



INSTITUTE OF EAST ASIAN STUDIES  
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA • BERKELEY  
CENTER FOR CHINESE STUDIES

# The Strategies of Politeness in the Chinese Language

KAIDI ZHAN



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## PREFACE

Kaidi Zhan has asked me to write an introduction to her monograph, and I am honored to have been asked to do so.

I met Kaidi when she arrived in Berkeley as a visiting fellow in linguistics. Over the next few years she sat in on several of my classes, in pragmatics and sociolinguistics. It is always gratifying for students to take ideas to which you have introduced them to new understandings, forge new connections, and go beyond where you could have gone by yourself. It gives meaning to a career as a scholar and teacher: you see your ideas begetting progeny. So it is fitting for me to bring Kaidi's work to public attention and to place it in its practical as well as scholarly context.

This monograph is a study of politeness from several perspectives. As a contrastive study of politeness in two disparate cultures, it explores what aspects of polite behavior are universal, what specific to each group. In addition (since current politeness theory has largely been formulated by speakers of English and other Western languages), it is invaluable to have a study of politeness in a very different culture. To understand to the fullest degree the ways of a culture, one must have been born into that culture. Others can provide useful insights, make valid claims; but the perspective of the native is likely to be more accurate.

As a theoretical exploration, Kaidi Zhan's work is of value for scholars in many fields: pragmatics, sociolinguistics, sociology, psychology, and anthropology. But it also has practical value for teachers and learners of language (especially, of course, speakers of English and Chinese wishing to learn or teach one another's or their own languages) as a suggestion to language teachers that linguistic, or communicative, competence extends beyond phonology, lexicon, and syntax. Pragmatic competence, including the use of politeness, is critical to true fluency, and too often overlooked in

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the second-language classroom, largely because so little is known about comparative politeness systems. But an appreciation of the pragmatic similarities and differences that exist between cultures is important for others besides the scholar and the language teacher. The world, to dust off the platitude, grows smaller every day: the insularity more than one culture has cherished in years past has become a ticket to annihilation, as our failure to understand the ways of others allows us to insult and mistreat them, exacerbating misunderstanding to deadly conflict. In the long term, we can hope to avert such catastrophe only if we can manage to stop seeing relations between ourselves and others as cases of *us* versus *them*. But we can sincerely see all peoples as worth of empathy only if we understand that, beneath the surface differences in behavior and style, there are deeper similarities. The behaviors and attitudes studied under the rubric of politeness theory include some that have lent themselves, when misunderstood, to some of the most entrenched and destructive stereotypes people can invent for one another. To see other people's ways as choices, equal to if different from our own, different in surface form but arising out of the same needs, may be a first step out of that morass.

We tend to see politeness not as the product of learned rules, analogous to the rules of grammar, but as expressions of morality. *Good people*, according to this unconscious organization, are those who behave more or less as we do, perform greetings, farewells, apologies, invitations, and so on as we do. *Bad people* or *crazy people* are those who do it differently: hug when we weren't expecting a hug (or vice versa), address us by first name before we were ready or keep calling us by title and last name (to our minds) much too long; are indirect where we anticipate straightforwardness, or the reverse; use an unexpected formula to induce us to do something. We see these choices as personal failings, whether of an individual or a whole group. *They* are "inscrutable"; *they* are "standoffish"; *they* are "arrogant." We can best transcend these false and dangerous attributions by understanding politeness as a conventional strategy that is a part of the definition of "culture" rather than a

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spontaneous individual expression of emotion. If my culture dictates that, until I know you well, I will refrain from expressing closeness and intimacy, that does not mean that I am a cold person, or don't like you. If your culture induces you to hug me at our first meeting, to reveal to me details of your private life, I should not see that as a childish inability to maintain dignity or respect boundaries: you are merely following your culture's dictates. Ultimately, my reticence and your effusiveness have the same meaning: they are ways to behave before true intimacy is achieved; for us both, they say, "I am a socially correct person. You can feel comfortable with me." But the message works only if both sender and receiver understand the form for what it is — an arbitrary, culturally relative choice of conventional expression.

