
The Relevance Between Politeness Systems and Interpersonal Behaviour in Communication under intercultural backgrounds

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Abstract:

This paper explains the notion of “face” and politeness system including different strategies of “involvement” or “independence”. Furthermore, it provides three types of “deference, solidarity and hierarchical” politeness system. By analyzing the intercultural communication between Chinese and British, it represents how to mitigate the conflict between interlocutors in multilingual society. Eventually, it illustrates that non-native speaker is not good at using appropriate face strategies in a new environment. On the contrary, the native speaker is very skilful to adapt the culture difference. Consequently, it is crucial for second language learners to improve their intercultural competence in their studies in Britain.

Key Words: Face, Politeness system, Intercultural communication

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 What is “face”?

The notion of “face” was first investigated by Brown & Levinson (Cameron 2001,79) in sociolinguistic areas that refers to a kind of “social standing” or “esteem”. The individual will claim that for her or himself, and want others to respect. Other sociolinguists Scollon and Scollon (2001, 45) argue, “face is the negotiated public image, mutually granted each other by participants in a communicative event”.

Different sociolinguists emphasize different aspects of “face”. Brown and Levinson provide the underlying principles of speech acts that participants will perform during communication, which may lose face or save face. They demonstrate the concept of “face threatening acts (FTAs)” (Cameron 2001, 79). Using politeness may be a strategy for “mitigating” threats to face in verbal interaction. For instance, if a person A asks someone B to do something for him, that is a threat to B’s negative face. A will use some kind of positive politeness strategies, such as “excuse me, would you please...” Conversely, if person A is very rude to say, “shut up, it is so noisy of you”, without using any mitigation. That will be claimed by Brown and Levinson (Cameron 2001, 80) as “bald on record”. Person A does not use any elaborated or indirect way but in bald imperative speech to order person B. Therefore, he threatens to A’s face. In order to minimize the threat to face, people may use some politeness strategies. Cameron (2001,80) indicates some examples of positive politeness and negative politeness methods. Such as, showing interests in person B, seeking agreement with person B; on the contrary, begging forgiveness on person B or giving deference to person B.

Furthermore, Scollon and Scollon (2001,44) proclaim it is very crucial to take the social setting of participants into account that is the interpersonal identity of individual in communication. Especially, currently, intercultural communication has been aroused in a multilingual international community; conversationalist may have to make assumption about other people’s face before they start to communicate for their different cultural background. Thus, participants may attempt to use certain negotiation of face as a natural process of change in human relationships.

“Face” is not only prescribed in western countries but also in Chinese culture. Ji (2000,1060) insists that the Chinese word “Lian” share the same meaning with English word “face”. It refers to “prestige” or “respectability” which “identify a Chinese desire to secure public acknowledgement of one’s reputation”. Consequently, Chinese culture and western culture are significantly different. It seems that the underlying western studies of communication are “highly individualistic, self-motivated, and open to ongoing negotiation”. On the contrary, self-image of Asians is more “collectivistic” (Scollon & Scollon 2001,46). An individual is more expected to seek the respect of the community.

1.2 Politeness systems

Politeness strategies may be applied in positive strategies and negative strategies respectively. Scollon & Scollon (2001, 46) suggest another explanation of the two strategies, “involvement” and “independence”. However, involvement refers to showing a person is very keen on someone’s affairs and manifests the attraction on common things. The communication members will be close with each other. It can also be called as “solidarity politeness”. On the other hand, independence means “individual’s right not to be completely dominated by group or social values, and to be free from the impositions of others” (Scollon & Scollon 2001,47). Thus, participant will provide the widest scope of choices or use formal names and titles.

Involvement and independence may be conflict during the process of communication. Scollon & Scollon (2001,48) claim that it is “paradox”. To what extent should the participants use involvement or independence is very crucial. He has to apply strategies in appropriate way. “Any communication is a risk to face.” (Scollon & Scollon 2001,48) He has to cautiously undertake a face for respecting the face rights for himself and claims of other participants. If a person rejects other people within the relationship, he will increase his independence and decrease his involvement. Similarly, if he involves other participants too much, he will risk his independence. What a participant will do is to balance the involvement and independence in different situational communications.

