A Study of the Verbal Conflict between Mother and Daughter-in-law in *Desperate Housewives*

ETUDE DU CONFLIT VERBAL ENTRE LA MÈRE ET LA BELLE-FILLE DANS LES *MAÎTRESSES DE MAISON DÉSESPÉRÉES*

《絕望主婦》中婆媳之間言語衝突的研究

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Abstract: Ting-Toomey proposed face-negotiation theory in the 1980s. For years, face-negotiation theory has been used to explain conflict in communication and cultural differences related to communication. As we know, conflict is a very natural phenomenon in the conversation of different cultures. However, people have different ways to solve the conflict. This paper studies the conflict between mother and daughter-in-law in TV series. The extracts come from the American TV series *Desperate Housewives*. The paper aims to answer the two research questions: (1) does the conflict style between family members like mother and daughter-in-law in American TV series *Desperate Housewives* is also dominating? (2) If it is, how the conversation proceeds under the dominating style? After analyzing the materials, we find that the conflict style between mother and daughter-in-law in American TV series *Desperate Housewives* is dominating. In addition, although the conflict style between mother and daughter-in-law in American TV series *Desperate Housewives* is dominating, people also emphasize on the social harmony among family members.
Key words: conflict, face-negation theory, mother and daughter-in-law

Résumé: Ting-Toomey propose la théorie de la négation de face dans les années 1980. Depuis des années, la théorie de la négociation de face a été utilisée pour expliquer les conflits dans la communication et les différences culturelles relatives à la communication. Comme nous le savons, le conflit est un phénomène naturel dans la conversation des cultures différentes. Cependant, les gens ont de différents moyens pour résoudre le conflit. Le présent article traite le conflit entre la mère et la belle-fille dans les feuilletons télévisuels. Les extraits viennent d'un feuilleton américain-*Maîtresses de maison désespérées*. L'article vise à répondre deux questions : (1) Est-ce que le style conflictif entre les membres familiales, comme la mère et la belle-fille dans les *Maîtresses de maison désespérées*, est encore dominant ? (2) Si oui, comment la conversation s'engage sous le style dominant ? Après avoir analysé les matériels, nous trouvons que le style conflictif entre le mère et la belle-fille dans les *Maîtresses de maison désespérées* est dominant. Mais malgré cela, on insiste aussi sur l'harmonie sociale entre les membres familiales.
Mots-Clés: conflit, théorie de la négociation de face, mère et belle-fille

摘　要：Ting-Toomey 在十九世紀八十年代提出了面子磋商理論。多年來，該理論被用來解釋交際中的衝突和有關交際的文化差異。正如我們所瞭解的，不同文化間的言語對話中產生衝突是很自然的現象，然而人們總是有不同的方法去解決這些衝突。本文致力於研究電視劇中婆媳之間的言語衝突，目的是想回答兩個問題：（1）美國電視劇《絕望主婦》中像婆媳這種家庭成員間的衝突類型是屬於支配型嗎？（2）如果是的話，談話在這種衝突類型下是怎麼進行的？通過對材料的分析，我們發現美國電視劇《絕望主婦》中婆媳之間的衝突類型是支配型。另外，雖然這種衝突是支配型，他們也重視家庭成員之間的和諧相處。
關鍵詞：衝突；面子磋商理論；婆媳

1

1. INTRODUCTION

Since Ting-Toomey put forward her face-negotiation theory in the 1980s, scholars have studied the interpersonal interaction using this theory from different perspectives. The face-negotiation theory was first used to explain conflict in communication, later it is used widely in the explanation of the cultural differences reflected in communication.