So a study of comparative politeness can provide members of both examined cultures with deeper insight into each other's ways. But beyond this, Kaidi Zhan's work makes contributions to scholarship, to the understanding of what politeness is, how it is related to other communicative systems, and how it functions as a link between language and culture.

A brief discussion of prior work on politeness in linguistics, anthropology, and related fields may help to put Kaidi Zhan's work in perspective.

People engage in communication, from ordinary conversation to numerous special forms (e.g., classroom lectures, courtroom cross-examination, and psychotherapeutic interviews, to name a very few) with one or both of two overriding aims: to transmit information useful to other participants and to present themselves to others as competent members of society: friendly, helpful, and considerate. These two goals frequently come into conflict. The information offered may represent an undesirable intrusion to its intended recipient, something he or she doesn't want to hear. Or the very act of presenting oneself as more authoritative than another may make a speaker seem pompous, distant, or overbearing — thereby violating the need for niceness. Depending on the culture in which

the individual has been brought up and the discourse type in which he or she is participating, this conflict may be resolved in favor of either informativeness or niceness. The wrong choice of resolution (wrong in the eyes of other participants) may mark the speaker as incompetent, impolite, or unintelligible, among other bad outcomes. But — as is often hard for others to remember — unexpected resolutions of the niceness/informativeness conflict do not typically represent social incompetence; more often, they are indicative of cultural differences. Sometimes, though, they arise because the individual does not know the rules of a particular discourse type or misidentifies the type he or she is participating in.

After that decision come others. If it is appropriate to be informative, what is the best way to frame that information (see Grice 1975), to present it so as to be maximally useful and accessible to the interlocutor? If some delicacy is involved (that is, if interactive needs threaten to create a conflict), how is informativeness to be preserved with the least possible damage to the interaction and future relations? These decisions, too, are determined in part by the speaker's culture (as well as by the speaker's personality, the preexisting relationship between participants, and the discourse type). In "speaker-based" cultures (see Lakoff 1984), the responsibility for the successful transmission of meaning is assigned to the speaker. Communication, other things being equal, is ideally direct and to the point: hearers are not expected to do much interpreting. The best communicator gets to the point quickly, makes it unambiguously, and finishes succinctly. Americans tend to idealize this model. On the other hand, in a "hearer-based" system, much more responsibility for the meaning of a discourse is situated in the hearer. The latter is given options; possibilities are left open. From the forms of sentences (in which, for instance, tenses and pronouns required in a speaker-based language may be optional or lacking) to the structure of the discourse as a whole (participants may take a long time on preliminaries; may hint at their goals, rather than stating them outright; may value elegant turns of phrase at the expense of succinctness), hearers are



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expected to do a good deal of interpretation. For a speaker in a speaker-based system to leave things up to the hearer is to be confusing, illogical, and untrustworthy; in a hearer-based system, a hearer who opts for perfect clarity is seen as insultingly brusque or childlike. “Clear” as the latter’s speech may be, it may yet create misunderstanding, since it is not what the hearer expected to hear; the style interfaces with the understanding of the substance.

A discourse type that stresses interaction over information emphasizes politeness strategies. Actually, the term “politeness” is misleading: politeness per se is just one of the reasons people are less than fully informative. We normally think of polite behavior as designed to protect others — avoid offending or hurting them. But we also avoid direct expression to protect ourselves when we have something to hide or perceive risks in offending someone powerful. Then, too, we may choose a less than fully clear form of expression simply because (when clarity is not of paramount interest) another way of saying the same thing is more interesting: a synonym, a play on words, playfully complicated syntax, and so forth. Then, too, even in a speaker-based system, choosing a more complex or indirect way of communicating can be seen as a way of inducing or suggesting intimacy, a subtle compliment. To speak in a way that requires some extra work on the part of the hearer is to say “We’re so alike, I know you’ll understand what I have in mind” and “Even though this requires some deduction to understand, I know you’re smart enough to do it.”

