Cross-Cultural Politeness and Media

Cari Sisson

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1 Introduction

Different means of electronic communication simulate different aspect of natural face-to-face communication and the affordances of media can affect the quality of the interaction on multiple levels including the efficiency and the social qualities of the interaction. Some examples of relevant social qualities are trust, self-awareness and impression formation.

1.1 Politeness

Non-prescriptive, true politeness\(^1\) can be thought of as the techniques people use to avoid being offensive, embarrassing, aggressive or presumptuous in conversation. In their seminal work on politeness, Brown and Levinson (1987), define politeness as an attempt by the speaker to preserve the self-esteem, or face, of both the speaker and the hearer.

Brennan and Ohaeri (1999)\(^2\) write that politeness indicates “information about the speaker’s commitment to particular propositions and their willingness to have this information modified by a partner.” People express their commitment to the content of their utterance through facial expressions and gestures as well as through linguistic choices and mannerisms, such as intonation, word choice and syntax, the politeness can be communicated in many different ways.

This project is focused on linguistic politeness, which comes in many forms. Brown and Levinson identify two super-classes of politeness which are relevant to this discussion, namely positive and negative politeness. Positive politeness relates to the speaker’s desire for the listener to share the same perspective, emphasizing their commonalities. Negative politeness, on the other hand, focuses on respecting the differences between the speaker and the hearer, and granting them autonomy and freedom from obligation to each other.

1.2 Culture

Cultures can be differentiated by many features, one of which is the amount of contextual information necessary for successful communication. High context cultures are said to be more dependent on situational information, such as relationships and nonverbal behavior, than are low context cultures, which rely primarily on verbal content for effective communication (Hall cited in Setlock et. al. (2007)). This type of cultural difference is relevant for the development of communication tools, which

\(^1\) True politeness is different than prescriptive politeness, which includes things like saying please, thank you and excuse me at prescribed moments of common interactions.

\(^2\) Page 228.
afford different levels of contextual information, such as visual information or information about social networks.

1.3 Chinese Politeness

Culture has a great impact on how politeness is communicated and negotiated. Pan (2000) suggests that the theory of face proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) may not be as universal as they suggest, particularly for cultures which are less individual-centered than western culture. She writes that politeness is more situational for the Chinese than it is for Americans and that face management does not always adequately explain politeness behaviors. In Chinese culture, rank, age, gender and type of social connection, which all relate to power, are weighted differently in different situations. Examples of situations where polite behavior is manifest differently might be interacting at a family gathering, an official meeting or in a service industry. According to Pan, Americans often see Chinese as inconsistent in their degree of politeness while Chinese see Americans as being insincere in their politeness because of their relatively consistent use of prescriptively polite terms like please, even in very familiar settings.

1.4 Media Affordances

One of the primary purposes of communication media is to enable us to build and maintain relationships, both personal and professional, with people all around the world. Given this, it is important to investigate how cultural differences might influence how people interact through the filter of different media. In terms of conversational effectiveness, high-context cultures would be expected to get more benefit than low-context cultures would, from communication media that transmits additional contextual information.

In terms of the information content, most existing and currently-used communication media fall into three large categories: IM (synchronous text-only), audio-only and video with audio. The baseline for comparison is generally face-to-face communication. IM and face-to-face make the most extreme contrast as IM is lacking both the visual and vocal cues of face-to-face interaction and typing is a less natural means of communication than speech. In Setlock, Fussell and Neuwirth (2004), the found clear, but unsurprising differences in the IM and face-to-face interaction.

To test the value of specific media affordances, a more fine-grained comparison can be made between the audio-only and video with audio media, where the only difference is presence or absence of visual cues. The question is whether the visual component improves the quality of the interaction in measurable ways. There are many studies, such as Fussell, Setlock and Parker (2003), which show that visual cues improve the efficiency and success rate of tasks requiring physical descriptions, such as team
robot building, but it is less clear how the presence or absence of visual cues affect the social qualities of an interaction, such as the politeness that participants invest in a conversation.

