

Learn Chinese Politeness through Conversation Analysis in Sitcom The Lohas Family

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Abstract: Chinese Politeness Principle, a politeness principle proposed by GuYueguo. This article takes as an example the application Chinese Politeness Principle in Sitcom the Lohas Family. We used conversation analysis to understand how they interact with each other using the five maxims which GuYueguo defines that pragmatics and politeness as cultural characteristics.

1 INTRODUCTION

Sitcom (short for situation comedy) is a humorous drama based on the situation that might arise in everyday life. To make audience laugh is one of the most essential ingredients and the ultimate goal of sitcoms. Sitcoms are a little bit different compare to common comedy movies. Sitcoms are full of cultural references. Depending on the situation these references might portray regional differences throughout class system, family issues, religion, race and ethnicity, gender issues, social issues, politics and numerous other, and the more the learners know about the culture of the language they are learning – the better their understanding of that language will be. The sitcoms have not been created for second language learners but sitcoms are spontaneous authentic materials exhibit the characteristics of natural everyday speech in a way that read-aloud text do not. The second language learners learn the culture of the target language via humor. It is often considered that humor is a good vehicle for providing authentic cultural information, builds bridges between cultures, practices language items in genuine contexts, enriches textbook-based courses and introduces a refreshing change from routine language-learning procedures (Leah C, 2014).

It is believed that watching sitcoms enhances language acquisition process, but humor depends on the audience, only people with the certain cultural background or experience will grasp its meaning and laugh at the joke. One of the important elements to ensure our understanding about culture's reference is

to pay attention to politeness. People from different cultures may have different views on what politeness is and how to be polite, some languages or linguistic expressions are considered to be polite, while others were found to discourteous (Huang D, 2012). Since sitcoms are vehicles for providing cultural information, the conversational analysis of the politeness in sitcoms is expected to offer new insights into the understanding of Chinese politeness. We aim to analyze the application of politeness in Chinese Sitcom Lohas Family (LehuoJiating). Lohas Family is directed by Gao Yalin and was aired at 2010. The sitcom tells about three generations of the Feng family, an urban family in Beijing, it is filled with the daily life of seven people.

2 THE FIVE MAXIMS OF GUYUEGUO'S POLITENESS PRINCIPLE

In modern Chinese, the equivalent of politeness is *limao*, which it believed to have evolved in history from notion of *li* (Yueguo G, 1990). In "Politeness, Pragmatics and Culture, *GuYueguo* points out that the meaning of modern politeness is different from the traditional ones, and many of the social functions has disappeared as the society growing, for the traditional politeness is partly used as a behavioral rule to maintain the social ranking, while the major function of modern politeness is to enhance

harmonious relationships among people, to promote cooperation. Gu states that Chinese politeness is characterized by a tendency to denigrate oneself and respect the other. In accordance with Gu, “there are four basic notions underlying the conception of ‘*limao*’: respectfulness, modesty, attitudinal warmth, and refinement. “Respectfulness” refers to one’s positive appreciation of others, which concerns the other’s face, social status; “modesty” is a way of showing “self-denigration”, “attitudinal warmth” is one’s demonstration of hospitality and kindness to other, and “refinement” refers to one’s behavior to other in accordance with certain standards. All these aspects show that typical Chinese politeness attaches great importance to morality, as is shown in his moral maxims of his politeness principal (Yueguo G, 1992). Gu regards the Politeness Principle as a set of norms which are used to constrict speech acts. There are five sub-maxims in this Politeness Principle: the self-denigration maxim, the address maxim, the refinement maxim, the accordance maxim or agreement maxim, and the virtue-Words-Deeds Maxim.