Beyond the decision to emphasize information or interaction, other choices must be made. Politeness takes different forms depending on culture and discourse type. The works Kaidi Zhan cites in her text, Brown and Levinson (1987) and my own (1973), are two complementary models.

Politeness, according to these works, is the avoidance of negative confrontation, or at least its appearance. Brown and Levinson characterize that avoidance as involving the preservation of “face,” via the avoidance of face-threatening acts (FTAs). Erving Goffman (1967:5) defines face as “an

image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes.” B&L divide the concept into *positive face* — a sense of being a member in good standing of one’s group, liked, understood, cared for — and *negative face* — a sense of autonomy, privacy, the right to avoid intrusion. Either face can be threatened, advertently or not, by another individual’s communicative behavior. Negative face can be threatened, for instance, by encroachment: forcing a choice on someone, cutting off options, imposing. Positive face can be threatened by expressions of uninvolvedness or uncaring, lack of interest or understanding, or denials of similarity. When face threats occur, communication tends to break down. We normally lack the desire and the capacity to “metacommunicate,” that is, communicate about the form of our communication, and therefore we lack the means to resolve the impasse directly. Bad feelings result. Therefore most of us tend, whenever possible, to avoid FTAs — at the very least, toward those in a position to hurt us. We also know that once one participant in an interaction commits a breach of politeness by an FTA, the gates are open: bad behavior becomes possible for everyone, and all kinds of dangers loom.

There are several ways to avoid FTAs in discourse. One is simply not to say anything that could, by its form or meaning, produce a threat to face. A second is to hedge one’s communicative bets by going, as B&L say, “off-record”: saying what has to be said so obliquely that the dangerous meaning is obscured, and both speaker and addressee can pretend, if necessary, that the FTA did not exist at all. Thus, instead of asking someone I don’t know too well to lend me money, I can say, peering at my wallet, “Darn! I’m out of cash and I’ll never be able to get to the bank on time!” My hearer can take that as a request for a loan, or, almost as easily, as nondirected grumbling. But neither of these outs is, in B&L’s sense, “polite” in being directed mainly at the hearer’s face needs. A polite utterance is made on-record, but, as the authors say, “with redressive action,” in a form designed to preserve the other’s autonomy (negative politeness) or sense of group fellowship (positive politeness).

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Thus, to frame a request for a loan, I might say, using positive politeness, “Can you help me out with some cash?” suggesting that the hearer might be willing to be helpful; or “Be a pal and lend me some money,” appealing to our friendship. As negative politeness, I might leave my addressee lots of room to refuse, at least conventionally (while making my meaning perfectly clear): “I don’t suppose you could possibly lend me a little money?” or, “If you don’t mind, I’d be real grateful for a little cash.”

American and Chinese cultures have different politeness conventions, as the present work demonstrates. Kaidi Zhan’s work will help bridge the age-old gap by showing readers of both cultures how to translate the conventions of one into those of the other. It shows that, under the surface, both groups are really doing the same thing, based on the same human needs and desires. If we can see beneath the cross-cultural mystique the deeper universality of human nature and human behavior, if we can see our interactive choices as governed by learned rules rather than ordained by innate character, we have set our feet on the path to understanding. As an American, I have learned a great deal from reading this monograph — about both American and Chinese politeness. As a linguist, my understanding of politeness theory has been enhanced by reading this work. I think other readers, Chinese and American, will similarly find in these pages a great deal of value.

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## CHAPTER ONE

# Introduction

The aim of this monograph is to describe and demonstrate the politeness strategies used by speakers of Mandarin Chinese and explain these strategies to readers whose native language is English.

