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Compliments and Refusals in a Traditional Chinese City

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Abstract

Language mirrors reality. Speech act, as a part of pragmatics, has been a meaningful starting point for cross-cultural study scholars and second language teachers to seek the unsaid myth behind the language itself. This article mainly centers on the examination of two main speech acts: compliment and refusal in traditional China to solicit their respective contrastive Chinese cultural values encased in their dialogues and ways of addressing. Meanwhile, this article makes the point that the change prompted by contemporary China's social, political, and economic transformations also contributes to the variations of a multitude of conditioned speech acts.

Keywords

Speech Acts, Cross-Cultural, Contextual, Compliments, Refusals

1. Speech Acts and the Definition

Speech acts have long been one of the main focuses in cross-cultural studies and second language teaching. As Cohen precisely pointed out (Cohen, 2009) that speech act behavior constitutes an area of continual concern for language learners because they are again and again faced with the need to make use of speech acts such as complaints, apologies, requests, and refusals, each of which can be realized by means of a series of potential strategies. Not only do they carry sociolinguistic implications, but they also reflect extensive sociocultural realities. On the one hand, by studying different performances of speech acts, we could investigate many social and cultural "secrets" behind the language scenes. On the other hand, since a language is closely related to its culture and society, if we turn a blind eye to the social and cultural context of a language, language teaching would not be able to achieve its goal. "Language does serve as a tool for communication, but in

addition it is a system of representation for perception and thinking" (Stewart & Bennet, 2005). In order to avoid being a "fluent fool" (Stewart & Bennet, 2005), a learner or a teacher of second languages should relate speech acts to their specific social and cultural backgrounds. Otherwise, one would very possibly have to suffer futility and risk superficiality. "[T]he teaching of second language words and phrases isolated from their sociocultural context may lead to the production of linguistic curiosities which do not achieve their communicative purposes. Given this reality, second language teachers may well find that an understanding of speech act theory and practice will improve their ability to prepare their learners to meet the challenge of producing more contextually appropriate speech in the target language" (Cohen, 2009). Thus, the study of speech acts in a cultural context will help a second language learner gain a more solid mastery of the language without being culturally foolish.

Before going any further on speech acts, I would like to try to give a rough definition of speech acts by citing two pundits in speech act studies: Austin and Searle. See the following chart by Halion (1989):

AUSTIN	SEARLE
(a) Locutionary Act: (i) Phonetic Act (ii) Phatic Act (iii) Rhetic Act	(a) Utterance Act (b) Prepositional Act: (i) Reference Act (ii) Act of Predication
(b) Illocutionary Act	(c) Illocutionary Act
(c) Perlocutionary Act	(d) Perlocutionary Act

From above, we could see that regardless of some differences between Austin's theory of speech acts and Searle's modified one (Searle's claim is that utterances do not make any sense if it is not prepositional), they carry enough similarities for us to define speech acts roughly. A speech act is the minimal unit of speech that has rules in terms of both of where and when they may occur and of what their specific features are (Wolfson, 1989). Thus, a speech act is a unit that makes human communication work. It usually has three kinds of meanings: literal, social and contextual. In another way of classification, speech acts have five categories: 1) *representatives*: assertions, claims, reports; 2) *directives*: suggestions, request, command; 3) *expressives*: apology, complaint, thanks; 4) *commissives*: promise, threat; 5) *declaratives*: decree, declaration (Cohen, 2009).

2. Methodology

In this short essay, by analyzing the characteristics of two important speech acts, i.e., *compliments and refusals* in traditional China, I attempt to demonstrate some sociolinguistic and sociocultural variations between traditional China and a culturally distinct America. For this purpose, I will deliberately choose the City of *Jiangshan* as the "proxy" of traditional China. It is a city that lies in such an ex-