2.1 The Self-Denigration Maxim

This maxim means denigrating self and elevating other. It absorbs the notion of respectfulness and modesty. When you are talking about yourself or something about yourself, you are supposed to denigrate yourself and should hold attitude of being modest. And when you are talking about someone else, you must elevate the one being talked about, and you should show your respect to the addressee. For example, one should use “stupid ideas” to refer his/her own ideas, and “wise ideas” to other’s; when call one’s own wife “*jiannei*” while call other’s wife “*zunfuren*”. When receiving praise, Chinese people always negate the praise first and then belittle themselves since Chinese people, accepting other’s praise is regarded as self-satisfaction.

2.2 The Address Maxim

This maxim means addressing your interlocutor with an appropriate address term. It is based on the notion of respectfulness and attitudinal warmth. Gu insists that the address forms represent social relationships among people. Changing of address forms may result in different relationships among certain people, there is very strict principle in address. For example, the elder people’s name cannot be called directly by younger people. To address others appropriately, one needs to consider a few other

pragmatic elements as follows: kin or non-kin, politically superior or inferior, professionally prestigious or non-prestigious, interpersonally familiar or unfamiliar, male or female, younger or older, on formal or informal, in public or at home.

2.3 The Refinement Maxim

This maxim means to use refined words and avoid obscene words, and to use more euphemisms and less straight-forward expressions, for being refined and being obscene are on the opposite direction of a scale. For example, if A wants B to leave, his/her implication that “Sorry, I have something else to do” is regarded as in accordance with refinement maxim, while the order “Go away” is seen as obscene.

2.4 The Accordance Maxim or Agreement Maxim

Maximize agreement and harmony between self and other; Minimize disagreement between self and other. In this maxim, Gu puts his emphasis on “face” (*lian* or *mianzi* in Chinese), for many occasions, Chinese politeness is in essence a question of face. There are two phrases that are corresponding to the English concept “face”, they are “*lian*” and “*mianzi*”, with the positive social value of the former one lower than that of the latter one. In daily communication, there are many phrases concerning about “*lian*” and “*mianzi*”, like “*shanglian*” (honor one by accepting invitation), “*diulian*” (lose face), “*you mianzi*”(enjoy due respect) and so on. These two phrases are not clearly divided in Chinese daily common conversation. For example, if one is scolding the other for his/her nonsense, a third participant might respond with “Leave him a ‘*lian*’ and ‘*mianzi*’”. Generally speaking, “*lian*” are often associated with blame, criticism, invitations, requirements and the like. For example, when A is to blame B, A shall take B’s “*mianzi*” into consideration; when A is to invite B whose social rank is higher than A, A would like to know if B will “*shanglian*” or “*geimianzi*” (honor one by accepting the invitation. When people are considering their own or other’s “*lian*” or “*mianzi*”, they often take politeness as the measurement way.

2.5 The Virtue-Words-Deeds Maxim

Minimize cost and maximize benefit to other at the motivational level (being virtuous); maximize benefit and minimize cost to self at the expressive level (being a nobleman). For example: speaker A

offers to help B buy some chickens, which is polite in nature for A is trying to maximize benefit to B on the motivational level. For A's volunteered help, B feels it would be great trouble. So he does not intend to accept it, which shows he is trying to minimize cost to speaker A at the expressive level. Then speaker A's answer has minimized the cost that he might spend so as to make it easy for speaker B to accept it. It seems that speaker B is impolite if he accepts speaker A's help, for he does not minimize cost to the other in the end. It is not so indeed, for in China, there is a social custom that if one helps the other for a time, the other might repay it by helping him/her for the next time.

3 CONVERSATIONAL ANALYSIS CHINESE POLITENESS IN SITCOM LOHAS FAMILY

The following paragraphs are part of few episodes from Lohas Family sitcom series. We will take example to analyze the politeness which has applied in the conversations.

In episode five, Da Zhi met up his old school friend, MangGuo at a coffee shop nearby. MangGuo also his first love and they have not met again for fifteen years.