There are three elements of power, distance and weight of imposition, which will construct the systems of politeness. “+P” (plus power) will normally refer to the “hierarchical structure”, where participants have different social status with different power. “-P” (minus power) shows the “egalitarian” (Scollon & Scollon 2001,53) system within close friends or strangers who do not know each other.

“+D” (plus distance) or “-D” (minus distance) will be decided by the current situations. Perhaps, classmates in the same class of a university may be very familiar with each other, because they experience the common things every day. Their distance will be very close of “-D”. However, in an international conference, all the participants do not knew each other before, they will keep certain distance. That will be “+D”. Similarly, how much participant will force someone to have the same belief, opinion or act will decide the weight of imposition.

Thereby, Scollon & Scollon (2001,54) demonstrates three types of politeness systems: “deference politeness system (-P, +D), solidarity politeness system (-P, -D) and hierarchical politeness system (+P, +/-D)”. This paper will use there types of systems to analyze the recorded data.

1.3 Intercultural communication

To second language learners, cultural learning is a complex process that will relate to patterns of personal interaction and identification. It will also be influenced by human’s norms, values, beliefs, worldview and other aspects of subjective culture. Damen (1987, 216) argues, “Culture

learning should be seen as a process". It can be seen as many stages to develop intercultural communication skills and personal change. The linguist also points out that "it may be marked on a path leading from ethnocentrism, which finds only value, right, and logic in one's own cultural patterns, to varying stages of awareness, understanding, acceptance and a variety of outcomes."

If international students are lack of cultural learning, "intercultural communication" may bring major problems. For participants are from different cultural backgrounds, since they may have different history, worldview and native language. When sociolinguists consider about "culture", they may focus on anthropological culture by considering about any elements of the customs, worldview, language, kinship system, social organization that make the group as a distinctive group. Interpersonal behaviour of individuals may reveal the characteristics of the social group that they belong to. An individual may represent his culture's belief while engaging in an intercultural communication. That will raise significant difference in the ability to communicate. Will the distinctive identity of individuals cause conflict or bring harmony?

Kim (Asante & Gudykunst 1989, 276) provides an idea of "culture shock". That is "anxiety that results from losing all of our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse". When Individual gets into a new culture environment, he may feel surprising and uncertain. Sometimes, it may be unable to deal competently with the environmental unfamiliarity. Consequently, intercultural miscommunication will occur. Individual perform different speech acts, such as thank, apologize for or compliment on, which usually reflect the values of a particular social group. For instance, American people frequently compliment, since they want to negotiate social relationships and avoid the implication that they are superior to interlocutors. That is their ideology of egalitarian. Whereas, Asians may give few compliments in order to show the hierarchical social relations, which represents different social power.

The contribution of compliments in different cultures differs, since different social community may have their own politeness systems. The politeness system works in Chinese culture may not similarly works in Western culture. A sociolinguist Chick (Mckay & Hornberger 1996, 332) argues "sociolinguistic transfer refers to the use of the rules of speaking of one's own speech community or culture group when interacting with members of another community group". Ma (1996, 260) explains an example that will make people from other cultures feel quite confusing and misunderstandable. The social setting is in a Chinese person's home, during the dinner party, foreigners feel so appreciated of the food that is served by the Chinese host and react lots of compliments. However, the Chinese host says: "No, No. It is not well-served." That demonstrates Chinese people's face value communication. It seems that Chinese people rudely and directly disagree with interlocutors' compliments. Indeed, he may want to appear his modesty and be cautious to keep certain distance and give independence to others. However, he may not realize that he threatens the interlocutors' face in an inappropriate way. The Chinese host does not know how to use face devices to use some "hedgies that is a means of redress or resolving the conflict between two principles" (Mckay & Hornberger 1996,335).

To that kind of circumstances, Brown & Levinson (1987) suggest some face strategies as “face-saving” or “face-repairing” to mitigate the conflict between two principles. Thus, politeness strategies are the resource available to participants for attempting to balance their own face needs against those of others in intercultural communication. Brown & Levinson (1987) insist that “the choices of strategies use are based on their intuitive calculation of the relative closeness or distance of their relations with their interlocutors of the relative difference in their status, and of how much of an imposition what they are doing (evaluating, requesting, offering, complaining, apologizing) is in their culture”. Consequently, politeness strategies take a important role in intercultural communication.