tremely mountainous area that it has been barely influenced by modern socioeconomic and political changes of China. Half a million people in this city are mostly the descendants of immigrants from Northern China more than a thousand years ago and mixed well with locals. Epitaphs and recent tomb excavations show most of the people reside there basically without any migration for over 1500 years. Owing to its astonishing stability and imperviousness, the speech acts embodied in *Jiangshan dialect* is ideal for analysis not only because it largely retains the sheer bulk of the traditional Chinese ways of communication, but also because the locutors of this special dialect crosses several neighboring cities, making it a good representative of the speech acts to be studied in this article, regardless of the fact that the traditional speech acts may vary across other regions of China. The following speech acts examples from the city of Jiangshan have been collected through a decade-long personal observation and experiences. Another object with which occasional comparisons are made is a generalized America. Generalization would have to be employed here to make sense of this cross-cultural comparison. However, I would admit that the efficacy of this comparison could be more or less affected by this generalization.

3. Two Speech Acts Analyzed

Speech act comparisons in a cross-cultural perspective are necessary to achieve the goal of excellent communication. It is usually through contrastive analysis that cultural awareness can be enhanced. Some generalizations are usually made after comparisons, and this will help us reduce uneasiness and discomfort in a multicultural context. In the field of speech act studies, Wolfson's research on compliments contributes a lot to the study of speech acts in a cross-cultural perspective. By viewing compliment patterns from Indonesia to Iran to French, she concludes that "speech acts differ cross-culturally not only in the way they are realized but also in their distributions, their frequency of occurrence, and in the functions they serve." She also emphasized that cross-cultural comparisons of rules of speaking would be greatly important in order to minimize interference in true communication (Wolfson, 1989). By following their steps, in the sentences that follow below, I am going to talk about two main speech acts in a Chinese culture setting at *Jiangshan*, which, to some extent, could function as a window for a much larger Chinese cultural tradition.

Compliment

(1) S (A female acquaintance): Your daughter is growing more and more beautiful!

A (Mother): No, she's growing uglier and uglier.

(2) S: You are really intelligent!

A: No, no! I am so ignorant.

By reading the above conversations, one might draw a conclusion that Chinese are not good at receiving compliments. You are partly right. However, Chinese like compliments just as much as Americans do; they merely respond to them in

an *indirect* way. Being *indirect* in this way is largely attributed to the cultural value: *humility*. This value is even extended to compliments that involve the other members of the family. "Well-mannered Chinese deprecate not only their own accomplishments and advantages but also those of their family members. In a highly family-oriented society, praising family members is tantamount to praising oneself. And saying thank you to a compliment regarding a family member is the same as accepting without protest a compliment about oneself, a sure sign of bad manners" (Hu & Grove, 1991). Living in a distinctly different culture from China's, Americans would find the responses in (1) and (2) are really culturally shocking and hard to understand, such a self-negation. On the other hand, Americans generally respond with a reciprocal appreciation, "thank you," or they try to reject or deflect and downplay when they receive a compliment instead of returning the compliment (Luu, 2018).

When Chinese receive compliments, they receive compliments with some difficulty and even feel embarrassed sometimes. Dialogues (1) and (2) carry an important traditional Chinese cultural value: *humility*. This is usually realized by means of "self-negation" or "self-deprecation." According to Hu & Grove (1991), one of the best speech acts to demonstrate Chinese perplexing humility is this one:

(3) S (Employer): Have you done carpentry work before?
A (Carpenter): I don't dare say that I have. I have just been in a very modest way involved in the carpentry trade.
S: What are you skilled in then?
A: I won't say "skilled." I have only a little experience in making tables.
S: Can you make something now and show us how good you are?
A: How dare I be so indiscreet as to demonstrate my crude skills in front of a master of the trade like you?

Another way that Chinese often use to deal with compliments is to "*divert*" to another topic. Just like the following two conversations:

(4) S (A female acquaintance): Your daughter is growing more and more beautiful!
A (Mother): She's very naughty and hates school.
(5) S: That is a nice dress.
A: I got it only for 20 Yuan.

This speech act well shows that "traditional Chinese values require that a person who wishes to make a favorable impression avoid being self-congratulatory or personally assertive. Consequently, it is wise to be modest about your capabilities and experience" (Hu & Grove, 1991). Another important point needed to be mentioned here is that Chinese usually do not compliment the appearance of a person of the opposite gender with whom they are not familiar.

