A CONTRASTIVE RESEARCH
ON CHINESE AND U.S ENGLISH POLITENESS LANGUAGE

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Abstract

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ON CHINESE AND U.S ENGLISH POLITENESS LANGUAGE
Song Shanji
Under the Supervision of Daniel Leitch, Ph.D

Politeness is currently a much researched and discussed topic in modern linguistics. Sometimes researchers are focusing on specific politeness aspects, such as how collaborators’ different ideas of politeness influence how they express disagreement about artificial intelligence (Myers, 1990). Yet even in that specialized study, Myers (1990) points out that the “politeness phenomena” includes a wide range of linguistic features. Most speakers, however, encounter cultural aspects of politeness in less rigorous settings. Speakers first encounter how to be polite by learning how to greet someone or by learning how to act at a meal. As Zhang (2012) points out in his comparison of politeness language in English and Chinese, a social phenomenon plays an important role in maintaining harmonious society by controlling people’s actions and activities. Even if someone learns other languages or becomes immersed in other cultures, he or she will follow the politeness rules of his/her majority culture. Another researcher, Yuxin (2010) explores a similar line of thought: politeness is the basic social communication guidance for people. Politeness can be observed as a phenomenon and it has become the symbol of the civilization and society development (Yuxin, 2010).

Key words: Communication, Politeness language, Cross-culture
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Chapter I: Introduction

Politeness is a universal phenomenon in all cultures but the politeness maxims differ in different languages. Politeness plays a crucial role in social harmony and friendly interpersonal relationships. This paper aims to make a contrastive study of politeness language between the America and Chinese cultures. As politeness is a symbol and standard of human civilization, it exist in all cultures, meaning there must be some similarities between Chinese politeness and English politeness language. Because of the different backgrounds, there are some differences in the Chinese and English politeness language. For example, greeting and addressing each other, taboos and so on. Without understanding their differences, it is difficult to achieve a successful cross-cultural communication and may even cause serious misunderstanding.

This thesis offers a general contrast of the politeness principles in English, represented by Geoffrey Leech (1936), and Chinese politeness principles that are represented by Gu Yueguo (1956). Both scholars have analyzed the reasons that cause the similarities and differences of the two cultures.

Statement of the problem

What influences the differences between the Chinese and U.S cultures in regards to politeness language?

1. What is politeness language?

2. What are the similarities and differences between Chinese and English politeness language? (by giving some examples)

3. What are the implications? (cross-culture communication)
Definition of Terms

“Pragmatic transfer”- In cross-cultural communication, cultural differences play an important role in speech acts and disciplines in the use of speech. Moreover, people tend to use the principles of their own culture as the standard to explain and evaluate other people’s behavior. This is what is called “pragmatic transfer” (He, 2000).

Purpose of the Study

Politeness is a social phenomenon, an approach used in order to maintain the harmonious interpersonal relationship and it is a conventional behavioral norm. It is a standard of behavior that everyone must follow, no matter what their culture is. Different standards of politeness occur in different cultural backgrounds.

Principles of politeness in different cultures should be realized by students. Therefore this thesis discusses how cultural differences on politeness are exhibited in order to help people better understand each other.

Significance of the Study

Nowadays, China has developed the relationship with Western countries in many aspects such as politics, economics and culture. As the world becomes closer and closer, people communicate each other on a global scale. So speakers need to learn each other’s culture, and respect each other. However, regarding perspective of politeness, the differences between Chinese and English cultures cannot be ignored. Pragmatic failures may occur in cross-cultural communication because people lack sufficient knowledge of each other's cultural values. Chinese should identify U.S English speakers’ cultural norms, thus establishing on understanding of the differences between these two politeness cultures as distinguished by their respective languages.
Methodology

The research will be conducted over ninety (90) days in and through the Karrmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville. Primary searches will be conducted via the Internet EBSCOHOST ERIC, Academic Search Elite, and Google/Google Scholar. Key search topics included “politeness language,” “communication,” and “cross-culture.”
Chapter II: Review of Literature

What is politeness? As Ladegard (2006) explored at length in his work “Politeness Revisited: A New Approach to an Old Problem,” politeness is an element of intercultural communication studies, social and cross-cultural psychology, and sociolinguistics, to mention but a few.