Conflict is a common phenomenon across different cultures and is widely-seen in the conversations of people from all social statuses. Scholars have studied many types of conflict. Some scholars make contribution to the development of the face-negotiation theory (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003). Some scholars study the conflict in cross-cultural communication (Bailey, 2000). Some scholars study the conflict within a cultural group (Chang, 2001; Ji, 2000; Edstrom, 2004; Ruzickova, 2007; Gruber, 2001). Some scholars study the conflict in cross-gender studies (Farris, 2000; Ladegaard, 2004). Others focus on the conflict within a family (Laforest, 2002; Boxer, 2002)

This paper will study the conflict within a family: the conflict between mother and daughter-in-law. Although scholars have studied the conflict in family, the study on the conflict between mother and daughter-in-law has been rare. A mother and her daughter-in-law are relatives, however, they are not related through the ties of blood, but through the marriage between two families. They are brought up in different families with different education backgrounds, different ways of life, or even different social statuses. Thus, the relationship between mother and daughter-in-law is subtle and sensitive and the interaction between them is different from the interaction between other family members, for instance between mother and her own daughter. Conflict is frequent between mother and daughter-in-law. This paper chooses to study their conflict in a TV series *Desperate Housewives* to find out how conflict between mother and daughter-in-law is portrayed in TV series.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

When Ting-Toomey drew on the work of Goffman and Brown and Levinson to develop the face-negotiation theory in the year 1988, the study of face and conflict has already been carried out by several scholars in the west. In the United States, the earliest scholar who probed into the study of face in a systematical way was the sociologist E. Goffman. Goffman (1959) claims that in interaction, people will make an impression on each other; like actors and actresses, people play different roles in interaction and through reasonable and skilful performance, they control the audience's point of view

towards themselves. According to him, face is an image of self which has two characteristics: (1) face is the reflection of "self" in other people's eyes and (2) this "self" can be controlled (Goffman, 1967). It can be see clearly that Goffman believes that face can only be formed gradually in interaction.

However, Goffman's theory has been challenged by scholars at the end of the 1980s because this theory has a strong flavour of western culture and tendency towards individualism, thus, it is considered inadequate in understanding the communicative patterns of eastern cultures and collectivistic societies like China, Korea, and Japan. The face-negotiation theory put forward by Ting-Toomey is complementary to Goffman's. This theory holds that the construction of face is a process of negotiation between or among the participants in communication, and the success of the construction of face depends on the effort made by the participants in communication; if all the participants construct face actively in communication and at the same time are concerned with other people's face, the communication will be successful (Ting-Toomey, 1988).

Every cultural group is concerned about face, but each group differs in the way of solving the problems of face and conflict. These differences are interesting topics in the field of cross-cultural communication. There is a distinction between individualistic and collectivistic cultures in cross-cultural communication and the face-negotiation theory has been used to explain the different conflict styles and face-saving acts in these two groups (Ting-Toomey et al., 1991, cited in Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003; Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998; Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003). Just like Oetzel & Ting-Toomey (2003) states: the face-negotiation theory "provides an organizing and explanatory framework for conflict behaviours" (p. 600). According to Ting-Toomey (1994), conflict is "the perceived and/or actual incompatibility of values, expectations, processes, or outcomes between two or more parties over substantive and/or relational issues" (p. 360). Conflict styles of different cultural groups have been recognized by scholars. According to Oetzel & Ting-Toomey (2003), conflict styles "provide an overall picture of a person's communication orientation towards conflict" and "conflict style is a combination of traits (e.g., cultural background and personality) and states (e.g., situation)" (p. 601). The five-style model and the three-style model are the major approaches for the explanation of conflict styles. The five-style model identifies the following conflict styles: integrating (high on both concern for self and other), compromising (moderate on both concern for self and other), dominating (high self concern and low other concern), obliging (low self concern and high other concern), and avoiding (low on both concern for self and other) (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003). The three-style model reduces the abovementioned five conflict styles into the following three styles: control, forcing, or dominating; solution-oriented, issue-oriented, or integrating; and

nonconfrontational, smoothing, or avoiding (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003). Ting-Toomey's studies have found a connection between cultural groups and conflict styles: individualistic cultures favour more dominating conflict strategies and fewer avoiding conflict strategies than collectivistic cultures (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998). Originally, the face-negotiation theory's main focus was conflict in communication, later, it was used to explain different faces, conflict styles, and face-saving acts in different cultural groups. In recent years, Ting-Toomey provides a revised version of the face-negotiation theory in which the effect of power is put into consideration.

