Heart Theory as an Alternative Politeness Model

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Abstract: Face theory is an important pragmatic theory regarding politeness in human communication. As the central term of the theory, the face, a part of the human body, is seen as a metaphor for dignity and respect. The heart is put forward in this paper as an alternative politeness metaphor. Due to the differences between Western and Eastern politeness ideologies, face theory sometimes fails to explain certain pragmatic phenomena in China. By replacing the face in face theory with heart, the paper tries to inject an Eastern perception of human relationships into the traditional pragmatic theory.

Keywords: Face theory; Mianzi; Heart; Politeness

1. Introduction

Face theory is an important pragmatic theory regarding politeness in human communication. As the central term of the theory, the face, a part of the human body, is seen as a metaphor for dignity and respect. The direct translation of face, *lian*, or *mian* has already had rich connotations in Chinese culture. On the one hand, it makes Chinese learners accept the face theory quickly; on the other hand, it causes obstacles to the correct understanding of the face theory. The heart is put forward in this paper as an alternative politeness metaphor. Due to the differences between Western and Eastern politeness ideologies, face theory sometimes fails to explain certain pragmatic phenomena in China. By replacing the face in face theory with heart, the paper tries to inject an Eastern perception of human relationships into the traditional pragmatic theory.

2. Literature review

The sociologist Erving Goffman first introduced the concept of "face" into social theory with his 1955 article On Face-work: An Analysis of Ritual Elements of Social Interaction and his 1967 book Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior. The face theory was first proposed by Goffman as an explanatory tool for interpersonal communication.

Brown and Levinson later expanded Goffman's theory of face in their politeness theory, which differentiated between positive and negative face [1]. Positive faces and negative faces highlight different aspects

of self-image management in communication. Positive face refers to the desire for social approval, liking, and affirmation. It involves the need to be seen as competent, appreciated, and respected by others. Preserving a positive face involves emphasizing similarities, showing agreement, and providing positive reinforcement in communication. Negative face, on the other hand, pertains to the desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition. It involves the need to act without interference and to have one's actions and decisions respected by others. Preserving a negative face requires respecting personal space, allowing autonomy, and minimizing impositions on others. Individuals seek to protect their negative face by avoiding intrusiveness and acknowledging others' autonomy. A face-threatening act (FTA) refers to any behavior or communication that has the potential to damage an individual's self-image, or "face", in a social interaction.

3. Content

3.1. Face/*Lian*/*Mianzi*/Heart as politeness metaphor

3.1.1. Face

The use of "face" as a metaphor for politeness originates from the concept introduced by sociologist Erving Goffman. Goffman defines face as referencing an "image of self" [2]. In Goffman's framework, "face" transitions from being a physical feature to symbolizing one's social identity or self-image. The metaphorical extension is grounded in the idea that, like the physical face, one's social identity is sensitive and can be damaged. Maintaining "face" in interactions involves preserving a positive self-image and avoiding actions that could threaten one's social standing or reputation. This metaphorical usage has become particularly significant in discussions of politeness strategies and interpersonal communication.

Though we cannot know the specific psychological process of how Goffman chose the face out of many body organs as a symbolic metaphor figure in politeness strategies, the proposal of face certainly brought new connotations into this word. Unlike other concepts already established in psychology and interpersonal communications, the introduction of a new term, although the original meaning is a word that has existed for a long time, allows scholars to add the meanings that the old words cannot express to the new word, making the new concept more enriched with the connotations of the times. Maybe it cannot be called a neologism, because there is already the word face, but this process can be regarded as a specific explanation of the connotation of the word, a man-made process with a specific purpose. It is precisely because it is artificial that provides us with the possibility of replacing or supplementing the word face.

