This paper explores the applicability of Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory to Chinese women making requests in the business world. This research will take a closer look at the relationship between the sociological variables proposed by Brown and Levinson and the politeness strategies used by participants. Brown and Levinson (1987) claim their politeness theory is universal. Indeed, many scholars praise the theory for its universality, however, some criticize that the theory is under analyzed. In this research project, it could be observed that the theory cannot adequately explain the relationship between the politeness strategies and sociological variables. Yet, the data does provide support to the core idea which views face as basic wants. The research also identifies the importance of factors like gender and culture in explaining the adoption of certain politeness strategies.

1. Introduction

This research aims at examining the suitability of Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory in analyzing the language used by businesswomen in making requests at their workplace. The purpose of this analysis is to investigate whether the theory works at a
universal level in which it could be adopted to any gender and culture. In order to test its universal claim, the paper will investigate two sociological variables that are claimed to have an effect on the choice of politeness strategies - namely social distance and relative power. Taking into consideration the limitation of the theory in recognizing the importance of influential factors like gender and culture, the paper attempts to verify the theory’s significance in understanding the usage of politeness strategies.

2. Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory

Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory (1987) is based on two important ideas namely the notions of face and rationality. Face is considered as the self-image one wants to present. Goffman (1967) explains that by implementing politeness strategies in speech to preserve face, one is able to effectively claim that one contains approved social attributes. The notion of face wants is divided into two aspects, namely positive face and negative face. Positive face refers to having the desire to be appreciated and respected by others while negative face indicates the freedom of action and imposition (Brown & Levinson 1987). It is claimed that face is not a permanent entity, “face could be lost, maintained or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction.” (1987: 61). Hence, each individual must closely observe his/her behavior in order to mitigate face-threatening acts. Face-threatening acts refer to speech acts that may damage the face needs of others.

The model defines rationality as the mode of reasoning. Kenny (1966, cited in Brown and Levinson 1987: 64) states that “[j]ust like standard logics have a consequence relation that will take us from one proposition to another while preserving truth, a system of practical reasoning must allow one to pass from ends to means and further means while preserving the satisfactoriness of those means.” In simple words, politeness strategies would be favorable devices in achieving one’s aim and at the same time maintaining the truthfulness and sincerity of one’s speech.

In general, the theory assumes that interlocutors will cooperate with one another and would not deliberately threaten another’s face as face is considered a basic want. Leech (1983: 104) recognizes this as “forms of behaviors which are aimed at the establishment and maintenance of comity”. Thus, speakers would adopt politeness strategies in order to minimize threatening the face of others.
Positive politeness is described as the performance of praises that maintain mutual respect and solidarity within a group, while negative politeness attempts to avoid imposing on the addressee directly. Particular speech acts e.g. making requests are intrinsically face threatening and hence require softening in the form of politeness strategies. However, Brown and Levinson recognize that sociological variables such as social distance, relative power and absolute ranking are intact with the different uses of politeness devices. This paper I will mainly focus on two of these factors, namely social distance and relative power. These variables will be further elaborated in the discussion.

2.1 Criticisms

Brown and Levinson presume that there is an universal usage of politeness strategies. Holmes and Stubbe (2003) indicate that politeness is undoubtedly a need and apparent in most workplace cultures. Their data showed that mutual respect and concern for the face needs of others were a few of the most important elements in the working environment. However, many studies have tested Brown and Levinson’s theory in the Asian context and have challenged the applicability of their theory in this context.

Some claim that Brown and Levinson’s theory is over simplified and generalized. Werkholfer (1992) accuses the social variables of the model as a narrow approach to social realities, which obviously neglects some dynamic aspects of the use of language. Apart from its variables, the theory is criticized for its bias perception of only dealing with the politeness phenomenon of the western cultures (O’Driscoll 1996, cited in Watts 2003). Not only are these factors presumed as limitations of the theory, other aspects like gender and culture pose a tremendous threat to its universality claim. Cameron (1998a, cited in Sara Mills 2003) asserts that gender is a social category that should be considered, as participants may draw upon particular stereotypical social roles in conversations. In addition, Watts (2003) argues that the concept of culture has not been explicitly expressed in the politeness theory. Besides, politeness is highly culture-dependent (Ehlich 1992). In other words, what might be adopted by one culture would not necessarily work for the other. To the Chinese “the addressee’s social attributes of rank, age, and gender are crucial factors influencing the choice of politeness strategies” (Pan 2000: 144). From the above arguments, the theory may not be as universal as it claims.
3. Methodology