### 1.1. The importance of the principle of politeness

The issue of politeness is one issue dealt with in the study of pragmatics, a new branch of linguistics which emerged in the 1960s. At that time some linguists started to conduct research on language from a new point of view, because there are phenomena of language use which can not be explained adequately from the perspective of grammatical structure alone. These linguists started to pay attention to the way people use their language, believing that there are universal principles underlying language use in communication. Among these principles, the conversational maxims proposed by H. P. Grice (1975) are very basic and important. Grice argued that speakers pay attention to quantity, transmitting the proper amount of information, not more or less than required; quality, saying only what you believe to be true; relevance, saying only what is germane to the situation; and manner, avoiding obscurity of expression, avoiding ambiguity, being brief, and being orderly. Although speakers generally comply with these conversational maxims, sometimes they break them, in order to be polite. When conversational maxims conflict with politeness, in many cases politeness takes precedence (Lakoff 1973).

### 1.2. The term “politeness strategy”

It was John J. Gumperz (1970, 1982) who proposed the concept of “strategy” in conversation and demonstrated the use of strategy in cross-

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cultural communication. Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson (1987) adopted the concept of conversational strategy in their book *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. Brown and Levinson demonstrated that there are universal principles for politeness in language use, citing examples from three languages — English, Tzeltal, and Tamil — and occasionally drawing examples from other languages.

In this monograph, the terms used to discuss and classify politeness strategies, such as “On record,” “Off record,” “Positive politeness,” and “Negative politeness,” are taken from Brown & Levinson 1987 (hereafter B&L 1987), but we have made a few changes in order to adapt Brown & Levinson’s framework to the reality of Chinese usage. Following is a brief discussion of these terms.

“On record” describes a speech act in which the addressee can take the motive of the speaker and the information conveyed, which in this case the speaker really intends to convey, literally. “On record” can be divided in two types: “baldly on record,” on record without redressive action for the face-threatening speech act (FTA), and “politeness strategies on record,” on record with redressive action for the FTA.

“Positive politeness” is “redress for an FTA directed to the addressee’s positive face, his perennial desire that his wants (or the actions/acquisitions/values resulting from them) should be thought of as desirable” (B&L 1987:101). This redress involves communicating the idea that the speaker has wants similar to those of the addressee, bringing the two interlocutors metaphorically closer together.

“Negative politeness is redressive action (for an FTA) directed to the addressee’s negative face: his want to have his freedom of action unhindered and his attention unimpeded” (B&L 1987:129). This is “respectful” politeness, as opposed to positive politeness, which could be referred to as “familiar” politeness. When one makes a request or gives an order or advice, one intrudes into another person’s private territory. In this case negative politeness strategies make redress for or minimize the imposition of the face-threatening act.

“Off record” describes a speech act where one wants to ask the addressee to do something, to criticize the addressee, or to complain to the addressee, but one speaks in a roundabout or ambiguous way. The addressee has to see behind the words to determine the true motive of the speaker and what meaning the speaker really intends to convey. In this way the speaker can not be held responsible for a particular interpretation of the speech act.

### **1.3. The politeness strategies of Chinese**

On the one hand it is definitely true that the politeness principle is universal in language usage (B&L 1987), but on the other hand politeness strategies vary from language to language, from culture to culture. Therefore, to understand the politeness strategies of Chinese and use them well, one should understand both the Chinese language and Chinese culture, including the psychological features of the Chinese people.

### **1.4. The relationship between the politeness strategies of Chinese and Chinese grammar**

The linguistics means used to achieve politeness strategies in every language include grammar, prosody, and so on. Even though some politeness strategies of Chinese are similar to those of other languages, the linguistic means of achieving these politeness strategies may be totally different from those of other languages.

Chinese grammar is unique, so anyone who wants to understand the politeness strategies of Chinese must pay attention to the possibilities Chinese grammar provides. Following are some examples.