Politeness is also something to struggle every day. On a daily basis life, we often make judgments about what is polite and what is not polite (Lapoint, 1990). For example, Lapoint (1990), a professor from Eastern Washington University, looks at how cultural context shapes introductory linguistics; Lapoint favors a holistic approach that views language and other cultural signs as constituting a vast communications network that includes a variety of codes that function to transmit cultural information (Lapoint, 1990).

Through different studies of cultural backgrounds, principle and theory of politeness language, one can see that most writers on the subject agree that the broad differences between politeness in United States’ English-language cultures and Chinese-language cultures causes the communications problems during intercultural conversations.

Politeness is currently a much researched and discussed topic in modern linguistics. Sometimes researchers are focusing on specific politeness aspects, such as how collaborators’ different ideas of politeness influence how they express disagreement about artificial intelligence (Myers, 1990). Yet even in that specialized study, Myers (1990) points out that the “politeness phenomena” includes a wide range of linguistic features. Most speakers, however, encounter cultural aspects of politeness in less rigorous settings. Speakers first encounter how to be polite by learning how to greet someone or by learning how to act at a meal. As Zhang (2012) points out in his comparison of politeness language in English and Chinese, a social
phenomenon plays an important role in maintaining harmonious society by controlling people’s actions and activities. Even if someone learns other languages or becomes immersed in other cultures, he or she will follow the politeness rules of his/her majority culture. Another researcher, Yuxin (2010) explores a similar line of thought: politeness is the basic social communication guidance for people. Politeness can be observed as a phenomenon and it has become the symbol of the civilization and society development (Yuxin, 2010).

People act politely because they wish to start a cooperative relationship with someone. Though politeness may take different forms during this interaction, people use this skill daily. What is considered acceptable and polite may also change depending on a person’s role in the relationship and communication style. When speakers act polite to other people, whether talking to strangers or those close to them, it makes the speaker seem more likable. However, people from different cultures may have different understandings. Cultural differences in everyday conversation refer to the differences in habits and rules in communication between cultures. With the rapid development of intercultural communication, the discussion of the differences between Chinese and English will be significant for the purpose of culture awareness and communicative competence. Understanding the differences between Chinese and English in politeness language is indispensable in a modern, globalized society where polite actions can encourage stronger intercultural relationships. This is because people view others who are polite as kind and considerate and in general, a good person, which all are qualities that people usually like.

Politeness in language is mainly expressed in the forms of address, greeting, congratulation, appreciation, and apology. In the early eighteenth century, the language of politeness was assimilated into political discourse in ways that explained and clarified politics.
and contributed to the elaboration of ideology in a broad sense. This amounted to cultural politics, constituting a palpable attempt to explore the cultural relations of politics. There are different standards of politeness in different cultural backgrounds of society; the diversities are reflected mainly through the definitions of politeness, the strategy of realization of politeness, etc. (Gu, 1990). The biggest difference between English and Chinese is that the Chinese system is profuse and complicated, but the English one is quite simple. The difference includes age, income, marriage and religion, etc. Other topics are taboos in English; and U.S English speakers talk about weather when they meet each other. In Chinese most greetings include different things about one’s life (Zhang, 2012). This literature review considers the influences of differences between Chinese and Western cultures on polite language by asking the following questions:

1. What principles describe Chinese polite language?

2. What are the principles that describe polite languages of U.S English speakers?

3. What are the influences of differences between Chinese and Western cultures on polite language?

What are the Principles of Chinese Polite Language?

G. Leech (2005), a well-known linguist at the University of Lancaster (UK), believed that apart from cooperation, there must be something else that is a more specific to value and follow in conversations. This made led him to the conclusion that politeness is a notion that plays a vital role in helping people participate in a smooth conversation. In China, the most recent development in the study of politeness is represented by a Chinese scholar named Gu (1990), who explicitly connects politeness with social moral norms and who has contributed significantly to the study of politeness. Gu’s principle reflects and explains the unique Chinese
characteristics. According to Gu (1990), opinion there are five aspects in the politeness principle in Chinese:

(1) The self-denigration maxim: The maxim consists of two clauses or sub-maxims:
   a) Denigrate self and
   b) Elevate others. This maxim absorbs the notion of respectfulness and modesty.

(2) The address term maxim: The maxim reads: “address people’s interlocutor with an appropriate address term.” This maxim is based on the notions of respectfulness and attitudinal warmth.

