

# A Comparative Study of Politeness Phenomenon of Addressing in Chinese and English Cultures

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## Abstract

Specifying the extent to which the politeness systems of different cultures reflect politeness universals, and the extent to which they are culture-specific is one of the central concerns in the study of politeness pragmatics. This study attempts to explore the cultural universality and variability of politeness between native English speakers (ESs) and Chinese speakers (CSs), with special emphasis on the usage of addressing forms. It initiates with an investigation of the notion of politeness in English and Chinese cultures and then introduces western and Chinese theories of politeness. Following that, it presents specific applications of politeness in social addressing terms and kinship addressing terms in both cultures. At last, it concludes that there are both similarities and differences lies in the perception of politeness between native English speakers and Chinese speakers. The similarity is they hold similar views about the factors of power and ranking in Brown & Levinson's politeness framework. The difference is compared with English speakers Chinese addressing terms are more hierarchical. Meanwhile, Chinese speakers are inclined to show a greater degree of politeness to their superiors in their daily use of addressing.

## Keywords

Politeness; Addressing; Comparative Study.

## 1. Introduction

Politeness as a linguistic phenomenon has drawn considerable attention from language philosophers, linguists, and sociologists in the last two decades [1, 2]. One of the central concerns in the study of politeness pragmatics is the issue of universality. That is to explore to what extent it is possible to specify the pragmatic rules used in context from culture to culture and from language to language [3]. Through cross-cultural research in pragmatics, this issue can be analyzed. This study attempts to explore the cultural universality and variability of politeness between native English speakers (ESs) and Chinese speakers (CSs), with special emphasis on the usage of addressing forms. It initiates with an investigation of the notion of politeness in English and Chinese cultures and then introduces western and Chinese theories of politeness. Following that, it presents specific applications of politeness in social addressing terms and kinship addressing terms in both cultures. At last, it concludes that there are both similarities and differences lies in the perception of politeness between native English speakers and Chinese speakers. The similarity is they hold similar views about the factors of power and ranking in Brown & Levinson's politeness framework. The difference is compared with English speakers Chinese addressing terms are more hierarchical. Meanwhile, Chinese speakers are inclined to show a greater degree of politeness to their superiors in their daily use of addressing.

## 2. Politeness

Although the concept of politeness exists in both English-speaking culture and Chinese culture, it has quite different origins and connotations in these two cultures.

The term politeness is brought into English in the fifteenth century and is originated from Late Medieval Latin *politus* ('to smooth', 'polish') [4]. The Oxford English Dictionary gives a more close analysis of this term [5]. It traces the origin of politeness from two aspects: 1) Of persons (a) in respect of some art or scholarship, (b) in respect of general culture: Polished, refined, civilized, cultivated, cultured, well-bred, modish. 2) Of refined manners; esp. showing courteous consideration for others; courteous, mannerly, urbane. The first sense of politeness suggests that it is a means of showing that one's social class is higher than others [6]. The second sense refers to politeness as showing 'good manners' or 'courtesy'. From these two senses of politeness, it can be seen that politeness is originated in certain behaviors used in the upper class of society, which helps them to get distinguished from the lower class in the social hierarchy. In modern English, politeness is used in a more equal way. It is more likely being a matter of displaying modesty. This transformation can be shown in the various definitions of politeness that emerged in recent pragmatics studies. Brown and Levinson see politeness as 'conflict avoidance' [7]. It interprets politeness as a behavior to avoid conflict and promotes smooth communication between interlocutors [8]. Braun and Schubert also give a definition of politeness, they refer to politeness as appropriate behavior according to social norms [9]. These social norms can be imposed by conventions or the discourse of interaction. From the definitions of politeness before and nowadays, it can be concluded that in English culture, politeness is a matter of being perceived as well-mannered and showing consideration towards the feelings of others in line with social expectations [10].

