

Face Theory Embodied in Chinese Speech Act

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Abstract. Face theory is an influential theory used to discuss and explain politeness phenomenon, which is based on the western culture. This essay probes into the face theory embodied in the speech act under the background of Chinese culture. The aim of the comparison between face theory in western culture and in Chinese culture is to remove obstacles caused by cultural differences, promote cross-cultural communication and strengthen the awareness of the value of face theory in Chinese culture.

Key words: Face theory; Western culture; Chinese culture

1. Introduction

Goffman (1967), a Canadian-born sociologist and writer, considered "the most influential American sociologist of the twentieth century", firstly introduced the conception of face in western countries. Based on the research conducted by Goffman et al, Brown & Levinson (1978) introduced the mature face theory, trying to have a research on the face as a common language phenomenon. The face was defined as every social member intends to earn personal image in public. People want to maintain each other's face in the communication and the participant in the communication will use a politeness strategy of higher level when the degree of face threatening gets higher.

2. Face in Western Culture

2.1 Face is divided into positive face and negative face. Positive face refers to that every member of the society wants the obedience of others and wants his image to be appreciated and praised by others. Negative face refers to that a member of the society wants the freedom of action and freedom of self-determination, doesn't want his action to be interfered with by others. The speech act which is incompatible with the freedom of the communication participants is an invasion of the negative face of the participants. The core of western culture is its freedom of action and freedom of self-determination, therefore, the outstanding feature of western culture is the concept of negative face and the negative politeness characterized by not imposing on others.

2.2 When we communicate with others, we should be aware of the actions which intrinsically threaten the negative face of the listeners. The actions include asking listeners to do something or not to do something, such as order, request, suggestion, reminding, threatening, warning and goading; asking others to accept something or refuse something, such as providing, promising.

In order to avoid or reduce the loss of negative face of the communication participant, the speakers need to use the negative politeness strategies. The speakers can make a request in the conventional indirect ways, for example, the speaker may use the expression "*would you please pass me the salt?*" to reduce the violation of the face of the listeners. The speakers try not to impose on the listeners and not to force the listeners to make response, they may use the expression *Excuse me, may I borrow your electric bike?* The speakers may express the unwillingness to impose on others by making an apology; they may use the expression *I don't want to disturb you, but.....* The speakers may admit the grace from others to counteract the loss of face of the listeners, such as; they may use the expression *If you can... I would be overwhelmed with gratitude*, which is a compensation for the violation of the face of the listeners.

3. Face in Chinese Culture

3.1 In terms of the feeling of face, Chinese people pay more attention to the gains

and losses of the feeling and dignity; they demand the dignity and respect rather than directly demand the freedom of action and freedom of self-determination. Imposing on others is not considered a decisive factor for the violation of politeness in Chinese culture, which is a remarkable difference from the western culture. There are many adjustments to the politeness in Chinese, for example, using polite salutation may make “directly imposing on others” be used, which is generally accepted by Chinese people in a degree.

In Chinese culture, there is also the demand for being appreciated and being agreed with. The communication participants also try to get close to each other and avoid the difference, in this way; they maintain a harmonious interpersonal relationship. The Chinese people are very sensitive to the positive face such as being accepted and being appreciated, which is the core of face of Chinese people.

3.2 When we communicate with others, we should be aware of the actions which threaten the positive face of the listeners. The actions include: speeches expressing criticism, neglecting, sneering, insulting and dissatisfaction etc, the speeches indicate the speakers don't think in others' shoes and don't like the action, personality, possession and thought of the listeners; speeches expressing questioning, dispute, contradiction and disagreement, the speeches indicate the speakers think the listeners are wrong and impenetrable; expressing strong and uncontrollable emotion; disrespect; talking about taboos or unsuitable topic in a specific context; talking about a piece of bad news related to the listeners or a piece of good news related to the speakers; talking about a topic with dangerous mood or dispute, such as religion and politics etc; interrupting the conversation or making a comment irrelevant to the conversation; using unsuitable salutation or using unsuitable things to mark the identity.

