

# **THE SUBORDINATES' USAGE OF ADDRESS TOWARD THE SUPERIORS IN CHINESE**

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## **1. Introduction**

Conversation is a rule-governed, interpersonal communication activity (Shih 1986). It involves at least two interlocutors, a speaker (S) and a hearer (H), engaging in a give-and-take transmission of message. Successful communication in a conversation means that the speaker conveys his meaning and intention accurately, and the hearer understands and interprets the message exactly as the speaker intends. Conversation is also a goal-oriented, cooperative speech act. When people are engaged in a conversation, they normally have one or more of the following goals of communication in mind: to convey information, to establish or reinforce social relationships, to express emotion or direct the activities of other people. In order to accomplish these goals, the speaker needs the cooperation of the hearer. The most effective means to ensure a hearer's cooperation is through the use of politeness strategies (Shih 1986).

Politeness is a very important factor in the construction of conversational utterances, for no matter how clearly a message is conveyed, if the utterance is not conveyed in the proper manner, it may not be accepted by the hearer. To be polite in conversation means to say the right thing to the right person at the right time in the right manner, and thus make others feel happy and at ease. In essence, a polite speech act is one which pays respect to the other's "face", i.e., one's public self-image (Shih 1986). One way to pay respect to the hearer's face is to use appropriate address forms.

The primary goal of this study is to research how subordinates address their superiors. Generally speaking, because of the superiors' power over the subordinates, the latter should address the former in a more polite way. However, the real situation is not always so straightforward since some

social factors, such as the formality of the occasion and the degree of acquaintance, will involve in. Whether these two factors affect the subordinates' usage of address toward their superiors will be the main concern of this study. The reason why I am interested in the usage of address is that, according to Shih (1986), forms of address is one of the areas of sociolinguistics which can best illustrate the close bond between language and society. They are used to announce the relative status and degree of solidarity between the interlocutors and the formality of the occasion. They can also be used to indicate the speaker's attitude toward the hearer, and at the same time determine the speech style for the following conversation (Shih 1986). Therefore, I believe that through the study of people's usage of address toward their superiors I can determine their attitudes toward politeness.

In the subsequent parts, we will first review some notions of politeness and titles in section 2. Then in section 3, the methodology used in data collecting and analysis, and the results and findings of the analysis will be presented. At last, a summary of this study will be stated in section 4.

## **2. Theoretical Background**

In this section, we will review Brown & Levinson's "face theory" in 2.1. Then, the three most important sociolinguistic variables related to politeness will be stated in 2.2. In 2.3, forms of address will be presented.

### **2.1 Brown & Levinson's Face Theory**

In Brown and Levinson's (1987) discussion of politeness, the speaker is molded as a model person (MP), fluent in a natural language, and endowed with two special properties -- rationality and face. With "rationality", the MP can reason logically from ends to the means that will achieve those ends. And with "face", the MP has two particular wants, namely, the want to be unimpeded (negative-face wants) and the want to be approved of in certain aspects (positive-face wants). In general, people will cooperate (and assume each other's cooperation) in order to maintain each other's face. But people are also expected to defend their faces if threatened and to threaten

others' faces in defending their own. Therefore, there are face-threatening acts (FTAs), including acts that primarily threaten the hearer's negative-face wants, by indicating (potentially) that the speaker does not intend to avoid impeding the hearer's freedom of action, and acts that threaten the hearer's positive-face wants, by indicating (potentially) that the speaker does not care about the hearer's feelings, wants, and so on.

In Brown & Levinson's opinion, every person is an MP, who behaves appropriately in every social interactions. Hence, in the context of the mutual vulnerability of face, any MP will seek to avoid face-threatening acts, or will employ certain strategies to minimize the threat. In other words, s/he will take into consideration some strategies to meet the hearer's wants or to satisfy the hearer's desire, i.e., positive politeness, or s/he will do some redressive action to have the hearer's freedom of action unhindered or the hearer's attention unimpeded, i.e., negative politeness. Therefore, to be polite is "do not do the FTA; if unavoidable, do it with redressive action." (Brown & Levinson. 1987)

Positive politeness is an approach-based strategy. It "anoints" the face of the hearer, e.g., by treating him as a member of an in-group, a friend, a person whose wants and personality traits are known, liked, or appreciated. Using appropriate forms of address, the focus of this study, is one of the strategies of positive politeness. If appropriate forms of address are used, the hearer may feel respected, and properly treated. If they are misused, the hearer may feel annoyed, mistreated, and uncomfortable, that is, his positive face is threatened.

## 2.2 Sociolinguistic Variables

As politeness is a social motive, social factors will surely interact with politeness to make the linguistic realization patterns appear to be more satisfactory.

Social factors relevant to the assessment of politeness are hard to be named or numbered. Deference, modesty, intimacy, praise, status, respect of privacy, sincerity, and acceptance can all be included. But in Brown & Levinson's view, the following three factors are the most influential in all cultures

and most inclusive as they subsume all other factors that have a principal effect in assessing the degree of politeness (Brown & Levinson. 1987):

- (1) the relative power of S and H (an asymmetric relation: vertical distance)
- (2) the social distance of S (speaker) and H (hearer) (a symmetric relation: horizontal distance)
- (3) *the absolute ranking of impositions in the particular culture*

This observation corresponds to Leech's (1983) proposal: the degree of politeness exposed by the linguistic realization patterns is supposed to be mainly connected with the three social variables -- the cost of the act to the hearer, the relative power of the interlocutors and the solidarity between the speaker and the hearer.

Two of these three parameters relevant to this study will be discussed in more detail in the following.

#### A. Power/Vertical Distance

Power, authority, or superiority, is an asymmetric social dimension of relative status. It is a vertical social distance. Power difference between speaker and hearer may correspond to the degree to which speaker/hearer can impose his/her own plans or his/her own self-evaluation on hearer/speaker. Power difference may result from the difference of age (as between sixty-year-olds and twenty-year-olds), absolute social status (as between parents and children), relative social status (as between principals and teachers, or between teachers and students), and so on (Brown & Levinson. 1987). Besides, in a FTA, rights and duties are important in defining the standing status of participants in power relation to one another (Leech. 1983). Monetary weakness, strength of character, or alliances may all play a role in the assessment of power difference. Power difference between interlocutors will certainly carry its influence into social communication. Therefore, verbal exchange may be modified between those who are of equal social status (Brown & Levinson. 1987).

#### B. Solidarity/ Horizontal Distance

Solidarity, or intimacy, is a symmetric social dimension of relative status. It is a horizontal distance. In many cases,