone's face due to improper words. This behavior is what we called Face threatening Act (FFA). Here are four kinds of FFA: 1. Acts threatening the hearer's negative face, e.g.: ordering, advising, threatening, warning, etc; 2. Acts threatening the hearer's positive face, e.g.: disapproving, criticizing, complaining, insulting, disagreeing, etc; 3. Acts threatening the speaker's negative face, e.g.: expressing thanks, accepting thanks or apology, unwilling promise and offers, excusing, etc; 4, Acts threatening the speaker's positive face, e.g.: apologizing, accepting compliment, confessing, shuffling, cowering, etc. (Brown & Levinson, from He Zhaoxiong, 2003:569-572)

### 3.2. Chinese Politeness

Chinese courtesy theories were established based on Western theories. Chinese politeness could have started with Gu (1990) and Mao (1994). Mao argues 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," "emphasizes...the harmony of individual conduct with the views and judgment of the community," and "depends upon, and its indeed determined by, the participation of others" (Mao, 1994). In other words, whereas Euro-American face may be composed of positive and negative face, Chinese face "identifies a Chinese desire to secure public acknowledge of one's prestige or reputation" (Mao, 1994).

Gu (1990) and Mao (1994)'s propositions have been advocated by many researchers of pragmatics in their own study. For instance, refusing (Liao, 1994), requesting (Lee-Wong and Song, 1994a;1994b; Rue and Zhang, 2008), compliment responding (Loh, 1993), inviting (Mao, 1992; Tseng, 1996), food-playing (Chen, 1996), and gift offering and accepting (Zhu and Wei, 2000).

These structure of the negotiation between the speaker and the hearer in these speech events has been shown to be complicated. Typically, the recipient of the benefit---be it an invitation, food, or gift--would decline the offer and, along the way, state how much trouble the benefit must have cost or will cost the offerer. The offerer insists on offering, emphasizing that little effort is or will be involved in the offer. This cycle repeats itself several times until the recipient eventually accepts the offer. Since repeated offering threatens the recipient's negative face, findings of these studies have been viewed as evidence that Chinese politeness is different from Western politeness per Brown and Levinson (Rong *et al.*, 2013).

### 3.3. Japanese Politeness

The different positions regarding Japanese politeness is widely believed to have started from Matsumoto (1989) and Ide (1989). It was based on the use of honorifics and the formulaic expression onegaishimasu (Rong *et al.*, 2013). The concept of social hierarchy in Japan has been deeply rooted for a long period. During a conversation, people from different positions need to pay attention to their tones and words when they speak to others. For example, Subordinates must use honorifics when they speak to superiors as well as younger generations to elder generations, or it will be considered as impolite behavior. As for their peers, or elders to the younger generations, it will be OK not to use honorific languages.

In Japanese, honorific is generally divided into three parts: sonkeigo (language shows respect to hearer, especially to someone who is superior than speaker), kenjyougo (language shows modesty of speaker) and teineigo (language shows mutual respect to both hearer and speaker).

Sonkeigo, a respectful form of expression to the topic person, is the language which the speaker, with respect, use for the elders or superiors. And if the hearer also wants to reply in politeness, he should use teineigo. Teineigo shows the earnest attitude the speaker wants to convey to the hearer, and the speaker is usually superior to the hearer or both they are not familiar with each other, especially in an official occasion. Kenjyougo often shows modesty of the speaker himself, and this behavior does not mean that the speaker declines his own identity in front of the superior, but reflects the speaker's good quality and self-cultivation.

### 3.4. Similarity: Japanese and Chinese Daily Politeness

Japanese politeness is built based on the expression of honorifics. Chinese politeness also have the concept of honorifics. In china, honorifics are divided into respective and modest words, and both of them have a category of noun and verb.

In respective words, nouns refers to the use of respect for other people and something related to them. Usually, it will be used when communicate with unfamiliar people or in formal occasions, especially in literary works. For

instance, word as nouns: 贵姓(surname);贵庚(age);高见(view);高寿(age). Verbs are more widely used in literary works and formal occasions: 恭送(farewell);恭迎(welcome); 谨记(remember).

About modest words, speaker usually use it hearer to show his attitude of humbleness to get good expression from others. Nouns: 敝社(my shabby house);鄙人(myself);薄酒 (worthless wine) ;薄礼(worthless gift). Verbs like: 不敢&岂敢&哪敢(dare not)、不才(no talent).

## 4. Chinese and Japanese Daily Politeness in Face Theory

### 4.1. Chinese Politeness in Western View

We can tell the expression of politeness in China based on B&L's face theory is diversely different from the west. The First difference is the definition of Chinese "mianzi" and Western "face". In China, we define "mianzi" as "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," while Western "face" is explained as " a public self-image that every member wants to get." The West emphasizes "face"as an individual thing, and they regard it as a right norm people should be respected in public. For them, it's a kind of personal items, which will not affect their personal freedom. China's "mianzi" is the sum of individual status, social value and "people skill", or a symbol of interpersonal influence on the others. Family structure of these two worlds is a good example: westerners' usually prefer a family mode of core family, people in their families will seldom over two generations, and often, children will have to move out the house of their parents after their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. While the Chinese elders always want to live together with their descendants, for whom the gathering of family members is a symbol of thriving and harmony. Thus, "four generations under the roof" are pursued eagerly by people of Chinese. As such, "mianzi" in China is not a private wealth, but the society and the community's recognition of individuals, while western "face" is another thing.

