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**Title:**

A Contrastive Study on Disagreement Strategies for Politeness between  
American English & Mandarin Chinese

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**Abstract:**

The purpose of this paper is to make a contrastive study of disagreement strategies for politeness between American English and Mandarin Chinese at the private interpersonal level for better EFL/ESL teaching and learning. Five scenarios for disagreement are devised for college students in USA and Chinese mainland to fill in what they would say when they disagree with the higher-status, peers and the lower-status. The discourse completion test (DCT) method is applied for data elicitation. When disagreeing with the

superior, Chinese students are found to employ more politeness strategies and address forms than the American students do. In the case of peers, with the increase of social distance, both the American and Chinese students apply less and less politeness strategies. Positive correlation is found between the rates of disagreement and the change of the social distance for the Chinese students while negative correlation for the American students. When disagreeing with the sister, the Chinese male uses the least politeness strategies while the Chinese female uses the most politeness strategies. Female students behave more sensitive to politeness and use more politeness strategies than male subjects do.

### **Keywords**

face theory, politeness systems theory, cross culture comparison, politeness strategies

### **Introduction**

This is a contrastive study of disagreement strategies between American English and Mandarin Chinese from the perspectives of pragmatics and socio-linguistics at the private interpersonal level. It also serves as a pilot study of disagreement strategies from the perspective of politeness on the Chinese mainland. It aims at highlighting the differences of being polite in disagreement situations for EFL/ESL teaching and learning.

### **Literature Review**

At the same time as supporting renewed interest in Grice's Cooperative Principles (1975), the issue of politeness has become one of the most active areas of research in language use (Chen, 2001). Studies from Brown & Levinson (1978, 1987) and Scollon and Scollon (1995) have aroused increased attention in the study of politeness.

The face theory proposed by Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) serves as the most influential theory on politeness. It plays a leading role in the study of speech acts (Ji, 2000; Hobbs, 2003). Brown & Levinson's face theory contains three basic notions: face, face threatening acts (FTAs) and politeness strategies. They argue that everyone in the society

has two kinds of face wants. One is negative face: the basic claim to territories, personal preservers, rights to non-distraction -- i.e. to freedom of action and freedom from imposition. The other is the positive face: the positive consistent self-image or 'personality' (crucially including the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of) claimed by interactants. Every utterance is potentially a face threatening act (FTA), either to the negative face or to the positive face. Therefore, people need to employ politeness strategies to redress the FTA. Three factors need consideration when calculating the weightiness of the FTA: power status, social distance and the imposition. Brown and Levinson (1987) introduce five super strategies for politeness in relation to FTA's: bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record.

The politeness systems theory advocated by Scollon and Scollon (1995) is also noteworthy in this field. They observe three politeness systems: the deference politeness system, the solidarity politeness system and the hierarchical politeness system. The distinction of the three systems is mainly based on whether there exists power difference (+P or -P) and on the social distance between the interlocutors (+D or -D). The deference politeness system is one in which participants are considered to be equals or near equals but treat each other at a distance (e.g. classmates). In a solidarity politeness system, the speakers may feel neither power difference (-P) nor social distance (-D) between them (e.g. friends). The hierarchical politeness system may be widely recognized among companies, government and educational organizations, in which the speakers resort to different politeness strategies: the "higher" use involvement politeness strategies and the "lower" use independence politeness strategies.

Gu (1990) can be regarded as a pioneer work in the study of Chinese politeness. In his *Politeness Phenomena in Modern Chinese*, he introduces four maxims on Chinese politeness, which he claims to be very characteristic and almost unique to the Chinese culture. They are the self-denigration maxim (i.e. to denigrate self and to elevate the others), the address maxim, the generosity maxim and the tact maxim. The first maxim of denigrating self and honoring the others is alleged to represent the most eminent characteristics in Chinese politeness. The second maxim of address form shows that the

relational aspect of the Chinese self is further defined by prescribed roles in a hierarchical structure.