The previous studies have explored different types of conflict in communication and they use various research methods. Some studies use quantitative method and the software SPSS or AMOS is used in the analysis of data in order to provide a deeper understanding of the face-negotiation theory. Oetzel & Ting-Toomey (2003) belongs to these studies. The purpose of Oetzel & Ting-Toomey's study is "to test the assumption that face is the explanatory mechanism for the relationship between culture and conflict-management style" (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003, p. 600). The researchers send out questionnaires which require the participants to recall a conflict with a person of the same gender and same ethnic/cultural group, and then the answers are analyzed by the software AMOS. The study supports the four hypotheses concerning the relationship of the following variables: cultural Individualism-Collectivism, self-construal, face concerns, conflict styles, independent self-construal, interdependent self-construal, other-face, and self-face. The findings show that the face-negotiation theory is the mediator between cultural values and conflict behaviours.

Some studies use qualitative method by analyzing the conversations between people from different cultural groups to give an explanation of the conflict in cross-cultural communication. Bailey (2000) is one of these studies. In the paper, Bailey analyzes twenty-five video-recorded service encounters between African-American customers and their immigrant Korean retailers in Los Angeles using the method of conversation analysis. He finds that conflict constantly occurs in the interaction of these two groups because of two reasons: （1）there are the cultural and linguistic differences between the two groups;（2）the conflict between the two groups is actually the enactment of the pre-existing social boundaries in the U. S. Bailey (2000).

Other studies pay attention to the conflict and face within a particular cultural group (e.g. Chang, 2001; Ji, 2000; Edstrom, 2004; Ruzickova, 2007; Gruber, 2001). In Chang (2001), the author argues that the in Chinese conversation, the harmony is only at the surface level and conflict is hidden under the superficial politeness. The author analyzes the conversation recorded in Taiwan and he also uses tape-recorded interviews and

participant observation. He finds that superficial harmony helps the maintenance of larger social network and at the same time conceals the underlying conflict in interaction (Chang, 2001). In Edstrom (2004), the author examines the expression of disagreement among Venezuelan females. She concludes by stating that the politeness principle is not adequate in explaining the disagreement and conflict, other factors such as professional training and personality may also affect the conversation style. In Gruber (2001), he analyzes the videotaped interaction in an Austrian TV-talk-show *Club 2* to find out the questions and strategic orientation in verbal conflict sequences.

Besides, in gender studies, there are also studies on the cross-gender conflict (e.g. Farris, 2000; Ladegaard, 2004). Farris studies the excerpts from a videotaped interaction among girl and boy students and she finds that conflict which is a preferred form of interaction among children is the primary means for the social organization in preschool. Ladegaard's paper is concerned with children's pragmatic competence. He carries out an empirical study of Danish children's language in play with a focus of their use of the politeness principle. He concludes by stating that people should realize the importance of social-cultural context and the peer group influence on children's development of language (Ladegaard, 2004).

There are also studies that focus on the conflict within a family (e.g. Laforest, 2002; Boxer, 2002). Laforest (2002) studies the complaint in everyday conversation in family life. Boxer (2002) analyzes nagging in the familial domain and she draws the conclusion that gender, social distance, and social status and power are the strongest determiners of nagging.