Through the above examples, we could observe that the traditional Chinese ways of treating compliments are basically different from those of Westerners, as described by Olshtain and Weinbach (1988): *reinforcing the compliment*, *simply*

thanking the complimenter, *agreeing with it*, *justifying it*, *or expressing surprise*. The difference here is a fundamental reflection of cultural differences.

Refusals

Speech acts of refusals in traditional China are perplexingly interesting as well as confusing. Just like compliments, Chinese refusals carry their culturally distinct characteristics. Just look at the following speech acts at a dinner:

(6) S (the guest): I am full, I can't take any more.
A (the hostess): Have another bowl. Come on!
S: no…no…
A: Just one more.
S: no…no…I'm really full.
A: The last bowl…
S: OK, the last bowl…

This dialogue could appear really confusing to Americans. The hostess seems to be so impolite in American context because she is forcing the guest to have one more bowl even though he made himself clear again and again that he was full! However, she would turn out to be a very hospitable and popular hostess in Chinese context. What makes such a huge difference? Still again, it is the Chinese socio-cultural background that makes the hostess' conduct very valid. It is a Chinese custom that a guest is supposed to have *self-control* when being invited to a dinner. Self-control usually means taking a medium or minimum amount of food rather than making oneself appear totally stuffed, as at home. Under most circumstances, a guest would be overtly aware of this custom; as a result of that, he basically still needs to take more to fill his stomach. A clandestine consensus from the host or hostess is needed here. The host or the hostess should offer a little "push" to show their hospitality and the guest's stomach also needs such a "push." It is not rare in China for people to eat again after they return home since they just did not eat enough (But I would suspect those "starved" guests would then go home and blame the host and hostess for being too mean to push them to eat more).

This cultural difference could make American's initial interaction with the Chinese look clumsy or frustrating. With his refusal of the offerings from the American hostess, a Chinese person may really go home with an unfilled stomach since Chinese refusals sometimes do not mean refusals at all; it could be equal to a "yes" under many circumstances. However, Americans would feel a bit uncomfortable when the hostess tries to push them to "have more" without understanding the cultural "tricks" in it. Let's see other examples of Chinese refusal:

(7) S: Can I borrow 2000 Yuan? I guarantee I will pay it back soon.
A: Sorry, I just lent all my money to my friend two days ago. If you had come earlier…
(8) S: I wonder if I am considered for that position, I sent in my application months ago.
A: I will see to that and will give you a call sometime later.

(9) S: Have any decisions been made about my housing financing request?
A (Superior): We are still thinking about that.
(10) S (Boy): Would you like going to a movie tomorrow?
A: (Girl): I would like to, but I need to get a term paper done.

All answers above could mean authentic refusals, but in an *indirect* way. When someone is saying, "I am thinking about it," it generally means a refusal in China. Chinese are not alone in employing this strategy, though. As a matter of fact, the *indirect* strategies employed by Chinese above are very similar to those of Americans. When writing about American strategies for refusing, Beebe et al. (1990) find out that Americans use a lot of *indirect* strategies, like:

a. A positive opinion like "I'd like to."
b. An expression of regret like "I am sorry."
c. An excuse, reason or explanation, to conduct their refusals to acquaintances of equal status.

However, there are differences between Chinese refusals and American ones. "Americans tend to use direct refusals such as 'I refuse' or 'no' where, as mentioned earlier, are found to be used by Americans mainly in response to intimates and status unequals or strangers" (Beebe et al., 1990). Nevertheless, Chinese refusals rarely go so direct like Americans under these circumstances. Chinese would think such direct refusals could be very threatening to *harmony* among human relations. Chinese try to avoid such a disharmony by being overtly direct in turning people down.