Within the framework set by Brown & Levinson, many scholars and researchers carry out experiments in their specific culture to test the validity of politeness theory and try to make comparisons across gender and nationality (Hobbs, 2003). Being inherently an FTA, the speech act of disagreement has also aroused much attention (Rees-Miller, 2000; Muntigl & Turnbull, 1998).

### **Previous Research**

The American culture is generally regarded as highly individualism-oriented while the Chinese collectivism-oriented. In an individualism-oriented country, an "I" will take priority over the idea of "we". As Samovar, Porter and Stefani (1998:68) observe, "In cultures that tend toward individualism, ..., every individual has the right to his or her private property, thoughts, and opinions. These cultures stress individual initiative and achievement, and they value individual decision making", while in a society like China where collectivism is highly appreciated, a "we" consciousness prevails. Cooperation and concern for others enjoys much popularity. Detours or feigned agreement will enjoy far greater preference than blatant disagreement when one has to disagree with another. An appropriate address form will be employed by the inferior to show his/her politeness to the superior. Liao and Bresnahan (1996) finds that significantly more Chinese students than their American peers use the address form again and again to replace the second person pronoun 'you' when they talk with a person of the higher status.

Researchers on the relation of gender and language claim that women are more sensitive than men to being polite (Brown, 1998). Liao and Brenahan (1996:709) also find that "women are more status sensitive than men". Therefore, it is predictable that women will use more politeness strategies than men do.

### **The Study**

Altogether 82 English native speakers of American college students, including 47 females and 35 males, filled in the English version of the Discourse Completion Test (DCT). They belong to several universities, aging from 17 to 25 and coming from almost all regions of America. The 96 Chinese respondents are all non-English major students at the University of Science and Technology of China (USTC). It consists of 37 females and 59 females, aging from 17 to 23 and coming from almost all provinces of China.

The DCT consists of five scenarios, in which the subjects are expected to disagree with a higher status, three with peers and one with a lower status. When identifying the utterances of disagreement from the responses, the taxonomy from Muntigl and Turnbull (1998) is applied, which recognizes four types of disagreement: irrelevancy claim, challenge, contradiction and counterclaim.

The taxonomy of politeness strategies for disagreement developed by Rees-Miller (2000) is employed for counting and analyzing the politeness strategies. The statistical methods applied in this study are the non-parametric methods of the Chi-square Test and the Fischer's Exact Test. In order to minimize the instrumental errors, two trained evaluators take the responsibility of classifying the responses independently. When disagreements occur, a third competent party is consulted until 100 percent agreement is achieved.

## **Data Analysis**

### Address Form

In Liao and Brenahan (1996), it is indicated that when speaking to a person of higher status, the Chinese may use the address form much more frequently than their American counterparts to replace the second person pronoun 'you'. Gu (1990) also details the Maxim of Address Form in Chinese culture. Consequently, it is expected that the Chinese students will employ more address forms than their American peers.

The statistical analysis of the responses to the first scenario supports this argument. In the subjects' responses, only 3 (3.7%) Americans uttered the address form, 'Sir, miss these are definitely my original ideas', 'Ma'am, I promise you that these are mine', and 'No sir, I believe they are mine'. By contrast, 27 (28.1%) Chinese undergraduates utter the address form of lao-shi ('teacher'), jiao-shou ('professor'), or dao-shi ('supervisor') before defending themselves.

The non-parametric analysis proves that Chinese students and American students are significantly different in employing the address form to broach the disagreement. The cross culture comparison reveals that the Chinese students use the address form in a significantly higher frequency than their American peers. The Fischer's Exact Test shows a p-value of 0.0010 for American females and Chinese females, 0.0070 for American males and Chinese males, and 0.0001 for American students and Chinese students. This finding strongly supports the Maxim of Address Form in Gu (1990). Also, it indicates that sex manifests little influence in using address forms since the Chi-square value for female and male is 1.517 with the p-value of 0.2181.

