

Politeness in Restaurants of Different Grades

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Abstract

Based on the politeness theories proposed by Brown and Levinson, by Leech, and by Gu, this article tries to explore how environment affects waiters/waitresses and their language and behavior. A qualitative approach is taken in the research to analyze the data collected by the author. After a careful comparison of the language and behavior of waiters/waitresses, a conclusion can be drawn that environment plays a crucial role in the using of different strategies in the restaurants of different grades—middle-grade restaurants tend to use negative politeness strategies, whereas low-grade ones positive politeness strategies. Furthermore, the author wants to emphasize the importance of using different politeness strategies to explain the politeness phenomena in different environments.

Key words: Politeness theory; Environment; Language and behavior; Politeness strategies

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INTRODUCTION

Politeness as a linguistic phenomenon has drawn considerable attention from linguists, sociologists, and language philosophers in the last four decades (Lakoff,

1973, 1977; Leech, 1983; Brown & Levinson, 1978, 1987; Hill et al., 1986; Ide, 1989; Fraser, 1990; Gu, 1990; and Mao, 1994, among others). Therefore, Politeness theory has “enjoyed a privileged position on the forefront of pragmatic attention... it remains much alive as witnessed among others by a recent bibliography by Dufon et al. (1994)” (Morten Pilegaard, Politeness in written business discourse: A textlinguistic perspective on requests).

One of the major sources of insight into the phenomena of linguistic politeness is the study of how a particular speech act is performed in different languages. Thus, we have seen a flourishing literature in this regard, such as Blum-Kulka and Olshtain’s (1984) report of a large-scale, continuing project studying how politeness is achieved in requests and apologies in Hebrew, Danish, German, Canadian French, and British, American and Australian English; Scollon and Scollon’s (1980, 1981, 1983) analyses of politeness strategies of Canadian Athabaskan Indians and English speakers; Chick’s (1985) study of South African Black and White interaction; Darnell’s (1985) work on Cree Indians and ‘Whitemen’; House and Kasper’s (1981) study on German and English; Barnlund’s (1975), Daikuhara’s (1986), and Hill et al.’s (1986) respective studies on Japanese and English; Rong Chen’s (1993) report on a study of American English speakers’ and Chinese speakers’ verbal responses to compliments, to cite just a few.

Another source of linguistic politeness is its application to different areas from different perspectives, such as Pilegaard’s (1997) politeness in written business discourse; Johnstone, Ferrara and Bean’s (1992) study on gender, politeness and discourse management in same-sex and cross-sex opinion-poll interviews; Zajdman’s (1995) work of humorous face-threatening acts; Tayashi’s (1996) report of politeness in conflict management; Holmes’ (1993) analyses of New Zealand women’s politeness strategies in interaction and Zhu Werfang’s (1998)

investigation into/on the politeness in letters discourse, among others.

Despite the efforts of these practitioners, however, little has been found in the politeness strategies used by waiters/waitresses. In this paper, I report on research of politeness in restaurants of different grades and how environment contributes to the explanation to the usage of different politeness strategies in different restaurants. Waiters/waitresses of middle-grade restaurants tend to use negative politeness strategies to avoid imposition on their customers; whereas low-grade restaurants, on the other hand, tend to use positive politeness strategies to claim solidarity with their customers. For these differences, environment plays an important role. And these findings will be analyzed under the politeness theories proposed by Brown and Levinson, by Leech, and by Gu, showing that Brown and Levinson's and Gu's respective models are not fully adequate and Leech's theory offers additional explanation to the present findings.

1. THEORETICAL BASES

Based on the politeness theories proposed by Brown and Levinson, by Leech, and by Gu, the article is analyzed by using the data collected by the author.

Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) face-saving view agrees in principle with the Gricean maxims of conversation (1967, published in 1975). It assumes, however, that the motivation behind not talking strictly in accordance with the cooperative principle is politeness. For Brown and Levinson, "politeness must be communicated" (1987, p.5), since it constitutes a message; not communicating it signals the absence of the required polite attitude. The need to overtly communicate politeness derives from their notion of 'face' or a person's public self-image, which constantly needs to be attended to by both the Speaker and Hearer.

