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1 Pragmatics, Politeness, and Chinese Politeness

This scene-setting chapter serves as an introduction of politeness research in the field of pragmatics. Section 1.1 focuses on the important position politeness research holds in pragmatics; Section 1.2, on the role Chinese politeness plays in politeness research.

1.1 The Position of Politeness in Pragmatics

As a subfield of linguistics, pragmatics has a demonstrably larger number of practitioners than its siblings, syntax and semantics, if one follows Morris' (1938) tripartite classification of the study of language, which he calls "semiotics" or "the science of the study of signs" (Morris, 1938: 21, 30). There are more than a dozen handbooks of pragmatics, including a nine-volume tome by Bublitz, Jucker, and Schneider (2011) and the most recent, by Barron, Gu, and Steen (2018); there are nearly a dozen journals dedicated exclusively to pragmatics; and there are numerous papers on pragmatics published in journals that do not bear the term *pragmatics* in their titles, which can be easily verified by a glance at their tables of contents.

The reason for the draw of pragmatics lies in its mission. The received definition of pragmatics – the study of language use in context – grants the field the kind of "territorial rights" that other fields of linguistics can only envy, making it a big tent under which one finds a diversity of approaches, targets of investigation, and research methodology. The notion of context – the key to pragmatics – for instance, is believed to include any and all nonlinguistic factors that bear on meaning making. But what can these factors be? They can be biological (Morris, 1938): a drowning man will shout "Help!" to a lifeguard – due to his instinct for survival – instead of leisurely and gently uttering something along the lines of "Excuse me, I was wondering if you could be kind enough to land me a hand?" They can be personality-related: in precisely the same context, different speakers are probably going to say different things for the same purpose. They are surely sociocultural: the spokesperson of a government will probably discipline their children in ways that are different from the way they answer questions at a press conference. As a result, pragmatics has informed – and has

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been informed by – a range of disciplines in the social sciences and humanities: anthropology (e.g. the study of the ritualized features of language use [Kádár & House, 2020a, 2020b]); sociology (e.g. the study of identity construction [Ochs, 1990, 1992]); communication (Kádár, 2008); and political science (e.g. the study of Trump's (un)presidentiality [R. Chen, 2019b]).

The popularity of pragmatics in the general area of language studies is just as obvious. As a reaction to logical positivism in the mid-1900s, pragmatics started out as a study of meaning, particularly when there is a discrepancy between what is said and what is meant, as is seen in classical theories such as the speech act theory by Austin (1962) and Searle (1965, 1969, [1975] 1991), and the theory of conversational implicature (Grice, 1975). However, students of language use gradually realized that speakers do not say what they mean far more often and in far more situations than had been assumed. This led to the investigation of language use in all discourse types and all sociocultural situations, including discourse analysis, conversation analysis, genre analysis, cross-/intercultural communication, studies of nonliteral uses of language such as metaphor, irony, parody, and others (R. Chen, 2022a).

In this defused and diversified discipline of pragmatics, one finds a central thread: politeness. Politeness as an area of scholarly investigation originated in R. Lakoff (1973, 1976). In those papers, Robin Lakoff proposes "the rules of politeness": "don't impose, give options, and make the addressee feel good by being friendly." These rules, according to Lakoff, are motivations for language use in opposition to Grice's maxims: while Gricean maxims define directness and economy, politeness accounts for the opposite (R. Lakoff, 1976: 88).

Brown and Levinson's universal theory of politeness came soon after, in 1978, although it is better known for its 1987 iteration.[1] The authors start by positing that members of a society have face, defined as wants and needs to maintain their public image approved of by other members of the society. The notion of face is further divided into negative and positive. Negative face refers to "the want of every competent adult member that his actions be unimpeded by others"; positive face refers to "the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others" (P. Brown & Levinson [hereafter, Brown & Levinson], 1978: 62). On the other hand, however, speakers have to perform various speech acts in life. These acts very often threaten the face of the speaker or the hearer or both. Brown and Levinson hence call them face-threatening acts (FTAs). Brown and Levinson (65–68) provide a list of FTAs, which are categorized according to two parameters: whether an act threatens negative or positive face and whether it threatens the hearer's or the speaker's face.