Although the previous studies have examined many types of conflict in communication with the theoretical background of the face-negotiation theory (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003; Chang, 2001), the cooperative principle (Lindblom, 2001) or the politeness principle (Ruzickova, 2007; Edstrom, 2004; Ji, 2000; Ladegaard, 2004), the studies on the conflict in family using these theories have been rare. Besides, the previous studies analyze the data collected in natural conversation, and how conflict is presented in TV series is seldom studied. Therefore, this paper will study the verbal conflict between mother and daughter-in-law in the American TV series *Desperate Housewives* under the framework of the face-negotiation theory. As an important form of mass media, TV is considered both an educator and an entertainer in modern society and TV series is a popular form among TV programs. *Desperate Housewives* belongs to the category of satire. *Desperate Housewives* is a nostalgic representation of the past life in the suburbs in the 1950s when every people have a happy life. It simultaneously represents the past life and also the present society. Watching this kind of satire, the audience makes fun of it and at the same time takes it seriously. How the satire represents the real life is an interesting topic. Ting-Toomey claims that in

individualistic cultures like the United States, people emphasize on the self-face and the conflict style is dominating (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998). Is this claim of Ting-Toomey also applicable in TV satires like *Desperate Housewives*? This paper answers the following research questions: (1) does the conflict style between family members like mother and daughter-in-law in American TV satires *Desperate Housewives* is also dominating? (2) if it is, how the conversation proceeds under the dominating style?

3. DATA COLLECTION AND METHODOLOGY

The data in this paper come from the widely-known American TV series *Desperate Housewives.* From the three seasons which are already on the screen, eight excerpts in four episodes in season one and season two are selected for analyzing, because only in these four episodes can we find the conflict between mother and daughter-in-law. Three excerpts are from season one, episode five, which are about the conflict between Gabrielle and her mother-in-law. The other five excerpts are from season two, episodes one, two and three, which are about the conflict between Bree and her mother-in-law. Because the length of the paper is limited, we choose four excerpts out of these eight excerpts randomly to discuss in detail. The four excerpts we discussed consist of two excerpts in season one, episode five, one excerpt in season two, episode two, and one excerpt in season two, episode three. Because we did not find the subtitles on the Internet, we listen to the conversation and transcribe it by ourselves. To insure the correctness of the transcription of the subtitles, we listen separately and make our own transcriptions, then we cross check them to make a final decision of the subtitles. The method we use to analyze the data is conversation analysis.

4. DISCUSSION

Desperate Housewives is a very famous TV series in the USA. The series tell stories about the four housewives who live in a community called Wisterla Lane. In this TV series, Susan is a single mother, who is careless about everything. Lynette is a professional woman, but her four children are a burden of her life. Bree controls everything in the family. She is so pre-eminent that her husband wants to divorce with her. Gabrielle, who used to be a model before, now has a rich life and a beautiful face, but she still feels empty deepdown. In this part, four excerpts are selected as the discourse materials according to the two research questions.

4.1 Conflict in Desperate Housewives

This excerpt is a conversation between Gabrielle and her mother-in-law. Gabrielle and her mother- in- law Mum Solis are shopping together. Mum Solis tries to persuade her daughter-in-law to have a baby.

Excerpt 1

（In a shopping mall）

Mum Solis: So you shop a lot, huh?

Gabrielle: Yaah, so?

Mum Solis: Most women that shop a lot is because they don't have anything better to

do.

Gabrielle: What is your point?

Mum Solis: When you have children …

Gabrielle: Here we go…

Mum Solis: And I am just saying that children give your life purpose. You get so busy

taking care of them that you don't have any time to wonder if you're happy.

Gabrielle: You know why I didn't so like you? I invite you to a nice shopping trip and

you find ways to upset me.

Mum Solis: Oh, you didn't invite me. I invite myself.

Gabrielle: (Watching her watch in a hurry)

Mum Solis: You keep looking at your watch. Is there some place you have to be?