1.5 Data Source

To explore the importance of visual cues and their effect on the politeness used by representatives of high and low context cultures, this project examines existing data from a study by Setlock, Quinones and Fussell (2007). In this study, cross-cultural American-Chinese and single-culture Chinese-Chinese and American-American dyads discussed and negotiated a joint solution to the Desert Survival Task and the Arctic Survival Task, in which they were given a scenario where they had to rank a list of items in terms of their importance to the survival of a group of stranded people. Participants first made an individual ranking and then they discussed their ranking and came up with a negotiated joint ranking by communicating with a previously unknown partner through either an audio-only system or audio with a face-oriented video stream. After reporting their negotiated ranking, participants submitted a final individual ranking. Changes in individual rankings were seen as a measure of the persuasiveness of the conversational interaction. Each dyad completed both survival tasks, one of which used the video system and the other of which used the audio-only system.

This study looked at three outcome-related measures: how long it took pairs to come to an agreement, how much they persuaded each other to change rankings and the similarity of the rankings to the correct ranking. It also investigated the use of pronouns and cognitive terminology (such as *understand*) and participants’ own rankings of the effectiveness of the task.

None of the outcome-related measures appeared to differ significantly between the different cultures or media. The study found no main effects of medium or culture on the average number of words required to complete the task or on the degree of persuasion in an interaction. The accuracy of the rankings also showed no main effect of culture or medium.

However there were main effects of culture on the content measures and the quality measure. Collective pronouns, such as *we*, were more common in pairs that included at least one Chinese participant. *You* pronouns were used more in the American-American dyads. In the measure of quality, Chinese dyads reportedly felt that their interactions were less effective than did American dyads.

One possible explanation, proposed in the study, for the lack of a main effect of media is that participants in the video condition rarely looked at the video monitor, which minimizes the differences between the two media. For example, in the American-Chinese dyads one of the two participants was

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3 The Chinese participants were native speakers of Chinese who were born in the People’s Republic of China and had been in the United States for less than five years. The Americans were all native speakers of English.
looking at the monitor only about 19% of the time, while both participants simultaneously looked at the monitor only about 5% of the time.

It is also worth noting that the task was challenging for participants of both cultures because of the specific knowledge required to correctly rank the items. Also, some of the Chinese students were not familiar with all of the terminology, such as words like *syrup* and *rear view mirror*.

The lack of main effects of media on the outcome-related measures and the presence of intercultural content differences suggested that a different approach to investigating the content of the interactions might yield more significant results. Because the task involves negotiation, which can be a particularly face-threatening task, politeness was a natural choice for further study.

The intercultural pairs attracted my attention because they used more words, on average, than the single cultural pairs, and I wondered what they were doing with the additional words. Is it being spent on relationship-building and politeness, or is it due to miscommunications? The intercultural pairs also represented a good way to contrast the cultures with a reasonable amount of coding.

2 Coding Scheme

For the 10 American-Chinese dyads, I investigated several features related to politeness.

2.1 Turn length

In each condition, I recorded the number of turns taken by each speaker, where a turn consists of an un-interrupted utterance. I also recorded the number of words used and thus the average number of words per utterance for each speaker. If one partner had a higher number of words per turn in both the audio and the video tasks, I consider him/her to be the dominant speaker and the other participant to be the passive speaker.

2.2 Questions

I kept track of the different types of questions asked by the speakers. I limited the analysis to information-seeking questions, meaning that I excluded tag-questions, or confirmation questions (such as ‘*you want the matches, right?*’). I defined questions as being either task related or opinion related. Opinion questions included requests for factual information. I also divided questions in terms of

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4 Things like the fact that you can go longer without food than you can without water and the fact that it gets cold in the desert at night, were useful bits of information that not all of the participants knew.

5 The 10 pairs of subjects participated in both tasks so I have 10 audio transcripts and 10 video transcripts.
directness, based on the use of direct pronouns such as you, your, we, our and us. Examples of the four types of questions this defines are given in table 2.2.1.