Da Zhi : "I heard you have returned to the country and now you open a company and has become a big boss?"
 MangGuo : "Oh, it is nothing, well, our company is trying to go public."
 Da Zhi : "Wow, your company is big, the business must be good."
 MangGuo : "It is not too bad, but there are many side effects, when you have good career, your health is getting worse."
 Da Zhi : "You looks fine, is there any problem?"
 MangGuo : "It is not obvious? (She points out her health problems but in the same times, she also points the reason of her health is getting worse because of travelling and play some sports.

Da Zhi told MangGuo that he is a CEO of a big company and MangGuo praised him as a successful man. They both got criticized by the coffee shop owner who sat next to their table.

First time, MangGuo tried to denigrate herself when Da Zhi asked about her career and herself, but in the same time she also wanted to show how success she is. And Da Zhi is not a CEO at all, but he wanted to be seen as successful man so he bragged in front of MangGuo to save his "face". They both did not try to self-denigrate themselves, on the contrary try to elevate themselves, as the result they both was criticized by the coffee shop's owner of their impoliteness.

In episode three and four, Feng family tried to hire a maid to help them clean the house and cook for them. Liu Gu (Zhang Yun's aunt) and Da Zhi each brought a new maid to meet the family for the first time.

Scene 1

Liu Gu : "I introduce first, this is Grandfather Feng."
 Maid : "Hello Grandfather Feng."
 Liu Gu : "That is aunt Zhang."
 Maid : "Hello Aunt Zhang."
 Liu Gu : "That is Xiao Xuan."
 Maid : "Hello Aunt Xiao Xuan."
 Xiao Xuan : "Aunt? Call me Xiao Xuan."
 Maid : "Hello sister (jiejie) Xiao Xuan."

Scene 2

Da Zhi : "Please come in, this is our house, this is my father."
 Maid : "Hello Uncle."
 Da Zhi : "This is my little sister, Xiao Xuan."
 Maid : "Hello little sister, Xiao Xuan."
 Xiao Xuan : "Wow, she is smart, hello."
 Da Zhi : "This is Liu Gu, our special guest."
 Maid : "Hello Liu Gu, you look very young."
 Da Zhi : "And that is your big sister in law."
 Maid : "Oh, hello big sister in law, you are beautiful and your skin is good."
 Zhang Yun : "Wow, such a smart girl."

In these two conversations, both maids have clear realization of their self- status. They try to maintain good relationships with others when they greet Feng family in their first meetings. The first

maid used “grandfather” and the second maid used “uncle” to greet the elder of the family. They both had shown the family is the superior and they are the inferior. But if we compare these maids, the second maid is more likeable, she gave better impressions than the first one. Gu states, to address others appropriately is not an easy job, the use of address reflects a kind of social relationship between people, and the change of it means one’s relationship change with others. We see the first maid addressed Xiao Xuan with “aunt” and changed it into “sister” after Xiao Xuan showed she did not like to be called “aunt”. The second maid addressed Xiao Xuan with “little sister” even there no much age difference between them, this made Xiao Xuan felt much younger. And she also addressed Zhang Yun with big sister in law, instead of aunt. By addressing Zhang Yun “big sister in law, the second maid showed her respect because “big sister in law” in Chinese culture can be used to address women of higher age and rank. By using such familial or kinship terms to address Zhang Yun and Xiao Xuan, the stranger (second maid) gave a signal as a strategy to claim closeness (Pan Y and Kádár D Z, 2011). Besides, the second maid threw a lot of complements to female members of the Feng family, and made her got good impression and got complements back from the family.

In second episode, grandfather Feng and Xiao Xuan were angry because they felt that they were humiliated by Da Zhi behavior when he was on air in radio station. When Da Zhi came home, Xiao Xuan called him “big radio host” and his father called him “the elder son, come here”. Da Zhi’s profession is a radio host, so addressing him “big radio host” in normal circumstances is a common thing, especially if he was good on his profession, but in this occasion, Da Zhi did a big mistake when he was on air, so using “big radio host” to call him is to criticize his shameful behavior. Grandfather Feng stated his son as “elder son” (Zhang Zi), this phrase was used in ancient Chinese and was a normal term, but in modern Chinese using uncommon address term all depends on its context includes angry, criticize or a joke. In this case because grandfather Feng was very disappointed with his son and his son even did not apologize for it.