Gabrielle: No! You know I'm not one of these women who has a hole in their heart

that is gonna be filled by a baby. I like my life a lot. It is very fulfilling. (Left with anger)

Obviously, it is a conflict between Gabrielle and her mother-in-law. As we know conflict styles provide an overall picture of a person's communication orientation toward conflict. In this situation, Mum Solis tries to persuade her daughter-in-law to have a baby in order to give life a purpose. In the beginning, Gabrielle says to his mother-in-law, "I invite you to a nice shopping trip and you find ways to upset me." Her mother-in-law doesn't compromise but says, "Oh, you didn't invite me. I invite myself". In fact, Gabrielle is unwilling to go shopping with Mum Solis. Mum Solis follows her daughter-in-law in order to watch her. And then Gabrielle directly tells Mum Solis that she is not a kind of women that is going to be filled by a baby. That makes her mother-in-law embarrassed a lot. According to the face negotiation theory, self-face concern is associated positively with dominating style and

other-face concern is associated positively with integrating, obliging and compromising styles. Through this message, they high self concern and low other concern, so we can infer that the conflict styles in this excerpt is dominating. People view themselves as independent participants and give priority to their personal goals over the goals of others.

There is another example in this TV series. It is a conversation between Bree and her mother-in-law. The background information is that Bree's husband Rex has passed away. Both Bree and her mother-in-law are very grieving. But her mother- in-law Phyllis is too emotional that she always cries very loudly when people console them.

Excerpt 2

Phyllis: … are you saying that I'm too emotional?

Bree: I'm saying even the Italians take a break now and again.

Phyllis: My son is dead. I'm grieving.

Bree: So am I. But no one would ever know with your incensing cattle wailing.

Phyllis: Bree! (Angry)

Bree: People want to know how I'm doing but the minute they ask you, you jump into the spotlight and they forgot all about me. I need consoling, too, Phyllis. Have you ever thought of that?

Phyllis: (cry) I'm sorry. It won't happen again.

Bree: Thank you!

Phyllis: Of course if you didn't constantly suppress your emotions, people wouldn't forget to console you.

Bree: Excuse me?

Phyllis: It is true. You stow to the point of being cold.

…

From the excerpt, we can infer that Bree is angry with her mother-in-law Phyllis because Phyllis always becomes the focus when people console them. Phyllis is surprised because she thinks that feeling sad about his son's death is not a mistake. However, she says sorry to Bree. Up to here, we may think it is not a conflict because Phyllis apologized to her and Bree accepts the apology. But in the following conversation, Phyllis says, "Of course if you didn't constantly suppress your emotions, people wouldn't forget to console you". It is an obvious conflict between Bree and her mother-in-law. They both high their own concern, of course, the conflict style is dominating.

Thus, research question 1 is answered: the conflict style between family members like mother and daughter-in-law in American TV series *Desperate Housewives* is dominating.

4.2 'Social harmony' in *Desperate Housewives*

This excerpt is a conversation between Gabrielle and her mother-in-law Mum Solis. In this excerpt, Mum Solis visits her son and her daughter-in-law suddenly. Although they haven't seen each other for a long time, Gabrielle acts rather surprised and feels not comfortable.

Excerpt 3

Gabrielle: (Surprised) Mum Solis, what are, what are you doing here?

Mum Solis: I came to visit my son and daughter-in-law. What does he look like?

Gabrielle: Is . . . Carlos know you're coming?

Mum Solis: No, he likes to be surprised. (She put her bags down) Now, come, Gabrielle, come! (Hugging) Family should always hug, regardless of how they feel about each other (Whisper).

Gabrielle: (sigh)

As we see, on the surface, Gabrielle is unwilling to see that her mother-in-law visits them. In fact, family members haven't seen each other for a long time; Gabrielle should be more hospitable and glad to see her mother-in-law. However, she is so surprised that she asks whether her husband Carlos knows this. To some extent, she has to pretend to be happy to see Mum Solis but she hasn't.