Among the 27 Chinese utterances with address forms, 19 students (70.4%) uses lao-shi ('teacher') with a slight difference between the female (80%, 8/10) and the male (64.7%, 11/17). There are also 6 (22.2%) students who employ dao-shi ('supervisor') and 2 (7.4%) with jiao-shou ('professor'). The address form of lao-shi significantly overshadows other address forms.

### Disagreement

In scenario one, both American and Chinese students show high frequencies in employing this strategy. A detailed statistical analysis demonstrates that Chinese males are prominently more inclined to contradictory utterances than Chinese females (Chi-square value 4.586) at the 0.05 level, and than American males (Chi-square value is 5.151 and the p-value 0.0232). The comprehensive analyses on sex and nationality show that male students utter disagreements in an eminently higher frequency than female students with a

Chi-square value of 4.38 and p-value 0.364, and Chinese students in a higher frequency than American students (Chi-square 5.069 and p-value less than 0.05).

In situation two, we may find far fewer contradictory statements, which indicates that friends are cherished in both the cultures and the friends' face wants would be the concern of the students when they provide a reply. Still, higher frequencies are found on the Chinese side of both females (45.9%) and males (54.2%) than their American peers (40.4% for females and 38.2% for males) in expressing their disagreements. The Chi-square test shows no significant differences between the four groups in applying this strategy. Also, the comparisons across gender and nationality fail to identify any salient discrepancies.

The social distance is larger in situation three, which is a deference politeness system according to Scollon and Scollon (1995). The detailed Chi-square test show that significant differences are found between American females and Chinese females (Chi-square value 4.174 and p-value less than 0.05), and between American students and Chinese students with a Chi-square value of 4.423 and a p-value of 0.0355. No salient discrepancies are identified in other groups.

The results achieved in scenario four from the analyses of disagreement best support the arguments in Triandis and Singelis (1998:36) that "East Asian collectivists are especially eager to maintain harmonious relationships while individualists from the U. S. A. are more concerned with clearly giving opinions." The non-parametric analyses show that there exist significant differences in the application of disagreement between American females and Chinese females (Chi-square value 15.701 with p-value less than 0.0001) and between American male and Chinese male (Chi-square value 8.209 with p-value less than 0.01). In conclusion, the comparison across nationality shows salient difference between American subjects and Chinese respondents (Chi-square value 22.109 and p-value less than 0.00001), strongly supporting the common arguments of preference for harmony on collectivism. High frequencies of disagreement are identified in the students' responses in setting five. The detailed Chi-square tests show significant differences across area.

The Chinese male expresses disagreements to the sister at a significantly higher rate than the American male with the Chi-square value of 5.499 and p-value of 0.190. Similarly, important difference is recognized between Chinese females and American males with a Chi-square value of 5.572 and a p-value of 0.182. A comprehensive comparison across nationality demonstrates that Chinese students apply more contradictory statement with their sisters than their American peers with the Chi-square value of 9.295 and the p-value less than 0.005. Sex plays no salient role in distinguishing the application of disagreement for the four groups. No significant differences are recognized between American female and American male, between Chinese female and Chinese male, and between female and male subjects.

### **Politeness Strategies**

Concern about politeness being the same, the Chinese students and American subjects show much difference in the application of contradictory statements and politeness strategies. The Chinese behave more sensitively to hierarchical status in applying politeness strategies.

In scenario one, the Chinese students and male subjects use more disagreement than American respondents and female students. Such high rates of disagreements may seem contradictory to the arguments of Brown & Levinson, and Scollon & Scollon on the effect of power on politeness. However, the students' responses make sense since the imposition on the students' positive face is too high. If they do not explicitly express their disagreement, they will have to face the consequences of being dishonest. Taking the higher rates of politeness strategies the Chinese students employed into consideration, the Chinese students' disagreements are mitigated by the politeness expressions.

