



Cultural Specification of Face

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Abstract

Face is a universal phenomenon but has cultural specification. As a cultural phenomenon, face has always been a focus in social interactions. Brown and Levinson's face theory to some extent is validated in western culture. Chinese face has its connotation; and modesty is even more important. In making sense of linguistic interactions concerning face, it is sensible to combine culture influence with face theory.

Key words: Politeness; Face; Theory

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INTRODUCTION

As a socio-cultural phenomenon, politeness (being polite) is one of the basic social guidelines for human interaction and its goal is to minimize the potential for conflict and confrontation inherent (Lakoff). As a linguistic behavior it's a feature of language. As a pragmatic phenomenon, politeness has been a focus of interest for decades. A considerable amount of literature has been accumulating and there seems no sign of receding interest. In 1975, the American philosopher P.H. Grice proposed his Cooperative Principle with the assumption that social interactants would abide by in order to make effective social interactions (1975). But in real social life, the violation and flouting of the relative maxims under

Cooperative Principle is nothing new. And British linguist Leech (1983, p.132) put forward a set of politeness maxims as an explanation why people violate cooperative principle in speaking, according to which the core is the tact maxim and politeness is rather a strategy.

In fact, situational and social factors are far from that simple. The analysis reveals that lack of consideration for these factors in the actual use of linguistic politeness easily results in intercultural failure or misunderstanding. But Leech fails to use these factors to revise his theory. Therefore some actual use is beyond his explanation.

However, the scope of the application of the above theories is unclear and it ignores the appropriateness in certain social context and thus it is not convincing to account for all language uses. Based on Grice's maxim theory and Goffman's concept of face as "the positive value: a person effectively claim for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact (1967)", Brown and Levinson published an article in 1978 titled "Universal in Language Usage: Politeness Phenomena". The universal character of politeness is interpretable in various ways, i.e., it can be observed as a social phenomenon in all cultures, it is resorted to by speakers of different languages as a social goal to be achieved through the use of language and it is recognized as a norm in all societies. Brown and Levinson (1987) put forward their assumption: that all competent adult members of a society have (and know each other to have) "face", the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself. And there are two aspects of face. One is 'negative face', or the basic claim to territories, to freedom of action and freedom from imposition; essentially the want that your actions are not impeded by others. The other is 'positive face', the positive consistent self-image that people have and want to be appreciated and approved of by at least some other people. In simple terms, negative face is the need to be independent and positive face is the need to be connected. "Within their

everyday social interactions, people generally behave as if their expectations concerning their public self-image, or their face wants will be respected" (Zhao, 2010).

1. BROWN AND LEVINSON'S FACE THEORY

According to Brown and Levinson the essence of politeness is to save face by adopting various linguistic strategies in social interactions for many speech acts in daily life are face-threatening. Therefore, Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness is also called Face-saving Theory.

The general idea of Brown and Levinson's model of politeness is to understand various strategies for interactional behavior to achieve satisfaction of certain wants. The wants related to politeness are the wants of face, "something that is emotionally invested, and that can be lost, maintained, and enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction" (Brown & Levinson, 1978, p.66). The concept is directly related to the folk-expression "lose face", which is about being embarrassed or humiliated. If a speaker says something that represents a threat to another individual's expectations, it is described as a Face Threatening Act. Alternatively, given the possibilities that some action might be interpreted as a threat to another's face, the speaker can say something to lessen the possible threat. This is called a Face Saving Act (Yule, 2000). It is generally expected that each participant involved in interactions will attempt to respect the face wants of others and there are different ways of performing face saving acts. When we attempt to save another's face, we pay attention to their negative face wants or their positive face wants. In the context of the mutual vulnerability of face, any rational agent will seek to avoid these face-threatening acts (FTAs for short), or will employ certain strategies to minimize the threat, i. e. he will take into consideration the relative weightings of (at least) three wants: (a) the want to communicate the content of the FTAs, (b) the want to be efficient or urgent, and (c) the want to maintain H's face to any degree. Unless (b) is greater than (c), S will want to minimize the threat of his FTAs (Brown & Levinson, 1987). So, a face saving act which is oriented to the person's negative face will tend to show deference, emphasize the importance of the other's time or concerns, and even include an apology for the imposition or interruption. This is also called negative politeness. A face saving act which is concerned with the person's positive face will tend to show solidarity, emphasize that both speakers want the same thing, and that they have a common goal. This is also called positive politeness (Yule, 2000, pp.61-62).

"In Brown and Levinson's view, politeness strategies are concerned with interactant's face: they are used when doing FTAs which can threaten the speaker's face as well

as the hearer's" (Li, 2010). The rational actions people take to preserve both kinds of face for themselves and the people they interact with essentially add up to politeness. Brown and Levinson (1978) showed us five strategies a person can deal with a face-threatening act to maintain the interactants' negative face or enhance their positive face to any degree in social interaction. In order to minimize the threat of his FTA or to show politeness toward others, the speaker will choose from among a variety of politeness strategies to employ indicated by Brown and Levinson which have been mentioned above. The more an act threatens S's or H's face, the more S will want to choose a higher-numbered politeness strategy to minimize the risk of FTAs. Yule (2000) gives an example of "borrowing pen" to illustrate the above 5 strategies.

Bald on record:

- 1) A1. Give me a pen.
- A2. Lend me your pen.

Positive politeness:

- 2) A1. How about letting me use your pen?
- A2. Hey, buddy, I'd appreciate it if you'd let me use your pen.
- A3. Hi. How is it going? Okay if I sit here? We must be interested in the same crazy stuff. You take a lot of notes too, huh? Say, do me a great favour and let me use one of your pens.

Negative politeness:

- 3) A1. Could you lend me a pen?
- A2. I'm sorry to bother you, but can I ask you for a pen or something?
- A3. I know you're busy, but might I ask you if-eh-if you happen to have an extra pen that I could, you know-eh-maybe borrow?

Off-record:

- 4) A1. Uh, I forgot my pen.
- A2. Hmm, I wonder where I put my pen.

Not doing the FTA:

- 5) A. (Search through the bag.)
- B. Here, use this.

However, Brown and Levinson's politeness theory meets protest from different cultures. Although they modified their original publication, the essence of their concept remained the same (probably for their cultural restrictions).

Think of a speaker's different ways of invitation:

- 6) a. Would you like to have another sandwich?
- b. Have another sandwich.
- c. Do have another sandwich.
- d. You must have another sandwich

Apparently, sentence 6)a is the least face threatening act of invitation in Brown and Levinson's view, for it is "give face" to the hearer with redressive action (Would you). However, in Chinese culture, such a speech act does not threaten the H's negative face at all. What the speaker cares is whether he is warm or hospitable or even polite to the hearer.

notion of face is subject to culture elaboration and that face is a universal phenomenon but has cultural specification. Therefore, the universality of Brown and Levinson's Face Theory should mean: both positive face and negative face exist in different cultures; the strategy to save the hearer's face is universal.

Brown and Levinson's face theory to some extent is validated in Western culture or more specifically in Britain and America which emphasizes freedom of action and freedom from imposition. Chinese face has its connotation and modesty is even more important which stands for a virtue of self-cultivation that is the foundation on which politeness is built. It is sensible to combine culture influence with face theory.

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