Brown and Levinson distinguish between two types of politeness: positive and negative. Positive politeness "is approach-based; it 'anoits' the face of the addressee by indicating that in some respects, S wants H's wants" (Brown & Levinson, p.70). Negative politeness, on the other hand, "is oriented mainly toward partially satisfying (redressing) H's negative face, his basic want to maintain claims of territory and self-determination. Negative politeness, thus, is essentially avoidance-based...the speaker... will not be (or will only minimally) interfere with the addressee's freedom of action. Hence, negative politeness is characterized by self-effacement, formality and restraint..." (Brown & Levinson, p.70). Brown and Levinson's view of politeness, especially their notion of negative face and the need to avoid imposition, seems to apply to both the middle-grade restaurants and low-grade restaurants. To be specific, their notion of positive face applies more to the politeness in low-grade restaurants, while on the other hand, the notion of negative face takes

more account of the politeness phenomena in middle-grade restaurants.

A contrast between private vs. public face views of politeness is made by Gu (1990), although indirectly. According to Gu, politeness in New China seems to have assumed two new duties: "to enhance social harmony and to defuse interpersonal tension or conflict" (Gu, 1990, p.239) Gu develops a politeness principle of Chinese culture based upon Leech's (1983) Politeness Principle His PP is defined as "a sanctioned belief that an individual's social behavior ought to live up to expectations of respectfulness, modesty, attitudinal warmth and refinement" (Gu, 1990, p.245), which contains four maxims: Self-denigration, Address, Tact and Generosity. The self-denigration maxim consists of two clauses or sub-maxim: (a) denigrate self and (b) elevate other. This maxim "absorbs the notions of respectfulness and modesty" (Gu, 1990, p.246). The Address Maxim reads: "address your interlocutor with an appropriate address term. This notion is based on the notions of respectfulness and attitudinal warmth" (Gu, 1990, p.248).

Leech distinguishes relative politeness from absolute politeness and primarily deals with absolute politeness. Differing from Brown and Levinson, Leech emphasizes the normative (or regulative) aspect of politeness. His politeness principle includes six maxims, i.e., The Tact Maxim, the Generosity Maxim, the Approbation Maxim, the Modesty Maxim, the Agreement Maxim and the Sympathy Maxim (Leech, p.132).

2. RESEARCH DESIGN: PROCEDURES, SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

The author takes a qualitative approach in the research to explore how the environment affects waiters/waitresses and their language and behavior. And the research involves tape-recording which was well known to both the waiters/waitresses and customers.

First, tape-recording is adopted as a means to record the conversations between waiters/waitresses and customers in eight restaurants of different grades. Since there are contrastive differences between these restaurants, classification is made according to some standards used in this paper. Therefore, they are roughly classified into two groups of equal number—middle-grade and low-grade (Appendix).

This step itself seems to have the following three limitations: first, the standards or parameters used to classify these restaurants are worked out by myself, because I myself can not find any universal standards that have been used for the classification of different restaurants. The standards I used in this paper are mainly concerned with their environment, set-ups and waiters/waitresses. Subjective and casual they seem, they are

selected under the condition that they will not influence our results much. The second limitation is that I, the research of this paper, took almost all the tape-recordings, which means that I am a constant of this research, while other customers, and waiters/waitresses are variables. Inevitably, this may be, to some extent, lead to a subjective result toward this research. But on the other hand, there are two advantages in my taking part in the recording procedure: Firstly, with my own presence, I was able to observe the different environments in different restaurants with my own eyes, so that it would be more scientific and precise in the classification of these restaurants; Secondly, my participation in the recording can provide some convenience for the transcription procedure, in case some part of the recording is hard to recognize. As for the third limitation in this procedure, is about the range of my research. I mainly place my focus on the middle- and low-grade restaurants, without covering the high level restaurants. In this sense, this may result in the incomprehensiveness of the research. But in contrast to middle- and low-grade restaurants, the number of customers in high-level restaurants is much smaller, therefore, the research value of high-level restaurants is not as much as the other two. So I just put the emphasis on the middle- and low-grade restaurants.