In order to maintain the positive face of the listeners, the speakers need to use the positive politeness strategy and the basic strategy is to get close to others. The strategies include: speakers claim that they have something in common with the listeners, such as, they tell the listeners they have the same wish or same experience with the listeners, the following sentences are often used by the

Chinese people “*I visited that place, too. My father is a veteran, too*”. In order to maintain the positive face of listeners, the speakers need to use the positive politeness strategies and regard approaching the other person as the basic strategy. These strategies involve: the speakers say that they have the same wish or same experience with the listeners. The following expressions are often used by the Chinese people: *I come from...province, too. Your new dress is so beautiful and it fits you very well. The decoration of your house is so artistic.* The speakers may send the information of cooperation to the listeners, such as, they say *I know you will download information with your computer this evening; may I borrow your computer now?* The speakers may satisfy some wishes of the listeners, such as, they say *Next Sunday is your birthday, I will send you a book you like it all the time. If you pass the entrance examination for college students successfully and get the admission notice of your ideal university, I will give you money for travelling and you can go to the fascinating place.*

3.3 Collective spirit is attached much importance to in Chinese culture. A person should be accepted by his group and be harmonious with other people in the group. If a person is not welcomed and respected by the group and the society, then he loses the foundation of bearing himself. There is a proverb well-known in China, which is literally translated as *Trees live a skin, people live a face*, which means Chinese people are keen on face-saving. From this proverb, we can understand the importance of one person being accepted and respected by the society. Therefore, positive politeness deriving from positive face is the most formal, most familiar and most needed politeness.

In the background of Chinese culture, the following things are paid much attention to in terms of politeness: for example, using respectful words, such as *Excuse me, Please*; saying something kindly and friendly; discussing with listeners and asking for advice, such as *Are you free now? I hope I don't disturb you. If you have time, may I ask you a question?* In this way, respect is conveyed; considering the feelings of others more, understanding the difficulties of others more and giving others less trouble is of striking feature of Chinese culture, such

as, a relatively poor person is invited to attend a homecoming, the organizer may tell him *I know you are not rich at present, so just come to join in our homecoming, you needn't give the individual contribution money.* Being hospitable and not being indifferent is welcomed in China, when guests go to their home, they may say *Sit down please, would you like something to drink, tea or juice? Help yourself, feel at home. Have another glass of wine.* The hospitality of Chinese people is quite different from the avoiding imposing on others of western culture.

Verbal communication is of social characteristic and different kinds of communicative strategies are of great importance to the realization of the communicative purpose. Communicative strategies are mainly carried out around face or politeness.

4. Face Theory in Cross-cultural Communication

Different communicative strategies should be adopted in cross-cultural communication because of the differences of face theory in western culture and in Chinese culture

When involving in cross-cultural communication, they should draw much attention to the personal right and personal freedom in the western culture and show respect to the negative face of the westerners. Westerners are self-centered, their feelings and hopes will be respected properly so long as their words and behaviors don't interfere with others. Therefore, if Chinese people show enough respect to the freedom, rights and independence of the westerners, they will be regarded as being polite by the westerners, in this way the two sides can conduct the communication smoothly. Although imposing on others which interfere with others' freedom is not regarded as being impolite in Chinese culture, Chinese people must avoid imposing on others when they communicate with westerners. For example, when guests go to their home to have meal, the Chinese may show their hospitality by filling the bowl of the guest with rice; but when westerners go to their home, it is advisable for Chinese to ask the guests in advance whether they would like to have a bowl of rice or a glass of alcohol.

Nowadays, more and more westerners learn Chinese and Chinese culture. The face theory under the background of Chinese culture should be introduced to westerners who go to China. In Chinese culture, face embodies individual identity and ideal image, in other words, face is dignity. The behaviors of individual must be in accordance with the requirements of his identity and image. Face is the symbol of human relationship and interpersonal influence, in other words, face is feelings. Face also represents the ideal personality in the society and is the moral standard in the society. Face is an import and typical image of the social psychology of Chinese people. Face represents reputation and status, which is acquired through hard work. Face is a social norm which strengthens the moral standard and a guarantee for maintaining the complete morality of the individual as well, which is an internal norm. Giving face to others (or showing respect to others) is stressed in the social interaction of Chinese people and losing face is to be avoided intentionally. Therefore, westerners should pay much attention to the positive face of the Chinese people and show their respect to the Chinese. Westerners should attach great importance to the collective spirit, rather than to the self-centered individualism.

5. Conclusion

Face is a complex of traditional Chinese culture, traditional value, personality traits and the trend of Chinese society. In the background of Chinese culture, people take the face into consideration when they dress, when they behave etc, they should not only pay attention to whether they like it themselves, but also pay attention to the opinions of others. Face also refers to the social status or prestige which the individual acquires after their success in the society. "Face work" in the Chinese culture refers to the work done intentionally by the individual; the individual does the face work in order to give a specific personal image to others. Under the background of Chinese culture, Chinese people are concerned about face-saving, they evaluate the degree of acceptance of others to themselves depending on whether others give them face or how much face others

give to them. Chinese people need to learn the face under the background of western culture in order to promote cross-cultural communication and they need to introduce the face theory under the background of Chinese culture to westerners as well in order to promote the transmission of Chinese culture.

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