In first episode, Zhang Yun, Da Zhi’s wife decided to work as international flight attendant to pursue and develop her career, but her decision influence the whole family, her time at home became less and less. The whole family actually did not agree with her because no one will cook for the

family so they discussed who will cook when Zhang Yun were not at home. Basically, nobody wanted to cook, but they did not directly say it. Xiao Xuan even tried to offer herself, but latter she said, Oh, I can’t. I have to prepare for my exam, now is the important moment.” Grandfather Feng said, “I only can cook fried rice with egg and green onion, besides now I have make costume for senior choir in our community.” Da Zhi knew his father and sister did not want to cook, so he said he will cook for the family, but the children directly said his cooking is not good, it is better for the whole family to diet than to eat his cooking. Da Zhi was very angry and said, “Ungrateful children, do you think I want to cook?” In this conversation, we see grandfather and Xiao Xuan used less straight-forward expressions to said their unwillingness so Da Zhi did not angry and the kids used direct expressions to express their feeling about their father’s cooking, made Da Zhi very angry because the kids were regarded as impolite.

In episode three and four, grandfather Feng like to write Chinese calligraphy, the first maid in episode three threw his calligraphy and said, “Ah, those pictures and strokes was calligraphy? I thought that was kid’s writing.” Grandfather Feng was very angry and said, I practice calligraphy for years and you think my writing is kid’s writing?” on the contrary, second maid said to grandfather Feng that his calligraphy is still far beyond the professionals but was not hobby only and already above the amateurs. Basically, both maids actually have same thoughts about grandfather’s calligraphy, but the first maid used direct and impolite words by comparing with the inferiors (kids), and the second maid used indirect words by comparing with the superiors (professionals), made the second maid is seen as a polite and accomplished person.

In episode four, Da Zhi found out that his bicycle saddle was pull out by the security in their neighbourhood and he tried to confront the security officer. Da Zhi said to the security officer, “I will report you to your manager! You pulled my saddle without any notice, you violent my rights.” The security officer answered, “You did not park your bicycle in the right place. You are the one who violent my rights because you did not park in the right place, the manager will cut my salary.” The security officer wanted Da Zhi to come to security post to take back his saddle, but Da Zhi did not want to and tried to grab it from officer’s hand. Zhang Yun saw the fight and came to stop the fight but it failed. Liu Gu showed up and told the security that Da Zhi is her niece’s husband, and told Da Zhi that the security is from the same village as her. Liu Gu

criticized Da Zhi, “I do not want to criticize you but you cannot park your bicycle anywhere you want, ErLengzi (the security officer) only did his jobs.”

- Security officer : “Auntie, auntie don’t criticize my brother (Da Zhi) anymore, my brother I really don’t know that you are Liu Gu’s relatives, this is misunderstanding.”
- Da Zhi : “It was big brother’s (my) fault.”
- Security officer : “No, no, it was little brother’s fault, it is little brother’s fault, I will put the saddleback.”
- Da Zhi : “No, it is not necessary, I will put it myself.”
- Security officer : “Come, let little brother do it.”
- Da Zhi : “No, no, big brother’s bicycle does not need saddle.”
- Security officer : “No, no, no, you are my big brother.”
- Da Zhi : “you are my little brother.”