(3) The refinement maxim: The maxim refers to the self’s behavior towards others, which must meet certain standards. In regards to language use, it means the use of refined language and a ban on foul language. The use of euphemisms and indirectness is also covered.

(4) The agreement maxim: The maxim refers to efforts made by both interlocutors to maximize agreement and harmony and minimize disagreement.

(5) The virtues-words-deeds maxim: The maxim refers to “minimizing cost and maximizing benefit to other at motivational level, and maximizing benefit received and minimizing cost to self at the conversation level” (Gu, 1990).

Researchers need to study politeness further regarding Chinese language and culture.

**Addressing**

All people are sensitive to the addressing forms, especially Chinese people. When an addressing form is appropriate, it can help the speakers to have a positive start establishing a relationship. Chinese people follow the family concept, kinship concept, and degree concept, so very systematic addressing forms developed in Chinese language.

The primary characteristic of Chinese-style politeness is “夫礼者，自卑而尊人”，“Fu li
zhe, zi bei er zun ren,” Translated: (To be polite, one should denigrate self). The content of the maxim has turned into “self-depreciate” nowadays. The self-denigration maxim asks people to depreciate self as well as anything about self; at the same time, one is expected to praise and show respect to others. When naming other people or places of respect, a man would use the following honorary titles:

For example, one names
- himself “鄙人, 小弟, 在下”
- his wife “内人, 老婆”
- his children “犬子, 小女”
- others “您, 先生, or 阁下”
- other’s wife “夫人, 太太”

The address term maxim means that people should address people with titles that show the appropriate levels of respect. Address terms in Chinese represents the social relationship among people. For example, a student will usually address his/her teacher first by the teacher’s family name followed by the Chinese word for teacher (老师) because if the teacher was addressed the opposite fashion (with “老/小+family name” first followed the teacher’s family name) he or she would be impolite. The Chinese terms of address are influenced by the following elements: relationship, rank, degree of familiarity, gender, occasion, and so on. Each of these elements will alter the speaker’s words or tone in a variety of ways. For example, Chinese culture places more respect on those who are older. The communication address also reflects the rules that govern how age is treated. In China, different titles are given to different age ranges. Thus, Chinese politeness has evolved into the addressing system. According to Gu (1990), the Chinese do not use the familiar name of their parents or anyone who is older than
their parents. According to Gu’s maxims, out of politeness, people cannot call informally their parents and people who are older than them by their first names. The Chinese cannot directly refer to their bosses by their first name. Bosses should not be addressed by their familiar name; instead, employees show their bosses respect by addressing them as teacher, manager, or president. Chinese often call other people teacher even if they are employed as teachers. For example, Chinese students call the people who guard their dormitories teachers. If a person has a position, then he or she prefers to be called by his or her professional positions. In order to express their respect, they often not use the title. For example, if teacher Zhang is a vice-professor, then he is called professor Zhang instead of vice-professor Zhang.

Kinship terms are used in both English and Chinese. Terms of family relationships are only used for relatives in English, but in Chinese, these terms are not only used for relatives but also for non-relatives. Chinese people prefer to use the kinship addresses to name family member but also acquaintances and even strangers. Chinese use addressing forms like uncle, grandma, and grandpa when people meet, even if they are not blood relatives. In China, the character old is often heard as part of an address because it symbolizes respect. In Chinese, children usually use shu shu (uncle) and a yi (aunt) to address adults. English does not have an equivalent address. To address strangers, English speakers sometimes use “sir” or “madam” or “Mama.” In addition, kinship terms in Chinese are more complicated than those in English. In Chinese, da bo (eldest brother of father), er jie (second elder sister), san ge (third elder brother) are often used, while in English “sister,” “uncle,” and “grandma” are used alone or even before their first names.

Greeting

Greetings play a very important role in communication because appropriate greetings
will maintain good relationships. For example, if a company’s employees say “hello” to their new colleague on first day of work, then they will have a good beginning for their colleague relationship at their work. Whether people meet acquaintance or strangers, it is acceptable to say hello to others. It means that people are easygoing.