The next step is data transcription that was carried out by myself. In this procedure, tape-recordings are transcribed into written form. Every word of the utterances was transcribed as accurately as possible, even including interjections and exclamations of no real meaning. Then the transcription was proof-read by myself.

3. DATA PRESENTATION

3.1 Politeness in the Middle-Grade Restaurants

Generally speaking, from data, politeness in the four middle-grade restaurants has the following five characteristics:

1) Usually, waiters/waitresses use politeness markers at the time when customers enter their restaurants or when during the course of serving. One of the typical politeness markers is “请” (please). For example, a waiter said; “请进!” (literal translation: Please, come in!) Similarly, other waiters/waitresses either said “您好, 请进!” or “请进!”

2) Address forms: They tended to use honorific pronouns to address their customers. Example of honorifics is “您”. For example, some waiters/waitresses said: “您几位?”, some said: “您点什么?” or “您吃什么?” or “您喝什么?”

3) Recommendation making: They avoided making recommendations for their customers, even if they were asked to do so. For instance, when a customer asked for advice on which kind of soup tasted better, the waitress

responded as, “得看你们喜欢吃哪种口味的!” (literal translation: It depends on which taste you prefer.) Similarly, when in another restaurant, a customer asked for recommendation of which vegetable is better cooked in their restaurant, the waiter of that restaurant did not answer it directly, instead, he listed a couple of vegetable dishes to let the customer make his/her own choice. For example, the waiter answered, “素菜? 有油菜, 菠菜, 嗯, 干煸豆角, 还有油麦菜。”

4) The behavior of waiters/waitresses: Generally speaking, most of them behaved themselves properly. For instance, when being asked, say, the name of a certain dish, they mostly gave an immediate and detailed answer. For example, when a customer asked the waiter to introduce their specially hit dishes, he replied: “有那个咸水鸭, 极品虾仔, 鲜果鸡头, 鸡香牛柳, 豆豉小排...” Likewise, when another waiter was asked to bring some more napkin, he promptly answered, “行!” or “好的!” in similar situation. Another example showing their behavior is that when serving the present customers, they would not greet or serve other customers at the same time. Also, every time when they served the dishes, they would tell the customers the names of certain dishes.

5) Repetition: Sometimes waiters/waitresses would repeat what the customer had just said to make confirmation. For instance, a customer said: “一个大‘醒目’, 一个‘鲜橙多!’” Similar case also happened in other three restaurants. For example, a customer said: “主食, 不要主食!” and then the waitress said: “不要主食啊!” Another example is when a customer said: “一个荤的, 一个素的吧!”, the waiter responded: “好, 一个荤的, 一个素的!”

3.2 Politeness in the Low-Grade Restaurants

In contrast with the politeness used in middle-grade restaurants, politeness in low- grade restaurants has its own characteristics. The following data are presented based on the conversations happened in low- grade restaurants.

1) In most cases, waiters/waitresses do not use politeness markers, instead they come directly to the point, i.e., served their customer what they wanted to eat. Take the example below: when customers entered a restaurant, the waiter (at the same time, is also the owner) came to ask: “坐, 坐, 想吃什么, 给你炒去!” And another example is: in a noodle restaurant, after the customer had already ordered a bowl of noodle, the owner (or the waitress) then responded: “好, 坐坐吧! 里边儿坐坐! 我就给你煮了啊!” Or in the similar situation, a waitress greeted the customers: “来, 来, 来, 坐这边!”

