

Pragmatic Strategies and Power Relations in Disagreement:

Chinese Culture in Higher Education

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**Universal Publishers
Boca Raton, Florida
USA • 2004**

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Universal Publishers/uPUBLISH.com
Boca Raton, Florida
USA • 2004

ISBN: 1-58112- 520-8

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe a particular debt of gratitude to my chief advisor and director, Professor Robert M. Harnish, who more than anyone has shaped my ideas about pragmatics. I would like to express my sincere thanks to him for his invaluable guidance, constructive criticism, ideas, encouragement and inspiration during the course of this study, and for his effort in reading and correcting the manuscript.

I would like to thank all the other members of my Ph.D. committee, Professor Timothy Vance, Professor Brian McKnight, Professor Merrill Garrett, and Professor Robert Ariew for all their encouragement, support, and work they have done for me.

I am indebted to many students, faculty and staff and institutes that have assisted my field research work, in particular subjects, survey respondents and interviewees in the universities: the Capital Normal University, Beijing Jiaotong University, and Beijing Foreign Studies University, in Beijing; and Chengdu University of Electronic Science and Technology, Xinan Jiaotong University, and Sichuan Normal University, in Chengdu, P. R. China, who contributed to the data for this study. I am very much indebted to the Deans of the colleges of foreign languages of the universities, whose warmth, enthusiasm and scholarship made my research experience in China a memorable and rewarding one.

I take this opportunity to thank the Graduate College of the University of Arizona for the GPSC Research Travel Grant which facilitated my field work in China for this study

during 2003 winter. My sincere gratitude is due to the US-China People Friendship Association for its M. Graham Scholarship award that assisted me with my full-time dissertation field research.

I am also grateful to my friends Marjorie King and C. J. Shane for their corrections and suggestions on the manuscript, and for the great benefit from discussions with them.

The support extended to me by my brother and his family members, as well as my friends in China, have been inestimable and greatly appreciated.

I would like to express my special thanks to my husband, Junqiang Zhou, for his encouragement and support throughout the process of this study and for his immeasurable sincere assistance. Great appreciation is due as well to my son, Morris Zhou, who helped with my data sorting, whose needs had to be compromised in some way, and for his efforts to understand the demands of this study.

To my husband Junqiang Zhou and
my son Morris Zhou
with love

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation investigates pragmatic strategies and power relations related to disagreement in Mandarin Chinese using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, referring to Brown (1988), and Fetterman (1989), in which both statistical analyses of data from DCT (Blum-Kulka 1982) and discourse analyses of data from an ethnographic approach were conducted. The data were collected in the People's Republic of China at six universities in the north and the south of the nation as well as at a large conference. The total subjects for the DCT were 360, and the natural data were obtained from (1) surveys and interviews with a total of 45 participants; (2) 49 odd hours of recordings, and 86 valid oral discourses, both long and short.

This study explores three general questions. The first question is whether power relations in Chinese university settings influence pragmatic strategies in disagreement. A null hypothesis is rejected with statistical evidence. Further exploration of the ways in which the strategies are significantly different shows that the students use lower power-level strategies when disagreeing with the professors and administrators than vice versa. The students are addressed with highest level of all. However, the professors and administrators use more polite strategies to the students than the students to them. The result implies a subtle and twisted relationship between power and politeness, as well as power and indirectness. People of higher status use more powerful yet more polite strategies in disagreement. People of lower status are able to interpret the powerful disagreement accompanying politeness because of the power held by the powerful people.

The second question asks what the pragmatic strategies in disagreement reflect regarding Chinese cultural dynamics in higher education. The result shows a hierarchy in China's higher education institutions. Nevertheless, the researcher does not attribute the cause of hierarchical conception merely to the traditional culture as most sinologists do. She reveals that power results in the hierarchy which is common nature in human beings compared with the hierarchy in the American university (see Gross and Grambsch, 1974). The findings from natural data support the author's presumption that Confucianism may not still be the "guiding principle" of the norms and values in the institutions of modern Chinese higher education as some sinologists have concluded recently. A new cultural orientation of Chinese people characterized with new features is discovered: more individualistic, more democratic, more realistic, more independent, and more self-confident than before, mainly due to modernization and internationalization.