1.4.1 There is a politeness strategy “Intensify interest to hearer” in Chinese and some other languages (B&L 1987:106-107). In all languages, when a speaker wants the conversation to go on well, he/she may try to tell a good story by making the language more vivid, but the linguistic means for achieving this in Chinese are unique. A Chinese speaker can choose between two constructions that make a verb more vivid. One is “Verb +

## CHAPTER TWO

# Positive Politeness

“Positive politeness is redress directed to the addressee’s positive face” (B&L 1987:101). Positive face means that a person is concerned about his/her public image. A person desires his/her virtue to be noticed and admitted by the public. And a person wants his/her interest, desire and thought to be considered. The redress often involves the expression of solidarity or commiseration with the addressee. Many of the strategies of positive politeness are similar in many languages, but the linguistic means to achieve these strategies are different and the connotation of positive politeness varies with each language, because “face” value is very closely related to cultural and social background. The positive politeness strategies of Chinese are unique not only because the Chinese language is unique, but also because of the influence of a kinship-based culture on the Chinese. Chinese people value human feelings very much, so in many cases a speaker holds a considerably optimistic attitude toward the addressee, presupposing the cooperation of the addressee. Then attempting to bring closer the addressee, as if he/she were kin, underlies many of the positive politeness strategies of the Chinese. We will discuss each of the positive politeness strategies in turn.

### 2.1. Strategy 1: Compliment

One can use this strategy to indicate that one has noticed aspects of the addressee’s virtues, strong points, good looks, nice possessions, excellent work, etc. in order to satisfy the addressee’s wants relating to face (B&L 1987:103-104). There are two aspects we should demonstrate.

First, syntactically, Chinese people like to use sentences with a comparative sense in compliments to highlight the addressee’s virtue, great ability, remarkable possessions, etc. For example:



(1) 提起村里这些姑娘,不是我当面夸奖,千真万真,全不如秀英. *Ti-qi cun li zhexie guniang, bu shi wo dangmian kuajiang, qianzhenwanzhen, quan buru Xiuying.* (Talking about the girls in this village, not that I want say something flattering in front of you, it is absolutely true that no one can compete with Xiuying.)

(2) 你们厂底子那么薄,亏了你有本事,越办越红火;差一点儿的早不知到折腾得怎么样了.  
*Nimen chang dizi namo bo, kui le ni you benshi, yue ban yue honghuo, chayidianr de zao bu zhidao zheteng de zenmoyang le.* (The basis of your factory is so poor; luckily you are capable; it has been becoming more and more successful; it is hard to imagine what would have happened if someone less capable was doing this job.)

(3) 二妹妹,别那么说,您那点儿家事也不是个二五眼能了得了的. *Er-meimei, bie zhemo shuo, nin nadianr jiashi ye bushi ge erwuyan neng liao-de-liao de.* (Second sister, do not say that. The work you do couldn't be done by just anybody!)

Sometimes, in paying compliments, Chinese speakers use intensifying modifiers, such as “真” *zhen* (really), “多” *duo* (indeed), etc. in order to exaggerate the virtues of the addressee. For example,

(4) 嘿,小伙子牛仔裤一穿真精神嘿. *Hei, xiaohuozhi niuzaiku yi chuan zhen jingshen hei.* (Wow, you young guys really look great in jeans.)

(5) 呦,你这房子多宽敞啊. *You, ni zhe fangzi duo kuanchang a!* (Wow, your house is really big!)

Second, giving compliments is quite an art in Chinese. One should pay compliments in a way that is suitable to the age, gender, status, profession, and personality of the addressee. This means that in paying compliments one should know what an addressee desires be noticed, and one should hit the mark. Below are some specific types:

2.1.1 An expression indicating good health and good fortune is a proper compliment for a person who is middle-aged or older. For example,

(6) 两年没见了,您还是那么硬朗. Liangnian mei jian le, nin hai shi name yinglang. (I have not seen you for two years; you still look very healthy.)

(7) 您这还不是造化,有儿有女,吃的喝的用的要什么有什么. Nin zhe hai bu shi zaohua, you er you nu, chi-de he-de yong-de yao shenme you shenme! (You are so lucky, you have a son, you have a daughter, you have everything you need, whatever you want, you have.)

2.1.2 An expression indicating good looks is a proper compliment for a young man or a young woman. For example,

(8) 这姑娘眉眼儿长得多秀气啊. Zhe guniang meiyanyr zhang de duo xiuqi a. (This young lady has beautiful eyes.)