In the following three situations which include one solidarity politeness system and two deference politeness systems, the American students and Chinese respondents show different trends in disagreement. With the increase of social distance (from friend to classmate to stranger), the contradictory statements from American students are on the rise

while the politeness strategies in decrease. To the Chinese students, the results are just the opposite. The rates of disagreement decrease with the increase of social distance. This significant difference again strongly supports the arguments on collectivism and individualism claimed by Triandis & Singelis (1998:36) that "East Asian collectivists are especially eager to maintain harmonious relationships while individualists from the U. S. A. Are more concerned with clearly giving opinions." The politeness strategies that the Chinese employed decrease with the reduction in contradictory statements.

Chinese female and male behave quite differently in situation five. Though both express disagreements in higher frequencies than their American peers, Chinese females take the first place in the application of politeness strategies, while Chinese males come last. One possible explanation is that unlike the American families in which the older sister or brother treats the younger sister with equal power status, the older children in a Chinese family will consider him/herself as being somewhat superior to the younger sister. It is especially the case with the Chinese male, who has traditionally been regarded as the backbone of the family. In scenario five, the high-rate application of politeness strategies mitigates the damaging force of contradictory statements for Chinese females. This shows a concern for harmonious existence of intimacy and in-group harmony. To Chinese males, who might regard themselves as being superior to the sister, they resort to a high rate of disagreement and low rate of politeness strategies.

Throughout the five scenarios, the female respondents use more politeness strategies and less or similar disagreements than their male counterparts. This supports the arguments on gender and language that the female is more polite than the male. It is in accordance with the findings of Brown (1998) that women are more attentive to the feelings of 'face needs' of their listeners, and thus use speech that is 'more polite' than that of men.

### **Implications of this Study to EFL/ESL Teaching and Learning**

In intercultural communication, pragmatic failure has aroused much attention. People often fail to achieve the communicative goal due to misunderstanding with people from other

cultures. Though being polite is preferred universally, the connotation of politeness might vary across culture and gender. Therefore, researchers need to probe into specific cultures for the exploitation of concrete speech acts and try to identify the different patterns and discourse strategies.

Teaching English in China has long been oriented by the College Entrance Examination, which focuses on grammar and reading. In real-life situation, Chinese students may often fail to communicate effectively with foreigners. Such studies may highlight some differences between Americans and Chinese on politeness during disagreement.

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### **The English Version of the Discourse Completion Test**

Thank you very much for your time and help. Five scenarios are described below in which you are expected to Disagree with the speaker on different occasions. How would you respond? Please write out what you are to SAY in real life scenarios.

Your Age: \_\_ Gender: \_\_ Hometown: \_\_

1. Your supervisor questions the originality of the term paper you submit. S/he says to you, "I'm sorry, but I don't think these ideas are yours." However, they are yours. In response, you will say,

" ....."

2. Your friend makes the following comment on your thesis, "I think you should supply more data to support your arguments. You know, your conclusion is a little bit weak." However, you think that there has been enough evidence and the problem is how to give a better explanation of the data. In response, you will say,

" ....."

3. In a seminar class on the effect of modern technology, one of your classmates says, "The so-called modern technology is endangering the environment. It causes too much pollution". However, you believe such problems are only temporary and can be solved gradually. In response, you will say:

" ....."

4. At your friend's party, you mention that you are thinking of taking a certain course next semester. Someone says, "Ah, I've heard of that course. It's difficult and boring". However, you have learned from a friend that the course is very easy and interesting, and you believe in your friend. In response, you will say:

" ....."

5. You are watching the movie Titanic with your younger sister at home. When the ship is about to sink and the first mate calls out, "Women and children first" to get on the lifeboat, your sister suddenly blurts out, "It's really unfair and prejudiced to women: we're no weaker than men. Why should women instead of men go first with the children?" In your opinion, women are, physically speaking, not as strong as men. Your response will be:

" ....."