2) Address forms: They were inclined to use singular non-honorific pronouns, such as “你” (you) or “你的”(your). According to my research, in all the four low-grade restaurants, all the subjects use T pronouns. Take the example of the noodle restaurants once again, when

the owner asked, one of her customer how much noodle she wanted to have, she simply asked: “噢，你要2块钱的？” And when the customer asked whether she should pay for her noodle right after ordering, the owner replied: “没事儿，没事儿，你先坐着！我就说这意思！” Similarly, in another low- grade restaurant, when the customers wanted to have one more bowl of rice, the owner just answered: “一碗一块，你自己盛吧！” Besides, some low- grade restaurants also preferred to use an inclusive “we” form, when he/she really meant “you” or “me”. See the conversation that follows:

Conversation 1: (C—customer; W—waiter/waitress)

C: 做个家常豆腐吧！

W: 家常豆腐，咱做不了，你看那没有价儿的，那个，咱做不了，那豆腐咱没有，豆腐搁不住……

Conversation 2:

W: 哎，咱得商量商量，咱还改那个香菇油菜吧！

C: ……

W: 荷兰豆没有，我这……就买了点儿油菜，行吗？

C: ……

3) Recommendation-making: Unlike the waiters/waitresses of middle- grade restaurants, waiters/waitresses in low- grade restaurants preferred to recommend their customers which dish tasted better even without being requested to do so. See the following conversation happened in a low- grade restaurant.

Conversation 3:

C: 给我们介绍一个热菜吧！

W: 红烧肚块，你们吃吗？

C: ……

W: 那海鲜豆腐，怎么样？

C: ……

Conversation 4:

W: 你们里面放点醋吧！

C: ……

W: 要辣椒吧！

C: ……

4) The behavior of the waiters/waitresses: It seems

that waiters/waitresses in low- grade restaurants did not behave so properly as those in middle- grade restaurants. In many cases they tended to use casual or rather intimate language when speaking to their customers. See the conversation happened in the cooking place of a small restaurant below:

Conversation 5:

C: 我觉得这个（指着一正要炒完的菜）看起来挺好的！

W: 来，尝一块儿！

C: ……

W: 那你们坐屋里等会儿吧！

Conversation 6:

W: 好，先吃一碗！

C: 好，谢谢！

In addition to this, when serving a customer, they would, at the same time, greet other customers. According to my recording, all the four low- grade restaurants had done this. In contrast to the middle- grade restaurants, 3 out of four low- grade restaurants said “goodbye” to the customers when they were leaving. They either said “哎，走了！” or “走啦！” But they also have similarities to the middle- grade restaurants. For instance, when customers asked for something, say, napkin, they would also respond promptly with simply one word “行！”

5) Repetition: Repetition also appeared in the conversation between waiters/waitresses of low- grade restaurants and their customers. See the following conversations:

Conversation 7:

C: 我要香菇油菜！

W: 香菇油菜！

Conversation 8:

C: 老板，再给添个鸡蛋！

W: 还来个鸡蛋哈？

Conversation 9:

C: 醋溜土豆丝！

W: 醋溜土豆丝啊！

Table 1
Contrasting Characteristics in Restaurants of Different Grades

Characteristics	Number of the 4 m-g Rs possessing the correspondent characteristics	Percentage	Number of the 4 l-g Rs possessing the correspondent characteristics	Percentage
Using <i>V</i> pronouns	4	100%	0	0%
Using <i>T</i> pronouns	0	0%	4	100%
Using politeness markers	4	100%	0	0%
Recommendation-making	1	25%	3	75%
Prompt response to requests	4	100%	4	100%
Repeating to requests	3	75%	3	75%

Note. m-g Rs—middle-grade Restaurants; l-g Rs—low-grade restaurants

It should be clear, from Table 1, that different grades restaurants possess different characteristics. There are significant statistical differences among the occurrences

of these characteristics. However, there are also striking similarities existing in both grades restaurants.

4. DATA DISCUSSION

Among many theoreticians of linguistic politeness, the most influential ones are Lakoff (1973), Brown and Levinson (1987), Leech (1983), and Hill et al. (1986). Since the present study is meant to find out how environmental factors affect the linguistic choice, the findings attribute a lot to Brown and Levinson's theory and also Gu's and Leech's theories.