In the Chinese cultural setting, politeness can be understood as a moral mode derived from social hierarchy and evolved into the social norm, whose core is denigrating self and respecting others [11]. In Chinese, the most approximately equivalent word to politeness is *limao*. It is evolved from the notion *li*, which refers to the social hierarchy and order of the slave society. *Li* was proposed by Confucius at the time when the slavery system had declined and there were consonant wars between feudal states. To re-establish the social order and remedy the situation, Confucius advocated the restoration of *li*. The most obvious manifestation of restoring *li* is *zhengming* (rectify names), which means to put every individual in his place according to the social position [12]. It exerts a great impact on people's addressing ways because to show people's social position, individuals need to be called according to their social status. For example, servants are supposed to call themselves *nucai* (slave), and officials are called *daren* (the great man). Three hundred years after, the meaning of *li* is enlarged. It is evolved from the social hierarchy into a social norm, whose core is to denigrate self and respect others. The enlarged meaning is recorded in the book *《Li Ji》* (On Li). It says "speaking of *li*, humble yourself and show respect to others". This enlarged meaning can also be reflected by the additional interpretation of people's addressing terms. Before, people's addressing terms are only used to show their social position like the servant and master. Now, when the servant calls themselves *nucai* (slave) he shows his politeness at the same time as he is humbling himself and respecting his master. The fail of using the addressing term *nucai* (slave) to call himself can be seen as a behavior of disrespect [13].

### 3. Western and Chinese Researches of Politeness

#### 3.1. A. Western Researches of Politeness

##### 3.1.1. Brown and Levinson

Brown and Levinson's face theory is one of the most influential linguistic politeness researches as it has dominated the theory of linguistic politeness since it was first published [14]. Their theory is built upon the term "face" from Goffman, which define the face as 'the public self-image that every member of society wants to claim for himself [15]. Brown and Levinson divide the face into positive face and negative face. The positive face is the need for the enhancement of a

positive self-image. The negative face is the need for freedom of action and freedom from imposition. These two basic face needs are satisfied by politeness strategies. Fifteen positive politeness strategies and ten negative politeness strategies are listed to avoid threatening people's positive and negative faces. However, sometimes actions that threaten these two faces needs will be performed and these actions are referred to as face-threatening acts. In Brown and Levinson's theory, linguistic politeness is a complex language system for softening face-threatening behavior.

### 3.1.2. Geoffrey Leech

Another influential theory about politeness is Leech's Politeness Principle. Leech investigates how politeness provides a link between Grice's Cooperative Principle and the problem of relating sense to force [16]. He distinguishes relative politeness and absolute politeness. Relative politeness is related to typical norms of behavior for a particular setting. Absolute politeness contains three scales including cost-benefit, optionality, and indirectness [16]. Based on these scales, Leech constructed six maxims of politeness which constrains people's communicative behavior. These maxims include the Tact Maxim, Generosity Maxim, Approbation Maxim, Modesty Maxim, Agreement Maxim, and Sympathy Maxim.

Leech's politeness principles might be more suitable for the linguistic politeness analysis in the eastern cultural settings. Although Brown and Levinson's framework has been very influential in research aimed at analyzing intercultural communication, it has some weaknesses and receives heavy criticisms [17]. The face theory tries to reveal the underlying universal principles of politeness based on the universal character 'face'. However, the notion of the face in their theory expresses special concerns for modern Anglo culture [18]. This theory is not accommodated with eastern culture as eastern society has a more collective notion of face, which puts more importance on 'social identity' [19]. In comparison, Leech's Maxims in Politeness Principle can be applied differently in different cultures [20]. For instance, in Asia cultures, the Japanese politeness behavior of rejecting compliments can be interpreted as they take precedence of the Modesty Maxim over the Agreement Maxim. Whereas the New Zealanders' agreement with the compliment can be seen as they emphasize the Agreement Maxim more than the Modesty Maxim.

## 3.2. Studies of Politeness in China

### 3.2.1. Gu Yueguo

Professor Gu contributed significantly to the politeness theory in China. He found that western theories of politeness are not fully applicable to the Chinese environment. Therefore, he traced the origin of the notion of politeness in the traditional Chinese culture and formulated a different set of politeness maxims based on Leech's Politeness Principle and the Principles of Sincerity and Balance [21]. These maxims contain the Self-denigration Maxim: depreciate self and elevate others; Address Maxim: addressing others appropriately according to the social relationship among people; Tact Maxim: speak with elegant words instead of vulgar words mildly instead of speaking bluntly; Agreement Maxim: one's communicative behavior is expected to consider both the Speaker's and the hearer's face and the Generosity Maxim: minimize the price of others and maximize the benefit for others; in speech, to maximize the benefit given by others and minimize the price of self [22].

The main difference between Gu's maxims and Leech's maxims lies in the Self-denigration Maxim. Gu combines the Approbation Maxim and the Modesty Maxim into the Self-denigration Maxim. In Gu's theory, self-denigrating and others-respecting are closely linked. While people denigrating themselves they show their respect at the same time. Comparatively, Leech's perception of self-denigrating in the Modesty maxim is not necessarily tied with respecting others. He contends that we can show our respect without self-denigrating. It is thought that Gu's theory is more suitable for the Chinese context as it is generalized on the politeness

phenomenon in the Chinese context. Leech's principle is more general and culturally inclusive. He takes the demands of different countries, nations, and communities into consideration and proposed a universal principle of politeness.