3.1.2. Lian and *mianzi*

In Chinese, the compound meaning of face is split into two words, *lian* and *mianzi*. *Lian* and *mian* are both the direct translation of face, meaning the front of the head. The denotation of the two words is similar, and the differences lie in connotations. Generally, both *lian* and *mianzi* convey the abstract signifiers of face, which include prestige or reputation. "*Lian*" is more related to individual behavior, which focuses on the image or performance of the person; while "*mianzi*" is more related to social interaction, which tends to the relationship status of the two parties in the interaction. *Lian* is the identity psychological and behavioral appearance of an individual to meet the image of a certain social circle, which is modified by impression. Meanwhile, *mianzi* is the sequence status of this already formed psychological appearance in others' minds, namely psychological status. As the resources of individual impression decoration, *lian* is related to temperament, character, ability, knowledge, morality, manner, appearance, clothing, speech, and so on, while as the resources of psychological status generated by relationships, *mianzi* include family background, identity, status, fame, job, power, money, sophistication, and relationship network, and so on [3]. From this definition, we can see that face is the

combination of *lian* and *mianzi*. It refers to both the personal impression decoration and the psychological status established in others' minds. The two imply a consistent psychological and behavioral mode. This hypothesis is actually in line with the value of Western individualism because, in the value system of Western individualism, the shaping of an individual's image directly relates to the establishment of their relationship with others and the number of resources he obtains.

While the importance of *mianzi* in Chinese culture is not only restricted to those expressions, *mianzi* is a cultural psychological phenomenon that anyone who has lived in China or come into contact with Chinese people can feel [3]. Long before Goffman and face theory, *mianzi* has always been an abstract cultural phenomenon in China. It became even clearer from the perspective of outsiders. The great Chinese writer Lu Xun once said that *mianzi* is the key concept in the process of understanding China's national character [4]. Lin Yutang also made a similar comment that *mianzi* is the most powerful of the three muses that govern the Chinese [5].

It can be said that face has a rich connotation and specific use scenarios in the Chinese context. *Mianzi* and *mianzi* study in China has such a long tradition that the understanding of the face theory is disturbed by these preconceived notions. However, because the word has a wealth of meanings in the language, Chinese speakers tend to equate *mianzi* with face, which hinders people from understanding the meaning of face in Goffman's definition. The connotations of face and *mianzi* are essentially different from face theory as an interrelationship theory. On the one hand, people have a high acceptance of face theory, but on the other hand, they fail to correctly understand the other connotations of face theory.

As a simple example, in the context of the Chinese language, having a face, such as someone boasting about their achievements, is a serious threat to the positive face of others in the face theory. The contradiction and asymmetry reflect that *mianzi* obviously cannot directly correspond to face. As an abstract concept, *mianzi* has subtle meanings that only native Chinese speakers can understand, which are not the exact same as specific behaviors in the face theory.

3.1.3. Heart

As an important human organ, the heart is called *xin* in Chinese. Heart, or *xin*, is a similar word to face in English. Besides referring to a body organ, it also has multiple metaphorical meanings, especially when it comes to human communications.

Heart is often used as a metaphor to symbolize emotions, feelings, and the core of one's inner self. The heart is the place in a person where the feelings and emotions are thought to be, especially those connected with love.

For example, the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary used heart in example contexts such as "she has a kind heart" and "his sad story touched her heart" [6]. Whereas the Modern Chinese Dictionary used heart in example contexts such as "where has your heart wandered to?", "she is young, but she has a very cunning heart", "his words made people feel kindly from the bottom of their hearts", and "he is not the kind of man who has no heart" [7].

When people speak of matters of the heart, they are typically referring to personal and emotional aspects of their lives. For example, expressing feelings of love, empathy, or sincerity may be associated with the metaphorical use of the heart. It serves as a powerful symbol for the emotional depth and connection between individuals in various communication contexts.

In the ancient Chinese classic, The Analects of Confucius, the symbolic meaning of the heart usually involves morality, character, and a person's inner thoughts. In Confucian thinking, the heart is regarded as the

core of a person's inner nature and moral thoughts. The "heart" is often mentioned in The Analects to emphasize individual character cultivation and behavior rules.

Communicating with people "with a heart" typically implies engaging in communication with empathy, sincerity, and emotional awareness. It suggests a genuine and compassionate approach, considering the feelings and emotions of others. When someone is said to communicate "with a heart," it often implies a deeper connection and understanding in interactions, acknowledging the emotional aspects of communication rather than focusing solely on factual or logical aspects. It emphasizes the importance of human connection and a sincere, compassionate attitude in the exchange of ideas and feelings. This proves that if face and heart are taken as two different doctrines for interpersonal communication, or as the criteria for analyzing interpersonal communication, the difference between them is obvious. The former reflects the individualism of the West, while the latter reflects the values of inclusiveness of the Eastern culture.

