



Politeness and face in Chinese talk shows:
a Critical Discourse Analysis approach

中文访谈节目中的 礼貌和面子

——批评性语篇分析新视角

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the linguistic representations of facework strategies in contemporary Chinese interaction. What is of particular interest in this research is to study the extent to which facework and hierarchy are inextricably linked in interactions between high-ranking government officials and ordinary people.

The research will be conducted by identifying and analysing the linguistic realizations of facework and hierarchy as they occur in selected television interviews. By siting the analysis within the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis, and in particular the three-dimensional framework proposed by Norman Fairclough, the research aims to discover the hierarchical power relations in these interactions and their potential underlying social and cultural causes.

Through studying the linguistic realisations of facework strategies as reflected in interactions between power unequals, the research will firstly address the question of whether these provide evidence whether, or the extent to which, hierarchy remains a key feature of Chinese society. The study will also investigate the role social and cultural norms and contexts have played in the development of politeness strategies, especially those that appear uniquely Chinese. Finally, the study will answer the question of whether the identified politeness strategies are indicative of new social phenomena and rules of conduct in transitional China.

It is concluded in the research that despite the great economic and social reforms which have taken place in China in the past decades, Chinese social culture remains hierarchical, and that this hierarchy is reflected in

the facework strategies employed by high-ranking government officials and ordinary people. It is also shown in this study that Chinese social and cultural norms and contexts have great impact upon people's employment of facework strategies. And the identified strategies also show that change is developing and that this change is characterized by an increasing promotion of self and an increasing respect for individuals and the protection of individual interests and privacy.

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List of Notations

A:	Aspect (excluding experiential)
BA:	<i>Ba</i> construction
CL:	Classifier
COM:	Comparison
CRS:	Current relevant state (<i>le</i>)
CSC:	Complex stative construction (<i>de</i>)
DUR:	Durative aspect
E:	Emphatic
ER:	<i>Er</i>
EXP:	Experiential (aspect)
FUT:	Future
HON:	Honorific form
M:	Modifier
N:	Negative
NOM:	Nominaliser
ORD:	Order
P:	Particle
PL:	Plural
Q:	Question particle
R:	Resultative complement
REx:	Response to expectation
SUO:	<i>Suo</i> construction

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Chapter One Introduction

Face is psychological and not physiological. Interesting as the Chinese physiological face is, the psychological face makes a still more fascinating study. It is not a face that can be washed and shaved, but a face that can be “granted” and “lost” and “fought for” and “presented as a gift”. ... Face cannot be translated or defined. It is like honour and is not honour. It cannot be purchased with money, and gives a man or a woman a material pride. It is hollow and yet is what men fight for and what many women die for. It is invisible and yet by definition exists by being shown to the public. ... It is amenable, not to reason but to social convention.

(Lin, 1939, pp. 199-200)

It is reported that a dinner guest once suggested to the French Marshal Ferdinand Foch that there was nothing but wind in French politeness. Foch is said to have retorted, “Neither is there anything but wind in a pneumatic tire, yet it eases wonderfully the jolts along life’s highway”

(Fraser, 1990, p. 219)

Politeness, as a lubricant in interpersonal relationships, has become increasingly popular as a field of enquiry. Publications on politeness-related studies cover fields “as diverse as business studies, computing, medical communication, foreign language teaching, developmental psychology, social psychology, sociolinguistics, linguistic pragmatics, social anthropology, cultural studies, sociology, communication studies and gender studies” (Christie, 2005, p. 2). A bibliography of publications relevant to politeness study compiled by Dufon *et al.* (1994) consists of 51 pages. Now more than ten years later, one has reason to believe that the great number of new studies would turn these 51 pages into a book-length document.

1.1 Rationale of the research

Studies on politeness by linguists are mainly concentrated on the areas of pragmatics and sociolinguistics (Lakoff, 2005) and they are conducted from either an intercultural or an intracultural perspective, with intercultural studies being the more popular. These intercultural studies, with a focus on differences of politeness norms and practices across cultures, have yielded significant results and provided valuable insights into this area. Nevertheless, a series of recent studies emphasizing intracultural politeness norms (Eelen, 2001; Mills, 2003; Watts, 2003) endow this research within culture with greater importance. These studies stress the need for a “more sensitive and nuanced approach to context and social identity” within a given culture and more empirical investigations into intracultural linguistic phenomena (Christie, 2005, p. 3). The awareness of the need for more intracultural studies is also emphasized in Shweder's (1973) research, which proves that “cross-cultural and intracultural research are not mutually relevant” (p. 543) and that intracultural studies often reveal different aspects about the culture than intercultural studies do. Therefore the present study will be placed within the Chinese cultural context with the aim of discovering the unique traits in Chinese social interaction.