The third probe of the question on how the concept of relevance in Grice's CP dominates the analysis of communicative interaction involving power obtains an outcome contributing to the controversial issue on pragmatics and power. Consistent with Kitis' (1999) "Global Relevance", this study, through Chinese discourse analyses, proves that the maxim of Relevance of CP and implicature theory explicate conversational cooperation with the connection of the frame of discourse type and the social parameters involving power. Meanwhile, the researcher implies that the maxim of quality does not elucidate a conversational cooperation encompassing lying. Further, she questions the Gricean notion that a conversation carrying lying is not cooperative. To solve the lying problem, she proposes a definition of conversational cooperation that both S and H make relevant contributions; they understand each other; and they reach an outcome.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, researchers into language as a social phenomenon have become increasingly aware of the need to see language as a social resource (Watts 1991). Researchers believe that command of socially accepted forms of language use allows the speaker access to positions of power and influence in different spheres of society. There has been an increase in the number of studies of both a general and a more specific nature into the ways in which conventionalized conceptions of appropriate language use guide our understanding of what constitutes power in society and how access to it is controlled by varied forms of discourse. Some of these studies have investigated the ways in which language and power are linked in multicultural, multilingual settings (Hong 2002, 1998; He 1998, Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford 1990, Beebe & Takahashi 1989). Others have concentrated on social domains in which power is exercised or in traditional areas of discrimination (Pulis 2003, Yves & Garth 2001, Meyer 1997, Soto 1997). In every case, however, neither the wider implications of how power is realized and exercised through pragmatic strategies are dealt with nor are features of the discourse between the power relations in Chinese higher education analyzed in a large sample.

The purpose of this study is to examine the strategies of disagreement as it is accomplished linguistically in academic settings on university campuses in both northern and southern cities of China. Although words are arbitrary signs, as noted by Saussure (1915), they are nevertheless invested with emotional and pragmatic content by the speech community that uses those words. This study focuses on pragmatic strategies of disagreement because these strategies

are recognizable and valuable for social culture realization, as well as for exploration of the evidence for pragmatic theories.

The works edited by Bloch (1975) and Paine (1981), respectively, reflect two different approaches to the study of language and power. Bloch's work emphasizes the role of social structure in traditional societies as a determinant of style in interactive discourses; while Paine's work emphasizes the role of the individual as social actor and his/her manipulation of elements of language style during social interaction. Anthropological and sociolinguistic studies of language and power have tended, thus far, to follow one or the other of these approaches. I attempt to bridge both views. I believe that socio-cultural factors do constrain and affect language use, on one hand; and that individual discourse styles and communicative strategies play a role in maintaining or struggling for power, on the other. In other words, the power structure and power conception of Chinese people would have an influence on their pragmatic strategies; in the meantime, the individuals who possess different levels of power would use diverse pragmatic strategies for the purpose of power protection and power attainment in the situational discourse.

Founded on this notion, the present study aims to elicit data, quantitatively and qualitatively, as lived and experienced by academic interactants in the university settings of modern China, without imposing particular conventional presumptions (theories or hypotheses). In other words, the nature of the study is descriptive and data-driven, rather than predictive and hypothesis-driven. Specifically, the present study examines first if the pragmatic strategies of disagreement are different in power levels due to the diversity of status in the higher education of modern China; and explores the ways in which power relations affect the strategies utilized by the different status when they disagree with each

other.

Second, in light of Hymes' (1977, 1972) notion that speech communities share detectable patterns of speech, and that such "cultural ways of speaking" provide an important domain for the exploration of speech as a cultural phenomenon, the present study is intended to connect the language use of Chinese speakers in university settings to their norms and values, with the purpose of probing for new cultural features in the higher education of modern China. Questioning the existing conclusion that Confucianism is still the guiding principle of Chinese culture (see Hong 2002, He 1998), I have attempted to reexamine the hierarchy concept and the power source in the higher education of contemporary China. My presumption is that new features have been developing in the culture of Chinese higher education that tend toward a complete rejection of the virtues, such as *Sangang Wuchang* (the three cardinal guides and the five constant virtues), *Sancong Side* (the three obediences and four virtues for a woman), and filial piety as taught by Confucius, because the revolution, policies and, especially, the opening and reform, have brought about great changes in China.

The third research interest is closely tied to controversial issues on pragmatics and power. Harris (1995) in her article "Pragmatics and Power" concludes that Grice's Cooperative Principle (CP) notion cannot provide sufficient grounding in itself for interaction involving social and political dimensions. Contra to Harris, Kitis (1999) advocates Grice's maxim of Relevance as a super maxim of Global Relevance, which is socially determined and embedded within the action-structure of representations of events. She proposes that in our analyses, we need to bestow greater appreciation on the overpowering maxim of Relevance that is applicable to analyses of constitutionalized discourses, prior to other maxims in configurations of CP. In agreement with Kitis

(1999), I assume that natural discourses (at least in Chinese) involving social factors can be accounted for with the maxim of Relevance. To facilitate examination of the assumption, I will provide examples of the powerful function of the maxim of Relevance from the natural data I observe in the Chinese university settings.