2.1.3 An expression indicating great ability is a proper compliment for a person whose personality is strong and who is eager to do well in everything. For example,

(9) 这么些事,在别人跟前就忙得不知怎么样了,可是在嫂子跟前,再添上些也不够嫂子一发挥的. Zheme xie shi, zai bieren genqian jiu mang de bu zhi zenmeyang le, ke shi zai saozi genqian, zai tianshang xie ye bugou saozi yi fahui de. (With all this work, anyone else would be overwhelmed, but with you, even adding more work, you could still handle it.)

(10) 这么个大会,你能安排得井井有条的,真不简单啊. Zheme ge dahui, ni neng 'anpai de jingjingyoutiao de, zhen bu jiandan 'a. (Such a big conference, and you organized everything so well, you're no slouch!)

2.1.4 An expression indicating great learning is a proper compliment for a professor. For example,

(11) 钱先生真是学问高深,我们连个脚踪也赶不上. Qian xiansheng zhen shi xuewen gaoshen; women lian ge jiao zong ye gan-bu-shang. (Professor Qian, you really have great learning; we could never catch up with you.)

There is one social custom that we should point out. In many cases

## CHAPTER THREE

# Negative Politeness

Negative politeness is redressive action for an FTA addressed to the addressee's negative face: a person wants to have his freedom of action unhindered and his attention unimpeded (B&L 1987:106). When one makes a request or gives an order or advice, one intrudes into another person's private territory. One should then make redress for such a face-threatening act. We have borrowed the definition of negative politeness from Brown and Levinson, but we should indicate that the conditions under which negative politeness is used in Chinese are different from those in English. In English, negative politeness is more conventional.

First, interpersonal relations, including relative power and rank between a speaker and an addressee, are less important in English than in Chinese. Traditionally and legally, Americans suppose everyone to be equal and value the individual very much. Consequently in English, no matter to whom one speaks, even when parents speak to a child or a teacher speaks to a student, one should use negative politeness strategies if a face-threatening act is involved. This does not mean Americans do not consider relative power and rank between a speaker and an addressee, but compared with Americans Chinese people traditionally are more preoccupied with a sense of hierarchy of elder vs. younger and senior vs. junior, and Chinese people have a stronger cultural tradition of showing respect to teachers. Therefore, when a younger person speaks to an elder person, such as when a child speaks to his/her parents, a junior speaks to a senior, an officer speaks to his/her superior, or a student speaks to his/her teacher, that person should use negative politeness when there is any face threatening. When the positions are reversed, the speaker does not use negative politeness. Maybe we can say that in order to avoid conflict in speech acts Americans keep a distance between a speaker and an

addressee in the horizontal dimension, whereas Chinese people keep a distance between a speaker and an addressee in the vertical dimension. On the other hand, the sense of family is very strong in China, so family members of the same generation, such as husband and wife or brothers and sisters do not use negative politeness in cases of face threatening.

Second, Americans take the concept of personal territory very seriously; Americans think freedom of action and attention to the rights of individuals are sacred and inviolable. Therefore whether a face-threatening act is small or big, one should use negative politeness. But in Chinese, if a speaker thinks the size of a face-threatening act is small and the speaker is familiar with the addressee, he/she need not use negative politeness. For example, when a speaker requests an acquaintance to pass the salt to him/her, or a speaker asks an acquaintance to give him/her a cigarette, usually he/she does not use any politeness strategy; otherwise it would look as if the intention was to set up a distance between them. It is very difficult to say when a face-threatening act becomes big enough to warrant the use of a negative politeness strategy. The line is very unclear, and sometimes an addressee will feel the speaker is not being polite, or that the speaker is being too polite, in order to distance himself/herself from the addressee, or that the speaker is not sincere.

Among the negative politeness strategies in Chinese, the strategies “softening the tone of speech” and “showing deference” play the most important roles. We will discuss each of the politeness strategies in Chinese one by one.