2. METHODOLOGY

Since more international students have chosen to study in Britain, intercultural communication between British culture and other cultures emerge more frequently. International students may have lots of chances to request, order or compliment with native speakers in every day life. Perhaps they should learn some relevant social culture of the target country or target language as part of their second language learning. Meanwhile, it may be demanding for native speakers that live in a multilingual society with different cultural background to know and understand some cultures in order to avoid intercultural miscommunication.

The author uses qualitative method to start this research. First, she plans this research for about three months and introduces the two Chinese students to visit native speaker’s home weekly. And then she have chances to observe and participate in the intercultural communication, during that time, she records all the conversation by voice recorder. Second, she collects this data by transcribing recorded voices into words, meanwhile chooses the most valuable data to analyze.

In the transcription, there are four interlocutors in the conversation. The researcher is the author herself. Lin and Cheng are young Chinese females who are the researcher’s MA classmates about twenty-five years old. The local native speaker in Southampton is called Kevin who has already retired and stays at home. He has very abundant experience of teaching English language to Chinese students in China before the retirement and he is keen on knowing and understanding more Chinese culture. The researcher has known Kevin very well and wants to introduce her classmates to him, therefore she brings Lin and Cheng to Kevin’s house to have some tea weekly. When Lin and Cheng meet Kevin for the first time, they are very curious about other interlocutor’s culture and living experience. They chat very friendly and casually.

3. CASE STUDY

In the conversations, Kevin is very friendly to these Chinese girls; therefore his face value is egalitarian principle. He may use compliments to negotiate social identities and relations with them. On the other hand, the researcher has well known with Kevin. They seem as two close friends. The politeness system between researcher and Kevin is “solidarity politeness system”

(Scollon & Scollon 2001, 55). There is a high level of involvement politeness strategies. Meanwhile, there is no big gap of their power and distance.

Conversely, the two Chinese guests in Kevin's house seem to have "hierarchical politeness system" (Scollon & Scollon 2001,55). In Chinese culture, the older people may have more power than younger ones. They will be in superordinate position and the others are in subordinate position. Scollon & Scollon (2001, 56) argues that the person in the superordinate or upper position uses involvement strategies in speaking "down", and then the person in the subordinate or lower position uses independence strategies in speaking "up". While Lin and Cheng enter a new cultural environment, they are not adapting the new principle or they may not understand how the British culture works. In the conversation, Cheng are very paradoxical of face strategies use of how to balance the involvement and independence with native speaker. For her, Kevin is very knowledgeable and respectable. She may be cautious to leave more independence for him and keep some distance. However, she is very curious about British culture and ambitious to communicate with native speakers. It seems that she bid for turns of speaking to illustrate her own opinion. At that moment, she may use more involvement strategies to negotiate with interlocutors. Indeed, she does not really understand how to interact with foreign people with different culture background, thus she use some inappropriate face strategies during the conversation.

At the opening of the conversation, researcher points out the fireplace in Kevin's house (see transcription line 1) she use positive strategies to show interests on the things that the host is willing to talk about. That is what Scollon & Scollon (2001,50) suggest of "notice and attend to hearer". Thus, this opening utterance promotes Kevin to explain his fire resource of wood that is from the new forest. Continuously, researcher attempts to bring the other two Chinese girls into discussing this topic of fireplace (see transcription line 3). Lin is good at using involvement strategies by saying: "It's my first time to see the real fireplace in my life" (line 7). She shows sympathy to Kevin. Following that Lin explains that she always saw some electronic one in pub. Thus, that is why she feels so interesting to see the fireplace there (line 14-15).