According to Brown and Levinson's theory, politeness used in middle- grade restaurants is basically positive politeness; while in low- grade restaurants mostly negative politeness. For middle- grade restaurants, their waiters/waitresses use honorific pronoun to show their respect to their customers. "In general, honorifics derive from froze outputs of politeness strategies where these directly or indirectly convey a status differential between speaker and addressee or referent" (Brown & Levinson, p.179). Showing deference to the addressees (here refers to the customers) is one way of avoiding imposition. In contrast, waiters/waitresses in low- grade restaurants do not use honorific pronoun, instead, they use T pronoun. This seemingly impolite behavior can be explained under Brown and Levinson's negative politeness. In some languages (including Chinese) that have T/V systems, "the use of a T (singular non-honorific pronoun) to a non-familiar alter can claim solidarity" (Brown and Levinson, p.107). So low- grade restaurants using T pronoun such as "你" do not mean to impose upon their customers, instead, they want to be more familiar with them. Also, low- grade restaurants by using an inclusive "we" (咱) form, when they mean "me", can "call upon the cooperative assumptions and thereby redress FTAs" (Brown & Levinson, p.127). So it is another way of claiming solidarity.

According to Gu's Address Maxim, S should address his interlocutor with an appropriate term. "The act of addressing involves (a) S's recognition of H as a social being in his specific social status or role and (b) S's definition of the social relation between S and H. it helps establish or maintain social bonds, strengthen solidarity, and control social distance" (Gu, p.249). This maxim can explain the usage of politeness marker by waiters/waitresses in middle- grade restaurants for they recognize their customers' superior position and the social distance between them.

Generally speaking, people who make recommendation are regarded as superior to those who follow recommendation. In this sense, it is no wonder that waiters/waitresses in middle- grade restaurants avoid making recommendation, for they do not want to impose on their customers. Avoidance of impeding others' freedom is negative politeness. This explanation under negative politeness can not explain the the phenomenon in low- grade restaurants, for they tended to give their customers advice. In fact, in offering their suggestion, they do not mean to impose, on the contrary, in order

to redress the potential threat of some FTAs, they may choose to stress their cooperation with their customers in another way. They may, as Brown and Levinson put it, "claim that (within a certain sphere of relevance) whatever, H (refers to customers) wants, S (here refers to waiters/waitresses in low- grade restaurants) wants for him and will help him to obtain. Offers and promises are natural outcome of choosing this strategy; even if they are false, they demonstrate S's good intentions in satisfying H's positive-face wants" (Brown & Levinson, p.125). So to satisfy customers' request of recommending them dishes, i.e., their positive face, waiters/waitresses in low- grade restaurants offer them their advice.

Strikingly, both grades restaurants use repetition (here it means "repeat part or all of what the preceding speaker has said in a conversation" (Brown & Levinson, p.112) to show their agreement with their customers. According to Brown and Levinson, in addition to demonstrating that one has heard correctly what was said, repeating is used to stress emotional agreement with the utterance. In this sense, both restaurants satisfy their customers' positive face.

Apart from Brown and Levinson's explanation to the waiters/waitresses different behavior patterns in restaurants of different grades, Leech's PP can also provide some insight into this issue, especially it applies to the behavior in low- grade restaurants. As mentioned above, in low- grade restaurants, waiters/waitresses are inclined to use casual language and serve their customers with less "polite" than the middle ones to their customers. But according to Leech (1983), there is a Banter Principle which expressed as follows:

"In order to show solidarity with h, say something which is (1) obviously untrue, and (2) obviously impolite to h" (Leech, p.144)

"Like irony, banter must be clearly recognizable as unserious... under-politeness can have the opposite effect of establishing or maintaining a bond of familiarity" (Leech, p.144). That is to say, the more intimate the relationship between waiters/waitresses and customers, the less important it is to be polite. Using this sub-principle, we can understand why in low-grade restaurants, waiters/waitresses seem to be impolite or intruding to their customers, while the effect is the opposite. Hence, "the lack of politeness in itself can become a sign of intimacy" (Leech, p.144).