#### 4. Similarities and Peculiarities of Politeness in English and Chinese Cultures

Chinese and English speakers hold a similar understanding of the role power and ranking play in the politeness phenomenon. However, they might perceive the factor of distance in a different way. Brown & Levinson consider the degree of politeness is affected by three factors in all cultures: the "social distance" (D); the relative "power" (P); and the absolute ranking (R) [23]. Cultural variability in politeness strategies can be accounted for "in terms of cultural differences in the values that are assigned to distance, power, and imposition variables" [24]. To examine whether Chinese and English speakers hold different perceptions about the role values of D, P, and R play in the politeness frame, Lee conducted a series of researches between Chinese speakers and English speakers [25, 26]. In his studies, he first asks the native Chinese speakers and English speakers to complete a questionnaire about their perception of to what extent social status/power affects the degree of politeness needed. The result shows that both of them concur that greater degrees of politeness are required to be shown when faced with interactants of high social status/power. As for what factor attributed to social status/power, there is also a little divergence of the answers from them. Both agreed that knowledge, money, occupation, title, and social acquaintances were important factors contributing to perceived social status/power. In further investigation, he invites the participants to rank ten possible interactants adopted from Hill et al's research, to see if they rank people in the same way [27]. The similar results given by participants in the ranking indicate that Chinese and English speakers show a high degree of uniformity in terms of the absolute ranking in Brown and Levinson's weight factors. Therefore, it can be concluded that English and Chinese speakers share a similar value pertains to the variables in politeness weight factors like social status/power and ranking. They are fairly agreed upon what factors affect the amount of politeness we need to show and which individuals warrant a higher degree of politeness usage [28]. However, different from power and ranking, the factor of distance seems to be more problematic. It has brought divergent findings among both Chinese learners of English and native English speakers themselves, as can be seen from the studies of Baxter, Slugoski & Turnbull, and Holmes [29, 30, 31]. There is still not an agreed definition of the parameters of what distance is and whether Chinese and English speakers perceive the distance in the same way in the politeness frame. The main issue in analyzing the distance factor lies in separating the effects of "attraction" and actual "social distance". However, the author is not aware of any study that has figured out this problem until now.

Although ESs and CSs share a similar understanding of what constitutes power and to whom a greater degree of politeness needs to be shown, their verbal utterance of addressing is different. Chinese tends to show more politeness in their daily use of addressing, whereas English speakers addressing others in a more equal way. The phenomenon that people use occupation titles to address their superiors is more frequently seen in Chinese than in English. For English speakers, when a student says: "Hello, professor, may I ask a question?" The teacher might say: "You can call me Jeff. Yes, sure, go ahead." However, in China, students rarely call the teacher's first name because it might be interpreted as disrespectful. In Chinese culture, calling the interlocutor's first name is mostly happens on occasions where the participants have the same social status. Teachers' social status is higher than students, thus students need to call them "teacher" directly or "their surname + teacher" to show their respect. This phenomenon is also confirmed in Yan's study [32]. He found that when faced with teachers, Chinese students are

more likely to use the address term “teacher” in their response as a polite form to refer to the teacher in the question scenario. In his study, 11 of 42 NCS student use the address term “teacher” and only 1 student use “Ms + last name”. In comparison, American English speakers did not use address forms at all, except for 1 who used “professor” and 2 who used “Mr/Ms + last name”. The particular preference of the address form “teacher” also reflects the Chinese-style respect for teachers, which may not be found in English-speaking cultures [33]. Besides, in terms of addressing ways between colleagues, it is also normal for English speakers to call their administrative superiors their first name. For instance, in the university, a teacher might say: “Marcia (the dean) will introduce the ethical approval for you.” In this example, the teacher directly uses his administrative superior's first name to refer to her and there is nothing wrong with this usage in the context of English speaking cultures. By contrast, in China, teachers need to call their administrative superiors their occupational title or their surname + occupational title. Only the superiors have the privilege of calling the inferior their first name. The linguistic behavior that inferiors use the given name to refer to their superiors can be interpreted as they put themselves in the same position as their superiors. It is a sign of arrogance and offending. Zhou's study also shows this peculiarity in the Chinese addressing forms, “when addressing a person of higher status, the Chinese may use the address form of titles much more frequently than their American counterparts [34].” The fact that the address terms in Chinese people's daily use tend to be more formal and more evident of showing the social hierarchy of participants caters for Gu's self-denigration maxim. While the Chinese people call their teachers “teacher” and their superiors their occupational title, they are showing that their status is lower than their interlocutors and expressing their respect at the same time. As for the superiors, they seldom refuse others to call them their occupational title. It is because the address term represents the social relationship between the addressees. If the interlocutor using other addressing terms that is not appropriate to call them it can be seen as a sign of a breakdown of social order [35]. In contrast, English speakers are more likely to obey Leech's politeness principles of Modesty Maxim and Agreement Maxim to express their politeness in addressing. In most cases, it would be the superiors express that they would like others to call them their first name. In doing this, the speaker shows his modesty, although he possesses comparatively higher status, he puts himself in the same position with others. While other interlocutors' behavior of calling their superiors their first name indicates that they show their politeness by respecting the agreement maxim. By calling their superiors their first name, the addresser and addressee maximize the agreement between them and minimize the disagreement.