According to the face negotiation theory, people from individualistic countries tend to be self-oriented and values own face. This kind of orientation is influenced by their cultures. Through this message, Gabrielle lows other face and it seems to be self-oriented. While from the facial expressions of Mum Solis in TV, we can infer that she knows that her daughter-in-law doesn't like her, but she still says that "Family should always hug" and then asks Gabrielle to come to her. Gabrielle wouldn't like her mother- in-law to visit, but she still accepts her hug as if they have a good relationship with each other.

That is to say although they are influenced by individualistic culture, they also value other's face. Does it mean a kind of social harmony? After hugging, Gabrielle doesn't say anything except a sigh. Gabrielle feels pressure from her mother-in-law with a sigh.

There is another example that can be an evidence of this kind of social harmony in *Desperate Housewives*. It

is a conversation between Bree and her mother-in-law Phyllis. The background information is that Bree's husband Rex has passed away. Rex's mother comes to her son's house. Both of them are very sad. After the funeral of Rex, Bree asks her mother-in-law when she is planning to leave.

Excerpt 4

(Bree and her mother-in-law Phyllis are having a walk.)

Bree: So have you given any thoughts when you maybe ending your visit?

Phyllis: (A little angry)

Bree: What?

Phyllis: Have I become a burden? Is that what you're saying?

Bree: I was simply asking when you were planning to leave; there is no agenda

behind the question.

Phyllis: Oh… I… I don't know. (Laugh) Why not plan by a year?

Bree: Yes, let's…

(They go on walking.)

On the surface, it is a conflict between Bree and her mother-in-law. It seems that Bree thinks Phyllis has stayed for a long time. She asks when she is planning to leave. Phyllis is a little angry about Bree's utterance. And she asks Bree whether she has became a burden. In this situation, according to the characteristics of individualism, Bree can directly tell her mother-in-law that it has been a long visit. In fact, she doesn't. She tells Phyllis that there is no other meaning behind the question in order to prevent her mother-in-law from embarrassing. Phyllis laughs and doesn't know how long she will stay. We don't know whether Phyllis understands her daughter-in-law's real meaning. However, she responds according to the principle of social harmony. That is to high both self and others' face. The listener is willing to play along with the speaker's utterance.

Thus, research question 2 is answered by the above analysis. Under the background of this TV series, people are influenced by individualism which is characterized by self-oriented and loose relationship with each other. According to the face negotiation theory, it is related with the conflict of dominating, that is high self concern and low other concern. However, from the above excerpts, we find that they also care about the social harmony which is closely related to notions of tolerance and moderation. As we known, people who are influenced by collectivistic cultures like Chinese people tend to emphasize on social harmony. They see themselves as a part of the group and have close relationships with others. People communicate with each other in indirect forms in order to protect the participants' face. However, in this study, we find that social harmony exists in the context of the TV series *Desperate Housewives*. They try to avoid conflict, use indirect forms and adopt silence or nonverbal communicative method like facial expressions.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper studies the verbal conflict between mother and daughter-in-law in the American TV series *Desperate Housewives* under the framework of the face-negotiation theory. Two conclusions are drawn according to the two research questions.

First, the conflict style between family members like mother and daughter-in-law in American TV series like *Desperate Housewives* is also dominating. According to Ting-Toomey & Kurogi（1998）, People who are influenced by individualistic culture like the United States, emphasize on the self-face and the conflict style is dominating. We select four excerpts from the American TV series *Desperate Housewife*. After analyzing the conversation, we find that this claim is also applicable in TV series. That is to say the conflict style between mother and daughter-in-law in American TV series *Desperate Housewives* is dominating.

Secondly, although the conflict style between mother and daughter-in-law in American TV series *Desperate Housewives* is dominating, people also emphasize on other-face. They follow the principle of social harmony. We use two excerpts to explain this. We find that people who are influenced by individualistic cultures also tend to emphasize on the social harmony among family members. They try to pretend to be polite, tolerant and moderate and prevent others from too embarrassed.

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