Request Strategies Across Societal Structures in S.E. Asia

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Abstract

This paper compares request strategies used by two broad groups of speakers of Putonghua /Standard Chinese in (a) the People's Republic of China and (b) other Southeast Asian countries - Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaysia and Taiwan. The basic tenet underlying this comparison is the belief that despite a shared common tradition there are entrenched cultural differences owing to different socio-economic and historical developments.

'Culture' as defined by Sapir (1949: 162) refers to the 'real world' that is 'to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality.'

To examine that 'social reality' as reflected in the realizations of requests, three main socio-cultural factors are explored - perceptions of relative social distance, relative power and the ranking of imposition.

Data collected from field work in these countries - the PRC and the non-PRC are analysed with a view to determine how perceptions of these social parameters affect request strategies. Results show parallels and differences in the repertoire of request strategies used by speakers from China (PRC) and those from the other countries (NPRC). For instance, in the use of main request strategy types both PRC and NPRC shared a preference for directness.

1.0.   INTRODUCTION

The basic tenet underlying the attempt to examine parallel data i.e. linguistic realizations of requests across societies is the belief that different socio-historical developments of PRC and NPRC societies have a significant bearing on the speech behaviour of request strategies.

The NPRC countries in this survey: Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia have been exposed to British education and Western values for a considerable period of time. Taiwan has been similarly influenced by America. Yet as speech communities of Chinese, speakers from these countries share certain traditional cultural values with PRC speakers. More than anything else 'the authority of a venerated past ... came to exercise a dominant role in Chinese culture. *The authority of tradition* came thus to have a more convincing effect than even direct observation and personal experience...' (Oliver, 1971:89). [Italics mine]. One fine example of this tradition is enshrined in Confucian rhetoric: 'that through decorum, propriety and politeness, feelings would be protected, dignity preserved, and harmony enhanced' (Oliver, 1971:143). The stress on social harmony explains the Chinese emphasis on placing social needs before individual needs. Yet, one must also expect such values to be influenced by exposure to Western culture which tends to emphasize individuality and de-emphasise collectivity or commonality. One is also aware of the vast differences that divide the PRC with its turbulent political past from NPRC, which by comparison is marked by an absence of such turbulence. The 1949 Revolution not only established China as a socialist country but also virtually closed China to the outside world for the next two decades. The anti-intellectual Cultural Revolution of 1966 was a period of political chaos and confusion, a period when cultural beliefs and values like filial piety and polite speech came under severe attack. In contrast, the cultural value system of NPRC speakers, beyond that of Westernisation, has been relatively untouched. Further, Singaporeans and Malaysians, have a different sociolinguistic background to that of China. Where

the PRC has a population that is predominantly Han, the overseas Chinese in these two countries interact with Malays and Tamils. In these two multilingual countries, then, Chinese speakers are influenced by a variety of co-existing languages - Chinese dialects, Bahasa Melayu, English and Tamil. For the Hong Kong Chinese, Putonghua, is not as widely spoken as Cantonese is in the community, so here again we may expect some differences in the way Putonghua is used by Hong Kong Chinese. The Taiwan Chinese speech community, like the Hong Kong Chinese, interact mainly with other Chinese, but in Taiwan the predominant local dialect is *Minnan hua* (a Fujian dialect). Chinese speakers in these four societies though distinguished by such social differences nevertheless share a common Chinese tradition. However, one must hasten to add that the term 'culture' considered in this paper does not refer only to a common inherited tradition, but also the social reality described by Sapir:

> The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. *The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached.*
>
> (1949:162).[Italics mine].

The worlds of PRC and NPRC are distinct worlds indeed in many aspects; for instance; it is difficult to believe that kinship is emphasized to the same degree in Singapore as in Nanjing. The word 'culture' then has two distinct meanings:

(1) a culture based on tradition which is essentially Confucianistic;

(2) a culture that is tied to local institutional practices and beliefs, the byproduct of socio-historical developments and existing local ethnic groups.

Two main questions are addressed here:

(1)   To what extent different societal structures impact on requestive behaviour?

(2)   To what extent a common traditional past and a common language system act as constraints on the pragmalinguistic repertoires of speakers?

2.0. METHODOLOGY

It should be noted from the outset that this is not an in-depth study of language use vis a vis requestives across societies. Rather, because of the difference in sample size between the PRC and the NPRC, it is to be approached from the perspective of a preliminary or exploratory study. The findings and conclusions drawn are to be considered as indicators for further investigation.

Data for the NPRC survey (interviews and written questionnaires) were collected from 24 interviewees and 38 respondents, all of whom were competent speakers of Putonghua. For interviews, a total of 320 tokens of utterances were gathered and for questionnaires the tokens of utterances totalled 1127. NPRC data are examined and analysed within the framework used for PRC data.

Data from the PRC were generated by 56 interviewees and 114 respondents to the questionnaire survey. Oral elicitations from interviewees and written responses to a modified form of Discourse Completion Test (DCT), along the lines of the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Patterns Project (CCSARP) group (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989), form the corpus of data used for analysis. Situations posed in both types of survey were common face-to-face requests. Altogether 32 situations were used in interviews and questionnaires. For each interviewee, a total of 16 situations were used. These situations represent a broad section of common daily events which occur in a variety of settings involving interactants who are marked by varying degrees of familiarity or social distance. These requests range from routine types (e.g. requesting information at the post office counter) to personal ones (e.g. requesting for a loan). These situations are described and categorised along Brown & Levinson's (1967, 1987) framework of social determinants:

(1) relative social distance [D]

(2) relative power [P]

(3) relative ranking/weighting of the degree of imposition [R]

In this paper we will consider these factors and determine to what extent they