Since the differences between the two group restaurants have been presented and theoretical explanations given, the following discussion will focus on the account of these differences. Why different restaurants of different grades have different politeness performance? The most important factor is environment. Comparatively speaking, environment in middle-grade restaurants requires their waiters/waitresses behave differently from the waiters/waitresses in low-grade ones. Another factor is whether the waiters/waitresses are trained. In the middle-

grade restaurants, according to my own investigation, waiters/waitresses receive pre-job training, although not so systematically, while waiters/waitresses in low- grade restaurants do not.

The above two factors are the variables that should be taken into consideration in this research. Since the customers are a relatively constant parameter (for I, the author of the present paper, am the major participant) in this study, I would not take it as the third factor that causes the differences between the two-group restaurants.

CONCLUSION

As discussed earlier, Gu's politeness model can explain some phenomena of middle-grade restaurants, but can account a little of the low-grade restaurants. This is because Gu's Politeness Principle mainly concerns "face" (Mianzi), while in low-grade restaurants, they seem that they do not take too much thought in their customers' faces. Similarly, Leech's Banter Principle can provide some explanation to the low- grade restaurants' intimate language used to their customers.

Brown and Levinson's theory is meant to be a framework for politeness strategies used in different restaurants. The fact that it can not offer a complete account for the two groups of data in the present study points to some inadequacies of the theory itself. But of course, the present study is not to suggest inadequacies of Brown and Levinson's theory. The central problem is in their notion of positive politeness and negative politeness. As expected, environment plays a crucial role in the using of different strategies in the restaurants of different grades—middle-grade restaurants tend to use negative politeness strategies, whereas low- grade ones positive politeness strategies.

Lastly, the author wants to emphasize the importance of using different politeness strategies to explain the politeness phenomena in different environments, that is to say, how environment plays a central role in deciding the application of different strategies. Little has been found in this aspect. So I hope the present research can provide some insight into this issue.

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APPENDIX: DEFINING MIDDLE- AND LOW-GRADE RESTAURANTS

In order to get a clear idea of the grades of restaurants, and what kind should be low- grade restaurants. A definition is necessary to make a clear cut between the two kinds of restaurants. (In the present study, only these tow kinds of restaurants are concerned, as for other grade restaurants, we just ignore them.)

1. MIDDLE- GRADE RESTAURANTS

1.1 Range/Scale

Generally speaking, the range/scale of the restaurants that can be called middle- grade, should have a comparatively middle-sized dining place, i.e. at least 100 square meters. They have their own kitchens and cooks , and employ at least 10 waiters/ waitresses.

1.2 Environment

The environment in middle- grade restaurants should not be dirty or untidy, instead it should be clean. Besides, it should be characteristic of their own style. From table cloth, tea-settings, dining settings to napkin, all these necessary things should be available to their customers, and of course, be tidy.

1.3 Qualification of Waiters/Waitresses

Waiters/waitresses in middle- grade restaurants wear their own uniforms, and receive pre-job training. As for the

language used by waiters/waitresses, dialects should be avoided and mandarin Chinese is compulsory.

2. LOW- GRADE RESTAURANTS

2.1 Range/Scale

In contrast to middle- grade restaurants, low- grade restaurants have a dining place less than 30 square meters. Among them, some even do not have their own cooks, for the owner acts as the cook and waiters/waitresses at the same time. The number of the waiters/waitresses employed is less than five.

2.2 Environment

The environment in low- grade restaurants is messy and not so carefully decorated. There is not table cloth, no tea settings or even without napkin. Only dining settings are served. On the tables and desks, there are oily and dirty patches.

2.3 Qualification of Waiters/Waitresses

There are no uniforms for the waiters/waitresses in low-grade restaurants, and in some cases, the owner acts as the grade restaurants or even the cook of the restaurants. The waiters/waitresses never received any pre-job training and in some restaurants of this grade, they can not speak mandarin Chinese but only dialects.