In China, only reporters use greeting expressions whereas people in their daily lives use something different. In people’s daily lives, people usually say “您好”or “您早上.” If they encounter an acquaintance who they seen for a long time, then they will change their greeting languages. Showing interest and expressing care, they will ask “how are you?” or “How is everything with you?” These kinds of greetings are usually civilities when people meet as people don’t need to answer them seriously. People can just say “fine, thank you” (Gu, 1990).

**Taboos**

All cultures have taboos and euphemisms, which are clearly noted within the culture’s language. Taboo expressions exist in nearly all cultures, and inappropriate use of taboo language cause obstacles in communication (Xia, 2006). The U.S English speakers and Chinese have their own cultures and manners in daily life. Therefore, some of the words are similar aspects of taboo. For example, when talking about pregnancy, there are a common sayings in America, such as “She is expecting,” “She is in a delicate condition,” or “She is in the family way.” Similarly, in China, people often say “她有喜了,” “她有了” or “她做妈妈了” instead of “她怀孕了.” This is because pregnancy cannot be talked about directly, let alone abortion. Chinese sometimes talk about each other’s health and express their concern by giving advice, such as “Have a rest,” or “Put on more clothes and drink more water.” However, English speakers may feel uncomfortable on hearing these words.

In China, the number “4” and the word “死 (death)” almost sound the same. People do not
like the number four because it reminds them of “death”. People won’t like telephone number
or car’s license to be with number 4. Among old people, they think “73” and “84” are two key
ages. If one is 73 or 84 years old, one will die before the King of hell invites him or her; so
many elderly people avoid talking their exact ages.

While for the U.S English speakers, one of the most influential taboo numbers is 13. No
doors’ number is thirteen; no hotel has the No.13 Room; they don’t allow 13 people have
dinner together. Ordinary people feel upset on 13th in every month. Therefore, 13 became a
taboo word among the U.S English speakers.

What are the Principles of Polite Language According to United States’ cultures?

Grice (1975) states that within language, social intercourse forces both parties to cooperate
in the most direct and efficient way. In an actual social intercourse, Grice (1975) found that
middlemen usually have intention to breach a certain standard among them with special
conversation meaning. Leech (1983) proposes a politeness principle (as a part of his
International Rhetoric study) which comprises maxims of tact, generosity, approbation, and
modesty, which seem to better account for the types of utterances insert period. The function of
the politeness principle is that speakers should try to express themselves in a polite way. A
polite manner is indirect and lets the speaker sense the impact so as to not hurt other’s feelings
or to make them lose face. When talking, speakers should always be polite to others; by doing
so, they minimize cost to others and maximize the benefit in order to make a good impression
and win the mutual respect. Because of the different cultural backgrounds, Chinese and English
speakers have different perspectives on politeness (Leech, 1982, p.453).

In China, the character “old” is often heard because it symbols a kind of respect. On the
contrary, the U.S. English speakers are often afraid to mention the word “old”. They want to be
regarded as youthful and young. Therefore, in English, aged people are called “senior citizens” instead of “old people”.

In English speaking countries, especially in America, people who are in different ages ranges tend to call each other’s name directly. For example, once a professor meets his students, he is likely to let his students call him by his first name. This represents a good relationship between the teacher and students. English speakers tend to use titles like Mr. or Miss because they think those kinds of addresses sounds too serious, lacking a sense of warmth. If the informal address occurred in China, it will be seen as being very impolite.

**Thanks and Apologizing**

In the U.S English community, people never withhold their thanks to those who have really done a great favor for them, even the little deeds such as; showing the way, offering the seats, getting the changes, answering the inquiry, passing the objects, etc. While Brown and Levinson (1978) believe that the notion of face to be universal, they explained “in any particular society we would expect [face] to be the subject of much cultural elaboration.” An apology is an attempt by the speaker to make up for a previous action that interfered with the addressee’s face-wants (Brown & Levinson, 1978). Living with the speakers, with all these words ringing around, people will have a comfortable and ease feeling in your heart. English speakers express their thanks towards their superiors, colleagues and strangers also show their gratitude among their relatives, friends, parents and even their children. As Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989) described, an apology is the acknowledgement by the speaker that a violation has been committed and an admission that he or she is at least partially involved in its cause (p.12).

In the U.S English society, at the final parting time, guests usually will tell the host why they have to leave by expressing an apology, such as “I’m afraid I must go now because the
babysitter is going to be off duty.” The U.S English speakers believe that visiting and having a conversation with others is a reflection of respect. Therefore, concluding a visit is not their own wish, but it must happen because of other arrangements. Therefore, they always look for an excuse and try to make themselves seem to be reluctant when leaving in order to make both sides comfortable.