Table 2.2.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question Type</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indirect task</td>
<td>What’s next?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Are we done then?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct task</td>
<td>What do you have as most important?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Should we put it as number five?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct opinion</td>
<td>Do you think the mirror is strong enough for that?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Did you think the water is already going to be pure?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect opinion</td>
<td>Are there wild animals?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Why?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Questions express positive politeness because they include the hearer in the activity. They also indicate involvement in the task, which is another positive quality. The avoidance of direct pronouns like you, is a strategy for negative politeness, because it reduces the pressure on the hearer.

The information seeking types of questions I coded exclude hedge questions which provisionally propose an idea. Hedge questions can be expressed through tag questions or intonation. Because I was working with transcripts that did not include intonation, it was difficult to distinguish between statements and questions that would have been marked only with intonation such as ‘So you think water is important.’

2.3 Thought verb tense

The use of past tense can indicate a polite willingness to negotiate a proposition. I looked specifically at the use of tense in ‘thought verbs’ such as think, figure, imagine and feel because they are content verbs that are often used in propositions. For example ‘I thought the wood matches would be the most important one’ or ‘I was thinking they would use the canvas to wrap themselves up’ is more open to revision than ‘I think the tablets would be next.’

In the theory of Brown and Levinson, such cases of deictic distancing are a way of expressing negative politeness. Distance in time creates remoteness from a potentially face threatening action such as stating an opinion.

2.4 Conditional statements

Flexibility and a desire to incorporate the opinions of an interlocutor can also be expressed through conditional statements. Similar to thought verb tense, the use of the conditional creates distance
and expresses negative politeness. In coding conditional statements I included the use of conditional tense (ie. *would* + verb, *could* + verb) and words like *if* and *may*.

This encompasses the use of conditionals in discussions of actual imagined scenarios as well as in places where present tense could easily be used. An example of the former is ‘If I were in the desert, I think I could walk for two days.’ The latter would include utterances like ‘I think matches would be first.’

3 Hypotheses

Based on the literature described in the introduction, I came up with the following hypotheses for the politeness features investigated and their interaction with culture and media condition.

Turn length
3.1 American’s will have a higher average number of words per turn, making them the dominant participants.

Questions
3.2 The Chinese will ask more questions, because of their collective world-view.
3.3 The more impoverished audio condition will lead to a more task-oriented focus, demonstrated by to fewer questions overall and fewer opinion questions in particular.

Thought verb tense and Conditionals
3.4 Americans will use more negative politeness hedges than the Chinese will. Americans will use more past tense thought verbs and conditionals than the Chinese will. This hypothesis comes from my belief that these types of hedges are less likely to be used by the Chinese in English because they subtle and more language-specific than are positive politeness techniques such as the use of inclusive pronouns.
3.5 The more impoverished audio condition will lead to a more task-oriented focus, demonstrated by fewer thought verbs in the audio condition.

Overall
3.6 The lack of visual cues will lead to less politeness in the audio condition.

4 Results

Because there are only 10 dyads, the results are merely suggestive and I do attempt to find significant differences.
4.1 Turn length

In eight of the ten dyads, one participant was dominant, meaning that, on average, they use more words per turn in both the video and audio condition. Four of these dominant participants were American and four were Chinese, so contrary to hypothesis 3.1, there is no apparent effect of culture on conversational dominance. Table 4.1.1 shows the average words per turn of the dominant and passive participants in both conditions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Dominant</th>
<th>Passive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Audio</td>
<td>15.9369</td>
<td>8.78329</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video</td>
<td>16.466</td>
<td>7.9402</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The two pairs in which there was no dominant participant where both extreme in terms of how many turns it took them to complete the task. One took much more turns than average (88 on audio, and 85 on video) and the other took very few turns (23 on audio and 12 on video).

There was very little difference in the average number of words used by a single participant in the two media; the audio average was 531 while the video average was 543. The average number of turns was also very similar between the conditions with audio at an average of 40 turns and video at 43.2 turns.

Setlock et. al. (2007) found that the intercultural pairs used more word overall than the single-culture pairs. It appears that this high overall rate of word use is not affected by medium.