Politeness needs to be studied in relation to face as face is “the underlying construct of politeness” (Kang, 2004, p. 133). To be polite in social interaction involves people's cooperation in maintaining each other's face. In this sense, politeness behaviours exist as a protective mechanism to keep people's face from being threatened. While the “mutual knowledge” of face and “the social necessity to orient oneself to it in interaction” are universal, “the content of face” varies from culture to culture (Brown and Levinson, 1987, pp. 61-62). It is therefore important to study Chinese face in the hope of discovering features specific to Chinese culture in general and

Chinese politeness in particular.

The Chinese concept of face has captured great attention among scholars in academia. This is, in a large part, due to the vital role face plays in Chinese social life. Lin (1935) places face on the very first of his triad: face, fate, and favour, which he calls “the three immutable laws of the Chinese universe” (p. 195). Face, in Lin’s view, “is yet the most delicate standard by which Chinese social intercourse is regulated” (1935, p. 200). It is a value so important that people would fight for it at the cost of everything, even their lives. This is exemplified in the following story told of a man who died of hunger after having refused to eat the food offered to him by a rich businessman in an impolite manner.

During a great dearth in Khi, Khien Ao had food prepared on the roads, to wait the approach of hungry people and give to them. (One day), there came a famished man, looking as if he could hardly see, his face covered with his sleeve, and dragging his feet together. Khien Ao, carrying with his left hand some rice, and holding some drink with the other, said to him, “Poor man! Come and eat”. The man, opening his eyes with a stare, and looking at him, said, “It was because I would not eat ‘Poor man come here’s’ food, that I am come to this state.” Khien Ao immediately apologised for his words, but the man after all would not take the food and died.

(The Book of Rites, section II, part III: 17, quoted in Legge, 1992, pp. 194-195)

According to Lin (1935), the concept of face is also “abstract and intangible” (p. 200) and as a result, is “impossible to define” (p. 202). Therefore, Lu suggests people not to “stop to think” about the concept of face, since “the more you think the more confused you grow” (1934, p. 129). Not surprisingly, the capricious and mysterious nature of the Chinese face has also contributed to raising researchers’ curiosity, which stimulates them to further explore the concept.

While there have been numerous important studies into Chinese face practices (Smith, 1894; Hu, 1944; Ho, 1976; Gu, 1990; Bond, 1991; Pan, 1995; Ting-Toomey, 2003), these studies have ignored or downplayed the hierarchical nature of Chinese face dynamics. As will be shown below, hierarchy plays a fundamental role in Chinese society. The study of face has to take into consideration the hierarchical nature of Chinese relationships to be able to show the unique feature of Chinese politeness practices.

In the context of a “high-context culture like that of the Chinese (Hall, 1976, p. 43), “the hierarchical structure of society with its permanency of statuses should be taken into consideration (Bond and Hwang, 1986, p. 244). In their examination of the conversational styles of Chinese people, Scollon and Scollon (2000) draw the conclusion that Chinese politeness behavior is hierarchical in nature.

The hierarchical nature of Chinese culture is deeply-rooted in Confucianism, the fundamental assumption of which is that man exists in relation to others (King and Bond, 1985). Five relationships, the so-called *wulun* (五伦, five cardinal relations), are distinguished. They are those between ruler and subject, father and son, elder brother and younger brother, husband and wife, and friend and friend. A specific hierarchy is thus established where people have their fixed positions with their specific rights and responsibilities. Chinese society can thus be seen to attach great importance to rank.

The hierarchical perspective of face can be traced back to the detailed description of *wei* (位, position) in the ancient Chinese classic, *The Yi Jing* (易经, *The Book of Changes*). One principle expounded in this book is its great emphasis on position. This can be found in its description of heaven and earth, “Heaven is lofty and honourable; earth is low. ...The noble and mean, had their places assigned accordingly” (*The Book of Changes*, Appendix III: I, quoted in Legge, 1964, p. 348). The book prescribes the