In this conversation, we saw a big fight between two people, when Zhang Yun came to stop it, it failed, but when Liu Gu came, they both called each other as “brother”. Asians tend to make clear distinction between in group and out group members, and place great emphasis on group cohesion and interdependence between in group members. In group members included families, relatives, friends, fellow villagers, fellow schoolmates and fellow colleagues. In group members form the basic structure for social interaction, so it took a long time for newcomers to overcome the boundary of inside and outside relations and establish social relationships in new place. If there was some personal connection to introduce the outsider to the locals, such as that he/she was someone’s cousin’s cousin, it was easier for him/her to be accepted (Pan Y, 2000). In here, we see how personal connections can be seen as breaking the ice between the inside and outside. Liu Gu is the connector between Da Zhi and the security officer, they both changed their behavior towards each other immediately since they knew ones relations with Liu Gu. Because of these relations between them, it made when ErLengzi want to blame Da Zhi, he

should take Liu Gu’s “*mianzi*” as consideration and Da Zhi was also the same. The appearance of Liu Gu indirectly drove them to be in agreement with other and keep a harmonious relationship with

each other (they called each other ‘brother’), leave others a ‘*lian*’ or ‘*mianzi*’ and also let Liu Gu feel ‘*yournianzi*’.

In episode four, the Feng family found out they hired maids few times but no one suitable to work at their house. Liu Gu offered herself to help, she was willing to become Feng family’s ‘maid’ to solve their problem.

- Liu Gu : “Actually, if you all loved my cooking, I will stay longer to help you.”
- Whole Family : “Wow, it is great, we expected for it.”
- Zhang Yun : “This is my auntie, I will feel bad. Liu Gu, you may stay as long as you want, but you are not allowed work for us.”
- Da Zhi : “That right, you can stay but not working.”
- Liu Gu : “Yun Yun, you don’t know, before I went to America, I sold my house, I am alone, live anywhere is the same for me. Besides, when I came here, stay with you, I feel happy, it is better to cook than feel bored.”

Liu Gu finally accept the offer to stay and help the family with cooking. In this conversation we see Liu Gu offers to help the family, first time, the whole family accept it directly, in Chinese culture, this is shameless. It is polite for Liu Gu to offer a help because she stay there as a guest, even she is Zhang Yun’s aunt. She tried to maximize benefit for Feng family. And for her offers, Feng family felt bad, so we see Zhang Yun and Da Zhi try to let Liu Gu stay but did not allow Liu Gu working, which they tried to minimize the cost to Liu Gu. And Liu Gu’s answer minimized the cost that she might spend so make Feng family easy to accept the offer. Being polite, one should always pay attention to the cost and benefit related to self and others.

4 CONCLUSION

Politeness is a social and linguistic phenomenon that exists in almost every culture (Wang M and Peng Y, 2015). GuYueguo summarized Chinese Politeness Principle is more or less influenced by his supervisor Leech, but his principle is constructed specially on Chinese culture. We tried to apply his Politeness

Principle in Chinese Sitcom, The Lohas Family. In comedy series, it was common to find violation to the politeness on purpose because is the source of the laughter, and sitcom The Lohas family is no exceptional. Through this research, we can learn that Chinese politeness depends on a lot of terms, a person is considered as polite if he or she does not elevate themselves, addressing someone also depends on situation, place, and social rank. Mostly hierarchy and family structures in Chinese are more complicated. In this sitcom, we only see the interaction between family members and their small environment, but with the limited examples, we learn about superior- inferior in addressing someone and how to be more likeable in Chinese society. Chinese people like more when people use indirect sentence, especially for criticize. Always pay attention on “face” is one of the most important in social relationship, cost and benefit for self and others also become highly appreciation in politeness principle. For example, a Chinese person’s first response to any offer is often ‘no’. ‘No’ here does not symbolize a rude rejection as conceptualized in some cultures, rather it is an expression of politeness (Lin H H, 2005) (ex: Liu Gu’s offer to cook for the family). Different cultures own different politeness maxim. Each culture values are not the same, by watching movie, especially original ones can help us to understand the culture and appropriately use the politeness principal in Chinese society.

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