[1] The two versions of the theory are essentially the same. The key difference is the addition, in the 1987 version, of the section "Introduction to the reissue," in which the authors spend 54 pages (1–54) reviewing the literature on politeness research since the publication of the 1978 version.

If Brown and Levinson's theory is meant to be a companion to the speech act theory, as it essentially provides a reason for the way in which an indirect speech act is done in a given context, then Leech's (1983) politeness principle is a companion to the theory of conversational implicature.[2] Grice (1975) does not dwell much on why a speaker would choose to violate a maxim, except mentioning, in passing, the clash between maxims. Leech sees the absence of discussion on reasons for maxim violation as a drawback of the theory and argues explicitly that a theory of language should provide reasons for linguistic behaviors. His politeness principle, therefore, is proposed to "rescue Grice"[3] by minimizing the impoliteness of illocutions, with its mirror image of maximizing the politeness of illocutions (Leech, 1983: 81, 83).

Over the next two decades or so, Brown and Levinson's (and, to a lesser extent, Leech's) theory was criticized heavily, leading to competing theories, including Hill et al.'s (1986) model of discernment (348; see also S. Ide, 1989), which has been developed into the construct of *wakimae* (S. Ide, 1992); Fraser's (1990) model of conversational contract; Escandell-Vidal's (1996) proposal of politeness that rests on cultural assumptions; Watts' (2003) model of politeness; and Spencer-Oatey's (2007, 2008) treatment of politeness as rapport management. A compressive critique of all these (and other) theories is found in Eelen (2001). The theories that are not in opposition to Brown and Levinson are Culpeper's (1996) theory of impoliteness and my own proposal of self-politeness (R. Chen, 2001). These two theories are meant instead to complement Brown and Levinson's theory: while impoliteness complements Brown and Levinson's theory in terms of polarity, self-politeness complements it in terms of orientation.

What concerns us presently is the important role that politeness research plays in pragmatics. In the following, we discuss the position of politeness in the investigation of speech acts, discourse studies, conversation analysis, and language use on the internet, with an aim to demonstrate the reach of politeness in the study of language use in general.

1.1.1 Politeness in Speech Acts

Looking at speech acts in terms of politeness started soon after the publication of Leech (1983) and Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987). The first such study is perhaps Clark and Schunk (1980), who argue, citing Brown and Levinson

[2] In fact, Brown and Levinson (1987: 5) acknowledge a similar relationship between their theory and Grice's: "The CP [Cooperative Principle] defines an 'unmarked' or socially neutral (indeed asocial) presumptive framework for communication; the essential assumption is 'no deviation from rational efficiency without a reason'. Politeness principles are, however, just such principled reasons for deviation."

[3] "To save Grice out of trouble," as Leech once observed (1982, personal communication).

(1978), that how people respond to a request is influenced by their estimate of how polite the request is. Also citing Brown and Levinson (1978), Hill et al. (1986) propose that American English is primarily volition-based while Japanese is primarily discernment-based. Another early study that explicitly applies politeness theories to the study of speech acts is R. Chen (1993), in which I demonstrate that, while Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory explains the compliment-responding behaviors of American English speakers, Leech's (1983) maxim of modesty accounts for the compliment-responding behaviors of Chinese.