Given the research purposes, the present study needs to employ a special methodology that combines both quantitative and qualitative methods, because it requires a large-scale sample to prove whether there are different strategies occurring when individuals who possess different levels of power disagree with each other. To support the result of the quantitative study and for description of the occurrence of power presentation as lived and experienced by daily interactants, interviews and observations as in ethnography are necessarily applied.

The organization of the present study is made as follows: Chapter 1 addresses the rationale and significance for conducting the study, the basis of the general questions, and terms needing to be defined. Chapter 2 provides a theoretical background for the study on language and power, disagreement, politeness, language and culture, and traditional culture and cultural changes in the higher education of modern China. Chapter 3 presents a review of previously related studies. Chapter 4 explains the design of the quantitative research with Discourse Completion Test (DCT). Chapter 5 demonstrates and analyzes the result of the quantitative study. Chapter 6 reviews the ethnographic approach and a plan of how to complete the study. Chapter 7 displays the findings of the natural data from observations and interviews in the ethnography. Chapter 8 gives a discussion of how the maxim of Reference in CP accounts for natural discourses involving a social factor – power. Chapter 9 makes a conclusion including pedagogical implications.

CHAPTER 1

PROBLEM

1.0 Overview

The question of language and power is a controversial issue in pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and sociology. Yet, it is among the least investigated areas in Chinese language use, even in the field of general linguistics. The present study pays serious attention to the power differences in pragmatic strategies used in disagreement among the various power relations in Chinese university settings, and focuses on the reasons that bring about the phenomena found.

This chapter gives a description of the rationale and significance of conducting the present study, presents three general research questions, and defines “power” as used here.

1.1 Rationale and Significance

The significance of this study, both academically and practically, is its contribution to the interdisciplinary fields of pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and social culture. The study is academically significant in roughly four ways.

First, the study introduces a pragmatic perspective of language and power that previous studies have ignored. A variety of perspectives of the relationship between language and power is essential since perspectives serve the very source of knowledge; a perspective promotes research, and

research created knowledge. As a powerful tool for knowledge creation, any perspective deserves examination.

To date, studies of pragmatics and power are fragmented and made in deduction across research attempts. This study attempts to comprehend the pragmatic strategy and power relations in disagreement as more than a linguistic aspect of communication. As such, the study may uncover the characteristics of power and the nature of the relationship between language strategy and social power relations in disagreement in Chinese higher education, which would otherwise be unavailable in conventional Chinese cultural analyses.

Second, this study departs from the existing understanding about the nature of contemporary Chinese culture. Generally, research on Chinese culture and Chinese-Western cultural comparisons reflect traditional concepts about Chinese people. The long-established practice of analyzing Chinese culture within a Confucian context needs critical examination for the reason that great changes have taken place in China since the Cultural Revolution of 1966-1976. The pace of change has escalated since the “opening and reform” policies began in the early 1980s. Using a combination of methods, including statistics, observation, and interviews, this study illuminates the relationship between pragmatic strategies and power relations in Chinese culture. This study is intended to avoid offering just “another” evidence to be added to the existing conclusion of the nature of the contemporary Chinese culture.

Third, this present study plans to address a controversial issue about the application of Grice’s CP to the explication of power relations in communication. An empirical study such as this has been needed to examine whether CP, or a maxim of CP, is applicable to an account and a clarification of a natural discourse.

The fourth intellectual significance of this study is to reinforce the evolving social science methodology of combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. The application of a statistical method to a socio-pragmatic study is a bold endeavor. The specific design and measurement of this study will be a contribution to pragmatic research methodology.

The above academic significance leads to practical significance. The practical side lies in relational development among students, professors and administrators in university settings. In human interaction, disagreement is inevitable. It appears that disagreements do occur no matter how hard people try to avoid them. When people try to avoid the unavoidable, they face a very complicated situation. When they try to settle disagreements, they need rhetorical strategies involving both concepts of hierarchy and politeness. It seems true that there is always a contradiction between disagreement and face-saving. The present study attempts to comprehend the reality of power relations apart from any presuppositions. As a result, the study may help everyday interactants see the source of power and provide strategies for dealing with disagreement in communications. Its findings may provide the interactants with knowledge and courage to handle disagreement without impolite or unpleasant conduct. This ultimately helps the social interactants develop richer and healthier relationships.

Further, this knowledge about the relationship between pragmatic strategies and power relations in disagreement also applies to interaction between intercultural communicators. Although this study is directed to analyses of intra-cultural conversation, the utility of its findings is not limited to the intra-cultural domain; it extends to other domains such as intercultural, interethnic, intergenerational communication, and so on. I assume that the relationship between pragmatic