Meanwhile, the native speaker uses some involvement strategies that he tries to support Lin's utterance (see transcription line 16-18) by describing that his wife says fireplace may bother her with all that "mess and sweeping, and soot". He uses an indirect and covert way to indicate that fireplace is not actually well even though indeed he does not really think so. For after that, he says: "Nothing nicer than in the winter when you can hear the rain coming down outside, and wind blowing, and you just sit besides the fireplace, and read a nice book. It's,..." (see transcription line 21-23). He claims his truly comments on fireplace later than complimenting other people's utterance. Thereby, Kevin, who knows how to shorten the distance and create a relaxing talking atmosphere, may be a good interlocutor to communicate with other people from different cultures; even it is the first time to meet with them.

Conversely, Cheng is very passive to talk about the fireplace, she represents less interests on that and be lack of enough compliments, only saying "Oh, or Yeah". It seems that she has

known little about the fireplace, because Chinese people do not usually use that at home. Nevertheless, she is attempting to join the conversation by showing respect to the native speaker. Thus, she decides to say: "So you needn't heater, you needn't buy any heater." (see transcription line 25). Actually, she interrupts Kevin's utterance by using a non-cohesive enquiry sentence. She may pursue to get agreement with the native speaker. Unfortunately, because of the word pronunciation, Kevin hears like that she is saying: "so you don't need to 'hit her'? I don't hit my wife!" (see transcription line 30-31) However, Kevin does not show his surprise conspicuously and add some comments to hedge the misunderstanding. After a short period of pause, he says: "No, the, the other room, of course, there is a gas fire. It's so easy, you just turn it on." (see transcription line 26-27). He uses involvement face strategies to avoid embarrassment of the misunderstanding. Cheng does not really realize her utterance threatens Kevin's positive face until Kevin explains that he thought what she might mean. And then she is so nervous and does not how to do face-repairing. She feels that she has lost her face. At that moment, she says a lot of "sorry" that is an action of threatening her negative face. She may be not skillful enough to provide compound response to mitigate the embarrass situation.

However, Kevin may have been released from his obligation to provide a direct response to Cheng's apology. Perhaps, he should say, "Ok, that's all right or do not worry." Indeed, he tries to avoid directly facing that situation and change into another topic to interlocutors: "Hit my wife? You know that word 'nagging'? To nag someone?" (see transcription line 37-38). Thus, the conflict between two cultures has been reduced.

From this short extract of casual conversation, the main participants of Kevin and Cheng are all applying different face strategies to each other. Kevin is very good at using solidarity politeness strategies to mitigate conflict from different politeness systems. Thus he not only saves his face value but also respect other interlocutors' by supporting others' point of view. Even though, other participant threatens his positive face, he may know how to promote understanding between intercultural communications. Nonetheless, Cheng does not use her independence strategies in appropriate way. She may exactly do not know what kind of utterance should be applied in enquiry, request, order or apology etc in British culture. For her further second language learning studies, it is very necessary to learn not only the English language itself but also the culture.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper presents that adapting British culture for international culture students may have to be a crucial issue. They will live in a new language and culture environment facing culture shock. After a long process of psychological development of their own beliefs, they will first be aware of British culture and then try to understand why they use that face strategies in certain circumstances. Following that, they may accept the difference and imitate their strategies to adapt the new environment. Finally, they will acquire the intercultural competence. Thus,

misunderstanding or use of inappropriate strategies in intercultural communication may not occur.

Furthermore, it exhibits the notion of “face” which is defined by different sociolinguists. Meanwhile, it represents different strategies of “involvement” or “independence”. Eventually, it provides three types of politeness systems of “deference politeness”, “solidarity politeness” and “hierarchical politeness system” that is argued by Scollon & Scollon (2001). However, intercultural communication and use of face strategies is very relevant with each other. In multilingual society, intercultural miscommunication often occur because of different principles and human beliefs, that the people from other cultures may be direct and avoiding self-praise. They may use some inappropriate compliments or lack of acknowledge and response. In order to mitigate the conflict, learn to use right face strategies may be very important. According to the literature review, this paper try to prove the relevance by analyzing a transcription between native speaker in Britain and non-native speakers from China. The data illustrates that non-native speaker is not good at using appropriate face strategies in a new environment. On the contrary, the native speaker is very skilful to adapt the culture difference. Consequently, it is exactly for second language learners to improve their intercultural competence in their studies in Britain.

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