Since then, it has seemed to be customary for students to study speech acts in relation to politeness. The literature on this is huge and covers a long list of speech acts: requesting (R. Chen, He, & Hu, 2013; Chiang, 2016; S. Fukushima, 2003; Upadhyay, 2003), complaining (Daikuhara, 1986; El-Dakhs & Ahmed, 2021), self-praising (Maíz-Arévalo, 2021), self-denigrating (Zhou & Kádár, 2020), apologizing (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989; Chejnová, 2021; Deng & Qiu, 2019; R. Ide, 1998; Jaworski, 1994; Woodman, 2005), promising (Beller & Bender, 2017; Egner, 2002), criticizing (El-Dakhs et al., 2019); offering (R. Chen, 1996; Ruiz de Zarobe, 2000), refusing (Kaiser, 2014; Ran & Lai, 2004), thanking (Kumatoridani, 1999; Kyono, 2017), and disagreeing (Cheng & Tsui, 2009; Harb, 2021), in addition to a large number of publications on compliment responses, a comprehensive survey of which is found in R. Chen (2022a).

Such a wealth of research output is expected. Since Brown and Levinson's theory is a reaction to and a companion of the speech act theory, treating politeness as a means of mitigating the force of an FTA, it is natural to examine how the carrying out of a speech act is influenced by face considerations. However, the link between politeness and other areas of investigation is less obvious and immediate. We look at a few such areas below.

1.1.2 Politeness in Discourse

Discourse studies is taken here to refer to two historically distinctive research programs: discourse analysis and genre analysis. Discourse analysis had always been inclusive, treating as discourse any chunk of text – either verbal, written, or otherwise – that has a definable function (e.g. the traffic sign "Stop," as seen in G. Brown & Yule [1983]). Genre analysis is a narrower notion, focusing on the research paper in academia as its target (Swales, 1981, 1990, 2011), although its scope has been expended to a few other genres of late (Hyon, 2018).

In the early stages of discourse studies, researchers were interested primarily in the structure of discourse and the functions of linguistic devices used in a particular type of discourse. In the discourse analysis literature, one finds a great deal of scholarship on information structure (Clark & Haviland, 1975; Prince, 1981, 1992), thematic progression, cohesion (Halliday & Hasan, 1976), and the functions of discourse markers (Schiffrin, 1987). Genre analysis was similar. Swale's (1981) Creating a Research Space (CARS) model, for example, captures the common three-part structure of the introductory section of a research article: establishing a territory, establishing a niche, and occupying the niche. The structure of CARS – Swales argues – is due to the competition for presence within a particular domain of research and the need to attract readers into the rhetorical space that a writer creates.

The effort to understand discourse in terms of politeness can be traced to the late 1980s. Linde (1988), for instance, demonstrates that politeness ("mitigation," in her words) is a reason for the failure of communication in aviation, and Penman (1990) applies Brown and Levinson's (1978) theory to the analysis of courtroom discourse, treating politeness as one of the goals for participants. Over the past two decades, however, the presence of politeness in discourse analysis is prevalent. It is seen in the analysis of spoken academic discourse (Poos & Simpson, 2002), the UK telephone advisory service (Brown & Crawford, 2009), television panel discussions (Hernandez-Flores, 2008; C. Hu & Chen, 2017), online forums (Wang & Taylor, 2019), workplace discourse (Dahlberg-Dodd, 2019), and politics (Ardila, 2019), among many others.

Different from its constant presence in discourse analysis, politeness is a latecomer in genre analysis. Its entry into genre analysis appears to stem from two developments. The first is the introduction of the notion of "writer stance" (Hyland, 1999, 2002, 2005), referring to the views of, attitudes toward, and positioning on issues writers write about and the relationship they wish to establish between themselves and their readers. Stance, thus seen, serves as a bridge between genre analysis and politeness. Donadio and Passariello (2022), for instance, demonstrate that hedges and boosters in English and Italian medical research articles are politeness strategies to mitigate face threats to the readership. In a series of studies by my colleague and me (R. Chen, 2020; R. Chen & Yang, 2023), we argue that the motion of modesty undergirds the use of the first-person plural pronoun for single-author self-reference by Chinese academic writers (e.g. "In this paper, we argue that …") whereby the paper is bylined by a single writer.