Avoidance of disharmony in Chinese refusals is well observed by introducing an important Chinese vocabulary: *face* (or *mian-zi* in Chinese). *Face* means *dignity*, *integrity and self-respect* here. Face-saving is very important in Chinese culture to maintain one's honor. Face-losing in public is a huge insult or disgrace for an individual. A Chinese saying puts face this way: "One needs his face as a tree needs its bark." When arguing why face has been such an important value for the Chinese, Hu and Grove give two main reasons. 1) China's a communal, stable society that requires it to maintain harmony, avoid conflicts, and protect the integrity of the group. 2) Confucian tradition requires everyone to be decorous to accept and respect each person's need to preserve face (Hu & Grove, 1991). Causing someone to lose face is an enormous challenge to one's self-respect and honor. To preserve one's face, directness and harshness are greatly avoided and indirectness is greatly valued.

4. Speech Acts Turn Permeable and Porous

Even though some speech acts stay relatively stable, some other ways of addressing have been much challenged and transformed by a powerful sociopolitical force. For the purpose stipulated, here I'd like to focus on the two most popular ways of addressing, i.e. comrade and Miss, for a closer review. Since the establishment of a new political leadership and the ideological transformation at the end of 1970s,

the traditionally agricultural Chinese society has undergone great changes in the past five decades, most prominently from 1990s to today. A relatively more open sociopolitical environment has greatly changed the speech acts in Chinese society. This change could be easily seen from the following typical ways of addressing:

(11) S: Comrade, could you please tell me how to get to the train station?
A: Who's your "comrade"?! (walking away fast with scorn).

The amazing thing is that "*comrade*" used to be a popular way of addressing people for decades in China, regardless of gender and age differences. But people today will feel offended or feel funny when being called a "*comrade*." In the past decade, the addressing of "*comrade*" has even gained two new meanings. This change of addressing or naming in Chinese society greatly reflects a considerable change of Chinese attitudes and views towards the relationship between people, largely attributed to a phenomenal shift of political ideology and economic reform. Today, even once popular "*Shifu* (master)" will not be regarded as deferential, but "*xian sheng* (Sir or Mr.) would be the most preferred one. This change is not merely a change of globalization or western influence, but also a product of great social and political change within the Chinese society. The disgust with the word "comrade" shows that most Chinese today have developed a keen awareness of their new identities, different from previous ones.

Meanwhile, a market-oriented economy and fast-growing urbanization help disintegrate the traditional Chinese rural society. Millions of people have moved to cities for better opportunities. In numerous villages today in China, only the kids and the old can be seen, except for the annual family reunion. The huge migration and much reduced control of the population help to form a new way of addressing, which is under great influence from the outside world. Some forms of addressing connote fast sociopolitical background changes. The following examples will give you an idea of how forms of address in Chinese society have been undergoing such a fast change:

(12) S: Excuse me, *xiao jie* (Miss), could you help me…?
A: Sure, no problem.
(13) S (A Male): Excuse me, *xiao jie* (Miss), could you tell me…?
A (Interruption): Who's your *Miss*? (Walking away with disgust.)

"Miss" used to be an elegant or decorous way of addressing a young lady for the large part of Chinese history, except from the 1950s to 1970s. After Deng's opening up and reformation, *xiao jie* was once again an overwhelming fashion in China in the 1980s. So, speech (12) is easily understood. But speech (13) could be very confusing to most Americans. Only Chinese people or those who experience today's China could really understand this speech well. Basically because of the increasing prostitution in China since the 1990s, *xiao jie*, to some extent, has become a jargon for prostitutes. As a result of that, many Chinese women today could feel greatly insulted by being addressed as "*xiao jie*" by a stranger of the opposite gender. Chinese women would prefer to be addressed "*nü shi*" (Lady or Ms.) when

she's encountering a stranger of the opposite gender of a similar age.

The above observations show us how speech acts are closely related to their sociolinguistic and sociopolitical environments. In this way, the study of speech acts would contribute greatly to better intercultural communication in the course of second language acquisition. More importantly, by studying the changes of speech acts like addressing, we could see how speech acts are socially and politically conditioned, and we could see "the secrets" hidden behind the scenes through this unique window.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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