4.2 Questions

Consistent with hypothesis 3.2, on average the Chinese participants did ask more questions than the Americans. As seen in Table 4.2.1, this difference is more pronounced in the video condition.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>American</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Audio</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On the whole, participants asked slightly fewer questions in the audio condition (average 3.95 questions) than in the video condition (average 4.45). This is at least partially consistent with hypothesis 3.3, which predicted such an effect in the more impoverished audio condition. This is shown by the bars labeled ‘total Q’ in the chart below. Participants asked slightly more indirect task questions in the audio condition and less of the other three types, suggesting that the audio condition does indeed lead to a slightly depersonalized and task-oriented approach. In the following charts, the y-axis represents the average number of questions asked.
Questions and Media Condition

Representatives of the two cultures asked different types of questions in the different media conditions, as shown by the charts below. Notably the Americans asked more indirect task questions in the audio condition and the Chinese asked more opinion questions in the video condition.

A closer look at the questions asked by the Chinese participants shows that they asked more indirect task questions in the audio condition and more of the other types of questions in the video condition. This is a more extreme case of the same trend observed when looking at the types of questions asked in the media condition, without subdividing the results by culture. This tradeoff between question types is shown the chart below. The chart below and to the right shows that Americans do not have such a tradeoff and that they appear to be less affected by media in this respect. The overall appearance of a more depersonalized and task-oriented focus in the audio condition seems to be almost entirely due to the differences shown by the Chinese participants, in keeping with the theory of high and low-context cultures.
Despite the fact that the Chinese asked more questions on average (an average of 4.9, up from 4) in the video condition, the trade-off between indirect task questions and opinion questions persists. Table 4.2.2.

**Table 4.2.2 Question Types**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Audio American</th>
<th>Audio Chinese</th>
<th>Video American</th>
<th>Video Chinese</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>indirect task</td>
<td>23.1%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>indirect opinion</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
<td>15.0%</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
<td>18.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>direct task</td>
<td>56.4%</td>
<td>45.0%</td>
<td>55.0%</td>
<td>44.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>direct opinion</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
<td>15.0%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>22.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interestingly, the passive participants asked more questions and a greater proportion of the questions in the video condition. This suggests that they were either more willing to ask questions in the video condition or that they were more able to do so, perhaps because the visual information was useful for turn taking.

**Table 4.2.3 Passive participant questions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>% of questions posed by passive participant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>audio</td>
<td>49.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>video</td>
<td>59.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The chart below shows that the eight passive participants showed the greatest increase in opinion questions. The number of questions asked by dominant participants was less affected by media and they actually asked fewer opinion questions.
4.3 Though verb tense

Contrary to hypothesis 3.5, the Americans used slightly fewer thought verbs in the audio condition, but the Chinese actually used significantly more. In agreement with the first part of hypothesis 3.4, the Americans used the past tense hedge more than the Chinese did, as seen in table 4.3.1.

Table 4.3.1 Average number of past tense hedges

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>American</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Audio</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The difference in usage of the past tense hedge is most notable in the video condition, where the Americans used the past tense both proportionately and absolutely more than in the audio condition or either Chinese condition. The chart below show the average number of thought verbs used.

Table 4.3.2 shows that when the average number of thought verbs per turn is considered in order to account for conversational length, the Americans in the video condition still use the highest percentage of the past tense hedge.
Table 4.3.2 Percentage of thought verbs in past tense

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Audio American</th>
<th>Audio Chinese</th>
<th>Video American</th>
<th>Video Chinese</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>percentage of average thought verbs per turn which were in past tense</td>
<td>19.2%</td>
<td>23.4%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>25.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.4 Conditional

In keeping with the second part of hypothesis 3.4, both table XXX and the chart that follows show that Americans used the conditional hedge much more than the Chinese did.

Table 4.4.1 Average number of conditionals per turn

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>American</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Audio</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Average number of conditionals used

The Americans also used conditional words more in the audio condition than in the video condition.