The second reason for the incorporation of politeness into genre analysis is the expansion of the coverage of genre. Once genre is no longer confined to research articles, politeness becomes immediately more germane. It is seen in the analysis of coursebooks in professional communication (Sousa, 2020), editorial letters to journal contributors (Flowerdew & Dudley-Evans, 2002), tax computation letters (Flowerdew & Wan, 2006), and the discourse of critique in academic journals (Lewin, 2005).

1.1.3 Politeness in Conversation Analysis

Our understanding of conversation is credited largely to conversation analysis. In keeping with the ethnographic research tradition, actual conversations were picked up and scrutinized as specimens of social interaction. The most notable studies in this research program are Sacks (1992), Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974), and Schegloff (2002, 2007). These early scholars (known as "the first generation/wave conversation analysists") came from sociology backgrounds rather than linguistics. They share a suspicion of the quantitative approach in their own field and largely shunt existing theories in both sociology and linguistics, which they believe to be an arbitrary imposition on the data of "objective categories" (Levinson, 1983: 295). The notion of politeness is hence absent from their treatises and subsequent literature by others from the 1970s till circa the 2010s.

In the second wave of conversation analysis – which is characterized by a new interest in the interactionality of conversation as opposed to the structures of it – politeness theories began to be adopted in various ways, most notably in the works by Heritage and colleagues (Heritage & C. W. Raymond, 2016; Heritage & G. Raymond, 2012; Heritage, C. W. Raymond, & Drew, 2019).

However, conversation analysis may benefit from politeness theories even more, as suggested by Levinson (1983) and argued more explicitly in R. Chen (2022a). Take adjacency pairs for example. An adjacency pair is a sequence of two turn construction units (TCUs) that are adjacent in time and produced by different participants. The first TCU is called the first of the pair, and the second TCU is called the second. Adjacency pairs are typed in such a way that a particular first requires a particular second or a range of seconds (e.g. question/answer; offer/acceptance or rejection [Coulthard, 1985]). In addition, speakers are found to deflect: a question, for example, can take many responses besides an answer, such as protestations of ignorance ("I don't know"), reroutes ("Better ask Henry"), refusals to answer ("I am not interested in that"), and challenges to the presuppositions or sincerity of the question ("You really want to know?"). Of all these possible seconds, therefore, some are preferred and others dispreferred. The preferred second of a request is acceptance and the dispreferred second is refusal. The preferred second of an assessment is agreement and its dispreferred second, disagreement. In actual conversations, preferred seconds are found to be simpler and without hesitation or delay:

(1) A: T's it's a beautiful day out isn't it?
B: Yeah it's just gorgeous …
(Pomerantz, 1975: 1)

Dispreferred seconds, on the other hand, display many features: delay, prefaces with discourse markers ("uh" and "well"), token agreements before disagreements ("I agree, but…"), appreciations of offers and invitations ("Nice of you to invite me, but…"), hesitations in various forms ("Let me sleep on it"), accounts ("That was due to unforeseeable circumstances"), and declination components ("I'd love to come, but I have an event that was scheduled several months ago") (Atkinson & Drew, 1979; Pomerantz, 1975). The following are three examples of how dispreferred seconds are delivered.

Via preface and account:

(2) A: What about coming here on the way (.) or doesn't that give you enough time?
B: Well no I'm supervising here.
(Levinson, 1983: 335)

Via delay, preface, and declination component:

(3) A: Um I wondered if there's any chance of seeing you tomorrow sometime (0.5) morning or before the seminar (1.0)
B: Ahum (.) I doubt it.
(Levinson, 1983: 335)

Via delay, marker, appreciation, declination, and account:

(4) A: Uh if you'd care to come and visit a little while this morning I'll give you a cup of coffee.
B: hehh Well that's awfully sweet of you. I don't think I can make it this morning … hh uhm I'm running an ad in the paper and-uh I have to stay near the phone.
(Atkinson & Drew, 1979: 58).