The second one is the unworthiness of negative face mentioned by B&L in China. According to the study of Mao (1994), The self-orientation trait of the face is applicable in the West. But since China is a country which emphasizes collective ownership more than individualism, it could not fit China so well. Therefore, the Chinese face concept does not include this part of negative face. On the contrary, the concept "mianzi" and "lian" in the Han (Chinese) culture are pretty similar to the positive face of the B & L, because Chinese people want to get the acceptance, recognition and respect from the group, and do not advocate excessive freedom to meet individual behavior. For example, Chinese mistress will keep urging the guests to eat more at the table, some also will continue serving food to their guests in order to create a harmonious atmosphere to show courtesy and prove their close relationship with the guests. Compared with Chinese culture, the west is more focuses on the protection of people's negative face. In social etiquette, Westerners worship the principle that "try not to find trouble for others". This will give people more choices to select. By doing this, people not only avoid unnecessary embarrassment, but also respect for their own freedom of behavior.

### 4.2. Japanese Politeness in Western View

Japanese politeness has been proposed on center on discernment (wakinmae), defined as a "sense of place of role in a given situation according to social convention (Matsumoto (1989) See also Hill *et al.* (1986); Ide (1989); Matsumoto (1988)). The concept of different positions plays a vital part in Japanese politeness. According to honorific rules, some simple sentences like "see you" can be expressed in different ways due to the discrepancy of the position between the speaker and hearer. When friends say goodbye with each other, they could use "じゃあね" or "またね". When people visit someone's house and it's time to leave, usually the visitor will say farewell like "邪魔しました". When you have to say goodbye to someone who is superior than you, sentence like "失礼しました" is very necessary at that time.

Besides, some formulaic expressions are also unsuitable in Western politeness. The sentence yoroshiku onegaishimasu is regarded as one of the most polite expressions, which is also the most widely used sentence in Japan. If we translate it into English, its literal meaning "Please take care of me" conveys an enforcement on the hearer, but it actually shouldn't be viewed as imposition. Since the west emphasize on avoiding imposition, and it happened that sentence is used as a token in Japanese politeness, Japanese politeness has to be different from Western politeness.

But, evidences have showed negative face is just as valid in Japanese as it is in Western cultures because Japanese speaker are found to use euphemisms, hedging, questioning, and apologizing to signal their respect for the hearer's territory and that negative face considerations "constrain the use of emotive/ affective terms, the expression of the speaker's intentions, or question on the hearer's skills and abilities" (Matsumoto, 2003) For example, In Japanese society, we usually see a lot of scenes like that. When a boy kneels down, with an engage ring, to a girl he likes very much, and says: "僕と結婚してください!" (Please marry me) If the girl does not like him, usually she will not directly say NO out of courtesy. She will choose a very tactful way to express her inner thought by saying "困ります." That means your proposal makes me annoyed, which not only gives the girl's answer, but also rejects the boy without losing his face.

## 5. Conclusion

From the previous comparison, we can find that Japanese and Chinese are quite different in politeness strategies of face theory. Chinese polite expression is used to leave a good impression on listener by using "exaggerated" and

"intimate" languages, which is coincided with B & L's positive politeness strategy (positive politeness strategy means to make the bilateral relationship of speaker and hearer closer through a positive mannered way).

While the Japanese politeness strategy tries not to make trouble to the listener. People always let the listener understand that they will not put any pressure on the hearer. At the same time, the listener will try to avoid judging the speaker's subjective intentions, respects mutual psychological demands, and deliberately maintains the psychological distance with each other. This is very similar to B&L's negative politeness strategy.

For the first question we mentioned in the introduce part, Chinese courtesy emphasizes the individual's sense of belonging in the group, also the consistency of individual behavior with the concept of group. Except that, the Chinese courtesy system has something in common with the positive face in B & L's face theory. For instance, when Chinese greet each other, they usually say the sentence like "Have you finished your meal?" This topic, involves the others' privacy, is used to prove their close relationship and to show the speaker's concern about the listener.

Japanese politeness has been proposed to center on discernment (*wakinmae*), defined as a "sense of place or role in a given situation according to social convention" (Matsumoto (1989) See also Hill *et al.* (1986); Ide (1989); Matsumoto (1988)). The notion discernment is later extended into the notion of *place* by Haugh (2005). According to Haugh (2005), place is composed of two aspects: the place one belongs and the place one stands. The place one belongs reflects the value of inclusion: to be part of a group. The place one stands reflects the value of distinction, to be different from others (Haugh, 2005). And Japanese politeness pursues the principle of not to find trouble to the others, which do well in B & L's face theory in the aspect of negative face.

Here, both China and Japan enhance the importance of the collectivism on the concept of courtesy, which is the commonality between Chinese and Japanese as Asian culture. At the same time, Japanese courtesy concept also raises the value of distinction, which is quite suitable for the principle of individual freedom advocated by the west. And due to the chasing of individualism, Westerners prefer negative face more than positive face theory. Thus, we can find that Japanese politeness is better for people to communicate with Westerners than Chinese politeness.

As for the second question, it's not hard for us to learn from the result contact with the west. One crucial thing is that we need to change our concept when talking with Westerners. Using the principles of individualism instead of traditional Eastern collectivism to communicate with Westerners. Respecting people's freedom as an individual and avoid involving in the privacy of others by using euphemistic words when you talk with them. Then the discourse will go more smoothly than before during intercultural communication with the west.

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