### **3.1. Strategy 1: Show deference**

“Show Deference” means a speaker will use certain expressions to humble and abase himself/herself or raise the status of the addressee (B&L 1987:178-187). A speaker can use this strategy to come closer to an addressee by shortening the vertical distance between them, or the speaker can use it to maintain a distance in the vertical dimension from the hearer in order to avoid potential conflict. Give deference is a typical politeness

strategy that reflects the sense of social hierarchy of the Chinese people. Following are some of the linguistic means for achieving this strategy.

3.1.1 There are two second person singular pronouns: 你 *ni* and 您 *nin*. *Nin* is the honorific form. When a junior in age, profession or position speaks to a superior, or one speaks to a stranger, he/she should use the honorific form “*nin*,” to show respect to the addressee. There is an honorific second person plural pronoun 您们 *ninmen*. It is used limitedly in current epistolary style.

There are also a few depreciatory first person singular pronouns, but these terms are somewhat out of date: 在下 *zaixia* (a person in lower position), 敝人 *biren* (a person shabby in dress) and 兄弟敝人 *xiongdibiren* (your younger brother is shabby in dress).

There is an honorific form of the third person singular pronoun *tan*, but it is rarely used except among older Manchu speakers of Chinese.

3.1.2 There are several honorific forms for the second person possessive in classical and epistolary style. These terms are used to elevate the addressee. Sometimes these terms are used in ordinary conversation (Chao 1976:309-342). For example,

- (1) 贵姓 *guixing* (your esteemed surname)
- 贵所 *guisuo* (your esteemed institute)
- 令郎 *linglang* (your excellent son)
- 令爱 *ling'ai* (your excellent daughter)

Corresponding with the honorific forms for the second person possessives, there are several depreciatory forms for the first person. For example,

- (2) 贱姓 *jianxing* (my humble surname)
- 敝所 *bisuo* (our shabby institute)
- 犬子 *quanzi* (my base son like a dog)
- 敝舍 *bishe* (my shabby hut)

3.1.3 Some terms of address show respect to the addressee. Most terms of address for raising the status of the addressee are related to the meaning of “old” or “elder,” because Chinese people have a strong sense of showing respect to their elders.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Off Record

“Off record” means that a speech act is done in a way that renders the communicative intent ambiguous, so the speaker can not be held responsible for a particular interpretation. When a person intends to do something seriously face threatening, which includes asking an addressee to do something, complaining to somebody about something, or criticizing somebody, one uses an indirect way of doing it by hiding one’s real motive. An addressee has to infer what the real motive of the speaker is and what the real meaning is that the speaker intends to convey. In other words, the meaning that a speaker intends to convey is different from the superficial meaning of the utterance made by the speaker.

How can an addressee figure out the real meaning of an off record speech act? There are two conditions. One of them is a knowledge of the background, including common sense, cultural background and mutual understanding. The other is the context. In a certain context an addressee with a knowledge of the background takes what is actually said as a clue and consequently makes an inference and interprets the real meaning of the off record utterance, what is conversationally implicated. In what circumstances does a speaker make the choice to make an off record utterance in Chinese? There are several factors which force a speaker to make an off record utterance. First, when the size of the face threatening is considerable or the issue which a speaker is raising is very sensitive, then a speaker makes an off record utterance in order to reduce the pressure on the addressee. It means an addressee can make the choice to pick up the conversational implicature of face threatening or not. Second, when a speaker feels it is not proper for him/her to complain to somebody of something or to criticize somebody directly because of his/her status, then a speaker makes an off record utterance.

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Brown and Levinson (1987:211-227) have indicated that when a speaker does an off record communicative act, he/she generally violates one of the conversational maxims (quantity, quality, relevance, manner) proposed by H. P. Grice (1975). It is the violation of one of these maxims that triggers the inference of the conversational implicature.