4.5 Overall

In terms of the question feature, the Chinese showed less positive politeness in the audio condition, while the Americans seemed unaffected by media. The usage of the negative politeness past tense hedge also suggests less politeness in the audio condition, at least by the Americans who showed greater differences regarding this feature. Conversely the conditional hedge is used slightly more by both groups in the audio condition. Due to a coding problem that will be discussed in the next section, the conditional hedge is a less reliable feature. Both the question feature and the verb tense feature suggest greater politeness in the video condition. This is consistent with hypothesis 3.6, which proposes that visual cues increase politeness.
5 Discussion

Because questions initiate adjacency pairs, they exercise a lot of control over the flow of the conversation. The high proportion of questions asked by the less verbose, passive participants in the video condition suggests that using more words does not entail having more control over the flow of a conversation. Perhaps ‘dominant’ and ‘passive’ are misnomers.

These results strongly suggest that the high and low-context cultures use different forms of politeness and are differently affected by the media condition.

Assuming that an increase in questions, particularly opinion questions, posed by a participant does indeed suggest increased involvement and positive politeness, the Chinese were positively affected by the presence of the visual information, in keeping with the theory of the high situational context required by high-context cultures. The Chinese asked more questions overall in the video condition and more of the questions were engaging opinion questions.

As predicted, the negative politeness hedges (thought verb tense and conditionals) were employed more by the Americans. Given the many different ways to achieve politeness, it appears that the hedges included here are just not commonly learned by the Chinese ESL populations. The absolute proportion of thought verbs which were in the past tense was higher among the Americans, than among the Chinese, particularly in the video condition where Americans use much more of the past tense hedge than they did in the audio condition. In both conditions, the conditional hedge is employed much more by Americans than by Chinese.

The more impoverished audio condition lead to fewer uses of thought verbs in the audio condition, among the Americans. This is taken as evidence of a more task-oriented approach in the audio condition, where fewer opinions are expressed. The Chinese did not follow the same pattern, actually using more thought verbs in the audio condition. However, the smaller number of questions posed by the Chinese in the audio condition suggests that they too took a more task-oriented approach to the audio tasks. It is worth noting that the increased usage of thought verbs by the Americans in the video condition might be extremely related to the increased number of opinion questions posed by the Chinese in the same condition.

Doing anything short of exhaustive coding of a great number of features inevitably lumps things together. This caused a problem in the conditional feature, which lumps together true hedges such as ‘We could start with the most important item’ and actual conditional discussions of scenarios such as ‘You could use the mirror to signal.’ The latter case isn’t a hedge – it’s just proper use of the conditional tense. In the case of the conditional feature, the non-hedge usage is more common than the hedge usage and so the feature is sort of washed out by this coding error. Similar, but less significant, distinctions could be
made in the thought verb tense feature where it would be useful to look at tense in propositions and reactions to proposals as compared to tense in justifications.

6 Conclusion

This project found trends that suggest that media is does influence politeness and that different cultures employ different politeness mechanisms. However it does not investigate enough features to address the claim that high-context cultures are more affected by media differences than are low-context cultures. The trends found here suggest that a more detailed analysis of many more features (such as provisional hedges, explicit agreement, and hesitations) would be worthwhile. In a study looking at a more complete set of features, it would be interesting to see if the Chinese use fewer negative politeness techniques than individual-centered Americans do. If that were the case, it might change the way we look at face management. Perhaps negative politeness is sometimes not even perceived as being polite, but some cultures.

In this vein, another future study of cross-cultural politeness might contrast intended politeness with perceived politeness. In reading the transcripts of these conversations, I noticed that the participants in the inter-cultural pairs were very tolerant of differences in how politeness was expressed (or not expressed). For example, many of the less proficient Chinese speakers (whose imperfect fluency was apparent in both the audio and video conditions) used overly direct phrasing that could easily have been construed as impolite (such as ‘That’s enough’ and ‘So again I will tell you my choice’), had it been used by an American. The Americans seemed to recognize the cultural differences and give the Chinese the benefit of the doubt, in terms of perceived politeness. I wasn’t able to read the transcripts from the point-of-view of Chinese politeness norms, but it seems likely that they too were accommodating.
Bibliography