The difference between the way a preferred second is delivered and the way a dispreferred second is delivered is sharp. A natural question to ask is why (which, it should be noted, was not asked by early conversation analysts). A possible answer is politeness. As is indicated in Brown and Levinson (1987: 38–39), speakers deliver preferred seconds straightforwardly because preferred seconds do not threaten the face of the hearer. They deliver dispreferred seconds laboriously because dispreferred seconds threaten it.

Further, politeness also explains why an ordinarily preferred second may be dispreferred in unordinary contexts. Agreement is the default preferred second, as illustrated by Ex. (1). However, as Pomerantz (1975) finds, in the case of self-denigration, agreement is *not* the preferred second; disagreement is, as seen in (5) and (6).

(5) A: I'm so dumb I don't even know it. hhh! Heh
B: Y-no, y-you're not du:mb…

(6) A: You're not bored (huh)?
B: Bored? No. We're fascinated.
(Pomerantz, 1975: 93–94).

Students of politeness will probably readily see this deviation as a result of B's effort to mitigate the face-threat self-denigration entails: when someone self-denigrates, they generally expect disagreement from their hearer.

In addition, politeness can very well be the reason for the way the correction (repair) mechanism works in conversation. A correction has two components: initiation and repair. Each of the two can be done by self or other. Putting the two parameters together, we have four types: self-initiation and self-repair, other-initiation and self-repair, self-initiation and other-repair, and other-initiation and other-repair. Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks (1977) show various ways in which self-correction (both initiation and repair) is encouraged in conversation. The speaker of the trouble source, for instance, is often provided the opportunity to self-initiate in a number of ways, although the other participant clearly knows how to do the repair themselves, as is seen in (7).

(7) A: Hey the first time they stopped me from sellin cigarettes was this morning.
(1.0)
B: From selling cigarettes?
A: From buying cigarettes. They // said uh Uh huh
(Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977: 370)

Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks wonder aloud about reasons for this pattern (1977: 370) and suspect that there must be a theory to account for it (338). I am of the opinion that that theory could be the theory of politeness: speakers encourage their hearers to self-initiate and self-repair a "troubled source" because doing so will threaten their (the hearers') positive face less than otherwise.

1.1.4 Politeness on the Internet

The term "on the internet" is used here as a cover term for communication carried out online, which has been named "computer-mediated communication" by some (Kádár, Haugh, & Chang, 2013; Upadhyay, 2010), including social media, discussion forums, blogs, texting, and others. The emergence of online communication is changing the basic assumption that human communication is primarily face-to-face, as social media seems to have become the primary channel of communication for some social groups or professions.

Although still in its infancy, research of language use on the internet has already demonstrated that politeness is a useful tool to account for the many features of online communication. Both temporally and spatially displaced – a poster can respond to a post much later in time and on the other side of the globe – online communication seems to have enabled things that are not available in the face-to-face mode. Instead of offering a comprehensive survey of findings on this new frontier of investigation, I discuss two topics below: the opportunity to show off and the tendency toward impoliteness.

Showing off refers to speakers "sharing" their possessions, events, activities, accomplishments, and other things. On Facebook, for instance, it seems customary for users to post photos of their food, clothing, newly purchased properties, parties, and pleasure trips. This "sharing" is a recognized positive politeness strategy, as it can help build camaraderie and solidarity. But it may serve another purpose: to show off, particularly in the Chinese linguaculture. W. Ren and Guo (2021; see also Y. Lin & Chen, 2022) brought our attention to "Versailles literature" in Chinese, apparently a new genre in which posters brag about their social standing and wealth. Such bragging is called "humble-bragging," as it is often couched in self-denigration. In terms of politeness, bragging enhances the positive face of self (R. Chen, 2001). But doing it "humbly" serves to help the poster appear modest, an important maxim of Gu's (1990) principles of Chinese politeness.[4] We will discuss this in Section 5.1.