In general, the English politeness principle and Chinese politeness principle have some similarities, as well as differences. Nevertheless, the Chinese are finding that their language is being influenced by English words and politeness. In the communication process, Chinese people should adapt correct politeness principles and right strategies so that the barrier between Chinese and English people will become less and less.

What Influences the Differences between Chinese and the U.S English speakers Cultures on Polite Language?

In general, the essence of interpersonal communication is culture. Each country has its own culture, so the etiquette in the United States and in China is also different. There are three main factors that influence the differences of politeness: thinking mode, spirit and hierarchy.

Thinking Mode

Chinese and Westerners have different backgrounds, so they have different thought processes? The U.S English speakers pay more attention to logic and analysis. They need full evidence before they believe one thing, or make a full preparation before deciding something. However, Chinese traditional thinking mode is intuition. Due to the influence of the traditional culture, Chinese usually pay special attention to the experience and feelings in the process of doing something.
Spirit

Chinese pay attention to modesty and cautiousness, whereas westerners pay attention to individual indulgence, to innovation development and public honor. Chinese culture does not advocate showing or honoring personal achievement, focusing instead on humbleness and cautiousness. Chinese usually worry about risks of innovation. Of course, in recent years, China also energetically advocates innovation reform, but deeply imbedded cultural norms still influence behavior.

Concept of Hierarchy

The concept of hierarchy in China is very strong. Although the hierarchy in traditional etiquette has been eliminated, the concept of hierarchy still has a strong influence on Chinese culture. In China, the father has absolute authority over his son, so does the teacher to student. Family background plays an important role in one's growth. In the west, most of countries advocate equality.

Summary

Politeness is a complex linguistic means used to maintain good interactions with other people (Axia and Baroni, 1985). The combination of spirit, material, politics, and culture help people to develop a high level of self-confidence and superiority. This combination also endows the English speaking culture with a strong appeal and makes people regard English speaking countries’ etiquette as world standard. Politeness is the foundation and direct reflection of an entire social civilization. A society that lacks etiquette is not a mature society or a harmonious society. By getting a clear understanding of the differences between Chinese and U.S English speaker politeness, intercultural speakers can participate in the etiquette and cultural system for a variety of cultures and help to achieve the ideal harmonious society.
Chapter III: Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

All people, no matter their cultural background, try to observe and maintain politeness in their actions and language. This paper is a report on a study of politeness in the EFL classroom. The paper analyzed different linguistic behaviors of politeness between English and Chinese based on various politeness theories. Of course, politeness is a symbol and standard of human civilization. In some degree, politeness exits in all cultures, so there must be some similarities between Chinese politeness and English politeness. Undoubtedly, politeness is affected by many cultural factors such as cultural value, mode of thinking, society, and other factors.

Chinese politeness and Western politeness are put forward respectively on the basis of Chinese languages cultural characteristics and the English language cultural characteristics. Covering many aspects of principles, politeness will be different in each culture due to the different cultural norms. In intercultural communication, people should do their best to use the correct politeness principle, avoid the cultural conflict, and communicate effectively.

The process of teaching revolves around effective communication. When teachers use polite language correctly, students are greatly influenced. To a large extent, the cultivation of students’ communication is achieved in the interaction between teachers and students in the classroom. Ideally, students will attach great importance to the communicative functions of the target language (the language they are studying), so that they will realize the importance of using polite language appropriately. Their pragmatic competence of the target language will be greatly improved.
Implications for Educators and Trainers

Politeness is an important topic for educators and trainers to consider. For students studying the English language, the topic helps students to understand the culture of many English speakers. For those training professionals, the topic may be useful in a variety of transactions, including business.

There are many forms and levels of politeness within every country depending on age, education, social statues and employment; the complexities are numerous. When it comes to teaching politeness in the context of TESOL, what kind of politeness does a teacher present to the language learners? When teachers raise students’ awareness of their own cultural norms, teachers should also be mindful of their own cultural awareness. Not only is this a challenge for the students but also for the teacher.

Politeness cannot be separated from culture and appropriate norms because there is a clear connection between cultural and context awareness in teaching and learning politeness language.
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