Compared with each other, the strategies for off record communicative acts in English and Chinese seem similar at first glance. For example, there are some strategies, such as the strategy “Give hints,” “Overstate,” “Use tautologies,” “Use contradictions,” and “Use rhetorical questions” which are similar. But going deeper into the two languages, we find that there are sharp distinctions in some aspects. These distinctions are related to the different cultures and different psychological features of the two peoples. Maybe we can say that Chinese people are more concerned about preserving face and prefer implicit complaints, implicit criticism and implicit negative answers, while Americans are more frank. For example, the strategy “Be vague” is used more often and more elaborately in Chinese. For example, to a challenge of face threatening, if the response is negative, in many cases Americans will answer “no” directly and clearly, but Chinese people prefer not to answer “no” directly and leave the negative answer ambiguous or vague. On the other hand, the strategy “Be ironic” is used more often in English, because traditionally American people tolerate a more critical point of view and have a greater sense of humor in literature and conversation, especially black humor. But by Chinese people’s traditional standards, one should speak in a moderate way, so the strategy “Be ironic” is used less in Chinese. Now we will discuss the off record strategies in Chinese one by one.

### **4.1. Strategy 1: Give hints**

When one wants to ask somebody to do something, give somebody advice or a suggestion or complain to somebody about something, he/she deliberately does not keep to the exact subject, but just drops a hint, then lets the addressee make the necessary inference and figure out what the

real motive of the speaker is (B&L 1987:213-217). The “Give hints” strategy violates the maxim requiring an utterance to be relevant. For example,

(1) 前年盖房, 去年我兄弟娶亲, 把这点底儿都花了. 这会儿你侄子又考上了大学, 月底就得动身. 我们娘俩正愁盘费呢. *Qian nian gai fang, qu nian wo xiongdi qu qin, ba zhe dian dir dou hua le. Zhe huir ni zhizi you kao-shang le daxue, yue di jiu dei dongshen, women niangr-lia zheng chou panfei ne.* (You know, two years ago we built a new house and last year my brother got married, so we spent all the money we had. Now your nephew has passed the entrance examination for college, we are worried about the transportation expenses.)

In this example, the speaker drops a hint to the addressee that the speaker is short of money, and hopes the addressee will make the inference that the speaker wants to borrow some money from the addressee.

(2) 我说, 听说上边有可能提拔老李当厂长. *Wo shuo, tingshuo shangbian you ke'neng tiba Lao Li dang changzhang.* (Well, I heard the authorities may promote Lao Li to the director of our factory.)

呕. *Ou.* (Oh.)

老李这人没私心, 业务上更没说的. 他要能上去可不错. *Lao Li zhe ren mei sixin, yewu shang geng mei-shuo-de. Ta yao neng shangqu ke bu cuo.* (Li is not selfish and is professionally competent. If Li can get promoted, it will be great.)

嗯. *En.* (M-hm.)

咱们都是老同学, 你也多往上反映反映. *Zanmen dou shi lao tongxue, ni ye duo wang shang fanying-fanying.* (We are all former classmates, you should tell the authorities more about these things.)

正因为是老同学, 我更不好说话了. 我看这种事还是让领导考虑考虑吧. *Zheng yinwei shi lao tongxue,*



# Conclusion

From the above discussion of the strategies of politeness in the Chinese language, we can reach these conclusions:

1. Politeness plays an important role in communication and is one of the key issues of pragmatics. To communicate smoothly and efficiently, a speaker should comply with Grice's conversational maxims on the one hand and follow the principles of politeness on the other. When conversational maxims conflict with politeness, politeness often takes precedence.

2. There are many strategies of politeness in the Chinese language, but they do not all occur with the same frequency. The core of positive politeness in Chinese is seen in a speaker's attempts to establish a "kinship" with the addressee and in his or her optimism in presupposing the cooperation of the addressee. The core of negative politeness in Chinese is revealed in softening the tone of speech in order to moderate the possible conflicts between the speaker and addressee and the giving of deference to the addressee by keeping the proper distance. As for the off-record politeness of the Chinese language, the politeness strategy of "being vague" is used more often and elaborately in the hope of speaking in a moderate way and saving the addressee's face.

3. Although politeness principles are universal in language usage, politeness strategies vary from language to language and from culture to culture. This monograph demonstrates that the strategies of politeness in Chinese are based on Chinese grammar, prosody, and so on, and are influenced in many ways by Chinese culture and the psychological features of the Chinese people.

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