Managing relationships in everyday practice: The case of strong disagreement in Mandarin

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Abstract

Most previous research on (im)politeness in Chinese has not centered on strong disagreement although a few studies have examined disagreement in Chinese via elicitation or in unequal-status situations. This study attempts to uncover strong disagreement emerging as a strategy for facework and relationship management employed by non-familial equal-status Mandarin-speaking participants in everyday practice in a southeastern city of mainland China. Spontaneous mundane conversations were collected through interactional sociolinguistic methods and analyzed by means of the discursive approach featuring the avoidance of overgeneralization, the elusiveness of (im)politeness and the inclusion of participants' emic perspectives. The participants were found to co-construct strong disagreement to conduct facework and manage relationships without any manifestation of negative evaluations. Most of the instances of strong disagreement were face and relationship maintaining or face and relationship enhancing, although some appeared to be face threatening. A close look at the local specificities of the conversations reveals that these face-threatening instances still functioned to maintain the interactants' relationships. The study suggests the importance of situating research in local contexts and the necessity to revisit stereotypes concerning Chinese. The findings can promote the understanding of intercultural communication that involves native Chinese speakers.
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1. Introduction

Angouri and Locher (2012) convincingly stated that disagreement exists in our daily lives, not just in news interviews (Clayman, 2002), talk shows (Gruber, 2001), mediation sessions (Jacobs, 2002), committee meetings (Kangasharju, 2002) or other workplaces (e.g. Pan, 2000a,b; Marra, 2012). When a disputable viewpoint is presented (Schiffrin, 1985) or a proposition is a verifiable fact (Takahashi and Beebe, 1993), disagreement occurs. Disagreement is "an oppositional stance (verbal or non-verbal) to an antecedent verbal (or non-verbal) action" (Kakava, 1993:36) or a reactive utterance of a speaker who considers a prior interlocutor's proposition untrue (Sornig, 1977; Rees-Miller, 2000). Strong disagreement refers to "one in which a conversant utters an evaluation which is directly contrastive with the prior evaluation. Such disagreements are strong inasmuch as they occur in turns containing exclusively disagreement components, and not in combination with agreement components" (Pomerantz, 1984:74). Simply put, strong disagreement is not prefaced with hedges, concessions, partial agreement or any other devices that can soften its tone of voice. It is important to note that strong disagreement involved in everyday practice differs from what seems to be intentionally rude behavior that occurs in unequal-status situations, such as army training (Culpeper, 1996), traffic disputes (Culpeper et al., 2003) or TV shows (Culpeper, 2005), where impoliteness may be common and even deliberate.

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This study is to reveal the use of strong disagreement as a strategy for facework and relationship management. What Goffman (1967) called 'facework' means avoiding face-threatening acts but performing face-maintaining acts or face-enhancing acts to save face for themselves or others. Brown and Levinson (1987:60) stated that some communicative acts "intrinsically threaten face" and make recipients feel bad. *Threaten* means "to be likely to injure; to be a source of danger to" in the Oxford English Dictionary Online. Therefore, the acts that potentially damage recipients' face are called face-threatening acts. Following this, face-maintaining acts are those communicative acts that do not make recipients feel any difference. Face-enhancing acts refer to those acts that enhance recipients' face and make them feel good. These acts seem to intertwine with relationship management in everyday conversations. Seeking harmonious relations has been said to be a dominant goal of ordinary Chinese people (Bond, 1986; La Barre, 1945; Stover, 1974).[1] To attain interpersonal harmony, some Chinese people might even obey to their superiors publicly but defy them privately (Hwang, 1997). It should not be surprising to find lower-status speakers opting out of disagreement (Liu, 2004) or disagreeing indirectly (Pan, 2000a) in order to build or improve relationships with higher-status interlocutors.

The study is important at least for two reasons. First, insufficient knowledge of native Chinese speakers' strong disagreement might cause cross-cultural miscommunications and jeopardize international relations, considering the increasing involvement of China in international trade, tourism and intercultural communication (see Cardon and Scott, 2003; Sheer and Chen, 2003; Li et al., 2001). Most of the previous research has addressed disagreement in non-Chinese-speaking contexts (e.g. Lakoff, 1973; Leech, 1983; Brown and Levinson, 1987; Pomerantz, 1984; Schiffrin, 1984; Georgakopoulou, 2001; Kakava, 2002; Kangasharju, 2002; Edstrom, 2004). Other studies that have examined (im)politeness in Chinese have not centered on strong disagreement in non-familial mundane conversations (e.g. Lee-Wong, 2000; Pan, 2008; Pan and Kádár, 2012; Kádár, 2007, 2008, 2012a,b; Kádár and Pan, 2012; Kádár et al., 2013; Chang and Haugh, 2011; Hinze, 2005, 2012). Second, the few studies that have discussed disagreement in Mandarin Chinese have investigated either what native speakers think about their disagreement strategies through elicitation methods (e.g. Du, 1995) or how they disagree in official, business or family settings, where power/status difference is obvious (e.g. Pan, 2000a). Those studies concluded that Chinese people, especially the lower-status ones, tend to avoid direct communication and disagreement. Nevertheless, elicited data reflects "an idealized and very often stereotypical assumption of how one should perform or act in given situation" (Pan and Kádár, 2011:103), which might differ from how one actually behaves in reality (Yuan, 2001; Golato, 2003). Researchers should move "towards examining samples of real-life interaction" because communication is "a joint and collaborative activity" (Haugh and Bargiela-Chiappini, 2010:2074). Also, unequal-status speakers might not express disagreement the same way as equal-status speakers because varying contextual parameters may affect how disagreement is enacted, assessed and responded to (Kakava, 2002).

This study employs the discursive approach (see Eelen, 2001; Watts, 2003; Locher, 2004; Mills, 2005) to unfold the co-constitution and functions of strong disagreement that emerged in spontaneous mundane conversations among sixty-eight non-familial equal-status Mandarin speakers in informal social activities, because this approach avoids overgeneralization, views (im)politeness as elusive and considers participants' emic perspectives.[2] The findings of the study reveal that most instances of strong disagreement served to maintain or enhance face and relationships. Even the few ostensibly face-threatening act of strong disagreement still appeared to be relationship maintaining, rather than relationship damaging. None of the participants reacted to strong disagreement with negative evaluations. In what follows, Section 2 illuminates the discursive approach in detail because perspectives from this approach are drawn on to facilitate our understanding of strong disagreement under study. Section 3 explicates interactional sociolinguistic methods. Section 4 portrays the co-constitution of strong disagreement as a strategy for facework and relationship management, and discusses the findings of the study. Section 5 is a conclusion.

2. The discursive approach[3]

For this study, the discursive approach can serve better than earlier (im)politeness theories to expound how Chinese participants discursively co-constructed strong disagreement, conducted facework and managed relationships in everyday practice. Most of those earlier frameworks (e.g. Brown and Levinson, 1987) have claimed to be predictive and

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[1] This goal could change during politically abnormal periods in China such as the Cultural Revolution.

[2] Equal status is a relative concept in this study. Despite participants' differences in sex, age, education or income, they were friends, acquaintances or strangers from different families and workplaces who socialized with one another in informal settings. Status difference, if any, seemed to be blurred in this context.

[3] Discursive researchers do not intend to construct a model of politeness to replace Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory because that would lead to generalizations and stereotyping (Mills, 2011). They "aim to develop a more contingent type of theorising which will account for contextualised expressions of politeness and impoliteness, but these positions will not necessarily come up with a simple predictive model" (Kádár and Mills, 2011:8).