Apart from the social terms of addressing, Chinese kinship addressing terms also reflect the hierarchy more clearly. This clarity is shown in three aspects: generation, age, and blood relationship. In ancient China, the big family serves as the basic unit of society and the center for all activities [36]. Nine generations constitute a whole family, each of the generations has its specific addressing way. They are called gao zu, zeng zu, zu , fu, ben ren, zi, sun, zeng sun, xuan sun. Comparatively, in western countries, the nuclear family is the core of society. It consists of a couple and unmarried children which is simpler than the Chinese conceptualization of family. Therefore, English kinship terms for generation are more simplified. There are always four expressions namely, grandfather, father, son, and grandson. Another factor that affects Chinese kinship addressing terms is age. In Chinese, numbers are commonly seen in address terms to show the order. For example, “da (the first) ge” refers to the eldest brother, “er (the second) ge” refers to the second eldest brother [37]. However, these usages are rarely seen in English addressing terms. In English, brother can refer to both younger and older brother, while sister refers to both younger and older sister. Chinese respect for seniority, it is believed that the senior has priority over the junior. Therefore, a greater degree of politeness needs to be shown to the senior. To better manifest this kind of hierarchy, the Chinese add the number to the addressing terms. However, English speakers perceive age in a more equal way. A greater degree

of politeness in addressing terms is less likely to be shown to the seniority. The Chinese kinship terms also express blood relationships in a more complex way than in English. In Chinese, there are two kinds of relatives. One is blood relatives which indicate relatives with blood relations. The other is *adfinis* which refers to relatives formed by marriage [37]. Terms addressing relatives on the father's side are different from those used to address relatives on the mother's side. For instance, *shu shu* and *gu gu* are used for addressing the father's brothers and sisters while *jiu jiu* and *yi yi* refer to the mother's brothers and sisters. In contrast, in English, both father and mother's brothers and sisters are called in the same way: uncle and aunt respectively. Chinese has a clan system based on blood relationships in ancient times, which is formed by hundreds or even thousands of members. Therefore, it is of great significance to distinguish the distant relations. However, the family size in English-speaking countries is smaller. There is less need to distinguish between distant relations [36].

## 5. Conclusion

To sum, the politeness system in English culture and Chinese culture reflect both universality and cultural specificity. According to Leech, western and eastern people have a common pragmatic and behavioral basis for politeness. Chinese and English speakers hold a similar understanding of the role power and ranking play in the politeness phenomenon. They share a similar understanding of what constitutes power and to whom a greater degree of politeness needs to be shown. However, despite its common ground, politeness is expressed differently in these two cultures. For the non-kinship addressing terms, Chinese tends to show more politeness in their addressing of superiors, while English speakers addressing others in a more equal way. For the kinship addressing terms, compared with English kinship terms of addressing, Chinese kinship addressing terms reflect the hierarchy more clearly in the aspects of generation, age, and blood relationship. Through these patterns of speech behavior, the cultural values of English speakers and Chinese speakers can be seen. Chinese speakers put more emphasis on self-denigrating and others-respecting. English speakers' addressing terms usage is a result of obeying the modesty maxim and agreement maxim. Although the application of politeness in pragmatics differs from culture to culture, people with different cultural backgrounds all try to observe and maintain politeness. Therefore, for people with different cultural backgrounds, we are supposed to seek universalities of politeness principles and respecting peculiarities.

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