The tendency (or, to use an internet term, "trend") toward impoliteness[5] in online communication has been frequently noted in the literature and in multiple languages. Impoliteness is seen in direct disagreements in a Hong Kong discussion forum (Shum & Lee, 2013), in the way users get into conflict in French (Sousa, 2020), in the frequent appearance of vulgarity in Czech (Gromnica, 2017), in the frontal attacks commenters launch at each other in Arabic (Rabab'ah & Alali, 2020), and in the verbal aggression displayed by readers of a British online news site (Neurauter-Kessels, 2011). These are just a sampler of many articles on online impoliteness. There are studies that show how users use politeness strategies in online communication, too, but these studies (e.g. Darics, 2010) are fewer in comparison.[6]

This tendency could have resulted from the displacement of online communication, as noted earlier: communicating with people who often are strangers in an unknown geographical location and asynchronously has the potential to release the pressure for nicety. However, the question still remains about what one expects to gain by being impolite when politeness is an option: after all, the fact that one *can* be impolite does not mean that one *should* be impolite, if we assume that being polite is the default of human communication. In R. Chen (2022b), I argue that the reason for impoliteness in general (not only online impoliteness) is self-politeness – that when one damages the face of other, one intends to enhance the face of self (more to come in Chapter 4). That gain varies from context to context. It can be a (temporary) one-up in a case of

[4] Such showing off may lead to unintended consequences. At the time of writing (August 2022), a blogger's posts about his wealth brought government investigation onto his family, as his displayed wealth caused the netizens' suspicion that it could have been ill-gotten. In the United States, Facebook users were advised to exercise caution: photos of things and activities that indicate wealth shared on social media had been shown to serve as catalysts for theft and robbery.
[5] This may be related to what is known as "internet violence."
[6] This tendency, if true, raises the question whether the internet is causing a change in politeness behavior.

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conflict; it can be moral superiority in the case of an unprovoked commentary or criticism as a bystander; and it can be effectiveness in the advancing of one's ideology or interest; and it can be any number of other things. This view will be part of the refinement of Brown and Levinson's theory in Chapter 4.

To summarize Section 1.1: we find that the notion of politeness is present in all major strands of pragmatics. The reason lies in the fact that politeness has turned out to be a consideration that undergirds language use and human communication in general, a view that is expressed in a slightly different way by Penelope Brown:

> In this perspective, politeness in communication goes right to the heart of social life and interaction; indeed it is probably a precondition for human cooperation in general. Language use is a crucial arena for expressing and negotiating such cooperation, and politeness is the feature of language use that most clearly reveals the nature of human sociality as expressed in speech. (P. Brown, 2017: 384)

If we see politeness research as a strand in pragmatics, it is different in nature from other strands such as genre analysis, the study of deictics or discourse markers, or the indexing of identity: while the latter strands have relatively well-defined boundaries in their scope of coverage, politeness research does not. For politeness, as conceived of by Brown and Levinson (1987: 55), is "a motive" that determines social interaction in general. As such, it is supposed to be present in the different arenas of language use. The vast literature on politeness in pragmatics is hence expected, and the privileged position it occupies in the field stands to continue.

1.2 The Position of Chinese Politeness in Politeness Research

Just as politeness research is privileged in pragmatics, Chinese politeness occupies a privileged position in politeness research. In this section, I demonstrate the role that Chinese face and politeness play in politeness research.

Firstly, the notion of Chinese face plays a prominent role in Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness. One of the core assumptions of Brown and Levinson is the notion of face, which is categorized into the negative and the positive. This dichotomization is traced to Durkheim (1912), who uses the term *negative* to refer to totemistic religious rites such as prohibition (324) and the term *positive* to refer to rites such as feasts, initiations, and weddings (330). The notion of face, however, "is derived from that of Goffman ([1955] 1967) and from the English folk term, which ties face with notions of being embarrassed or humiliated, or 'losing face'" (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 61). Here is Goffman's definition:

> The term *face* may be defined as the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self delineated [sic] in terms of approved social attributes – albeit an