3.2. Contrast of Western and Eastern politeness ideologies

The claim that the Western-originated politeness models fail adequately to explain Eastern concepts of interaction should come as no surprise to those familiar with recent debates in politeness research [8–9]. Critics also question Brown and Levinson's construal of negative face want as a desire of a speaker to gain due respect from others which, once successful, the speaker is not infringed upon. Similarly, face loss in Chinese culture is less a result of each individual's face being threatened than it is the product of one's inability to observe social codes of conduct [10–11]. Gu argued that Brown and Levinson's notion of "face" is too simplistic to capture the Chinese culture-specific understanding of this concept and that various aspects of Chinese politeness are formal and recurrent, and so they are neither "strategic" in Brown and Levinson's sense, nor do they involve clearly negative or positive face-work [10]. Mao, in a similar vein to Gu, criticized the problematic nature of the concept of "face" in Brown and Levinson's framework, by exploring the metapragmatic complexity of this notion in Chinese culture [11].

While face theory provides valuable insights into social interactions, it may face challenges in fully capturing the nuances of communication in Eastern cultures due to cultural variations. Eastern cultures often place a strong emphasis on collectivism, harmony, and indirect communication, which may not align perfectly with Goffman's individualistic and direct face theory. In Eastern cultures, maintaining harmony and avoiding direct confrontation is often prioritized over individual face concerns. Additionally, concepts such as "saving face" and "losing face" may be understood and managed differently in Eastern contexts. The cultural nuances, social norms, and the importance of relational harmony might not be fully addressed by face theory, which primarily stems from Western sociocultural contexts. Cultural variations in communication styles, power dynamics, and social expectations play a significant role. Therefore, when analyzing communication situations in Eastern cultures, it is often beneficial to complement face theory with insights from cultural communication theories that specifically address the intricacies of those cultural contexts.

3.3. Heart theory

Given that face often fails as an explanatory tool in Eastern contexts, rather than simply importing the face theory to China, it would be better to come up with a more appropriate theoretical model. The universal applicability of face theory has been examined and questioned and thus becomes a project in cross-cultural politeness research.

With all these sharing features between face and heart, relating them together is natural. Symbolically, the heart is less rational and reasonable than the face, but it represents a want and desire of our inner self. Heart,

with its emotional features, is an ideal representative metaphor for Chinese politeness rules. It shows our desire to be accepted and our desire to be liked. As Intachakra put it, considering politeness by "how we feel towards one another" can complement and sometimes even replace appeals to "how our personhood is maintained, flawed and/or damaged" [12].

The heart theory is not an alternative or even a better version of the face theory. It is just trying to adopt face theory into the Chinese context and trying to provide new insight by introducing new terms into a traditional pragmatic theory. By replacing face in face theory with heart, an Eastern perception can be injected towards human relationships, that is avoidance of hurting other people and a tendency to please others. Heart not only represents a thinking of oneself but also a consideration for others. This shift reconciles the interest of the speaker and the hearer by an ideal assumption that all language users are trying to maintain rapport and harmony.

4. Conclusion

Politeness is a cultural universal, but the more we move from one culture to the next, the more we tend to find differences in the forms, constraints, interpretations, and weights each culture gives in conceptualizing as well as rationalizing politeness [12]. This paper attempts to explore whether the heart theory can explain some pragmatic phenomena in the Eastern context when the face theory fails. The concept of the heart itself is an abstract concept. Despite some statements that have the word "heart" directly present, the concept of heart exists in the speaker's mind, guiding the speaker to choose specific ways to express their intentions. These expressions are often vague and indirect, rather than clearly reflecting the speaker's intentions. These vague and seemingly useless utterances, however, play an important role in maintaining interpersonal harmony and reflecting politeness. Politeness is universal, but the face theory is Western. Chinese politeness is broad and complex. It is sometimes awkward and stiff to see the Chinese language from the perspective of positive and negative faces, which makes the author want to explain these conversations with another theory. It is a reflection of Oriental wisdom to always keep others in mind. Heart theory is not yet mature and has many shortcomings, but the overall concept behind it is strong and compatible. It is hoped that there will be more pragmatic research on face and heart in the future, which will inject new perspectives and new impetus into the research of the politeness phenomenon.

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