In doing this research, both quantitative and qualitative data have been collected. A questionnaire was conducted from 20 October 2007 to mid-November 2007. The questionnaire was distributed to 50 women in the financial sector and 35 questionnaires were returned. The first part of the questionnaire contains basic questions on participants’ age and career, while the latter half includes three hypothetical situations that require participants to select an appropriate strategy in making requests. All the participants are service providers despite the fact that they all worked in different divisions e.g. Human Resources, Accounting and Investment. To thoroughly investigate this industry and to assure accuracy in the data, two financial planners were invited for an interview. The interviewees responded to the questionnaire providing a more comprehensive explanation for their choices. Both of the interviewees work as Financial Planners. One is a Senior Manager named Julie\(^1\) while the other participant is a Financial Planning Trainee named Amy.

4. Social distance

Brown and Levinson (1987) claim that social distance is assessed by means of the interlocutors’ frequency of interaction. The theory assumes that regular interaction displays a sign of social closeness. In cases of social closeness, Brown and Levinson claim that positive politeness is likely to be used as it is recognized as an intimate address form that signifies reciprocity (1987: 70, 101-103).

According to the collected data, very few of the participants would go out with their colleagues after work. Only 7 out of 35 participants stated that they often participated in other activities with their colleagues. Both of the interviewees claimed that they spend a lot of their time with clients and they usually have to meet with clients at night. One of the interviewees, Amy mentioned that their job did not require them to work with other colleagues thus it was not necessary for them to have a really close relationship with them. Although, most participants had minimal chances of going out with their colleagues, a majority of them did state that they always or often engaged in small talk at work. “Small talk serves as a discourse of making boundaries and

\(^1\) All names are pseudonyms.
transitions in workplace interaction...constructing, expressing, maintaining and reinforcing interpersonal relationships between those who work together” (Holmes & Stubbe 2003: 96). However, Amy mentioned that talking with one another did not necessarily make them have a “close” relationship. In other words, having time to chat with others during working hours now and then does not mean that interlocutors know each other. Baxter and Montgomery (1996: 119) explain that relationships are not “strings of encounters” but “modes of expression”. It is indeed agreed by many researchers that measuring the affectiveness of a relationship is much more reliable than depending on the social distance parameter (Watts 2003).

The above observations indicate that there is a high level of relative social distance between colleagues, as regular chats do not have an exact correlation with social closeness. In this case, it would be expected that the participants would choose negative politeness as one would want to maintain self-territory and prevent imposing on others whom they are not familiar with.

![Fig. 1 Colleague makes a request to colleague](image)

Yet, according to Figure 1 more than half of the participants adopted positive politeness when they were asked to make a request towards another colleague in regards to workload distribution in question 11. In order to provide a clear illustration, let us have a look at a request strategy that was most frequently chosen by our participants.
Example 1

*Context:* A colleague making a request to another colleague in sharing duties
(Question 11)

*You have more experience in that area so is it okay if I do part A and you do part B?*

In example 1, the speaker starts by giving a compliment to the addressee and acknowledges his/her experience in a particular area. This sign of praise is recognized as giving positive face to the addressee. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), giving reasons is also a sign of assumed cooperation. By using such an approach, the addressee is less aware that the speaker is making a request. Instead it might be regarded as a kind of offer. According to Brown and Levinson (1987: 113-114), this type of request entails the idea that one understands the strengths of the addressee and that is why he/she offers him/her this particular duty. Moreover, “is it okay” acts as a slight hedge, which mitigates the precise communication of the speaker’s attitude.

From the above analysis, one could witness that participants tend to praise others during a request even though they may not be socially close with the other. Pan (2000) explains that *guanxi*\(^2\) in Chinese culture is of primary importance. Although one’s job may not necessarily require cooperation one nevertheless mustn’t decide to omit politeness strategies. In East Asian context, there is the need to develop and maintain trust among participants (Bargiela-Chiappini & Harris 2006). Therefore, despite the lack of intimacy the participants still intended to be polite to their colleagues. Julie, an interviewee quotes that praise acts as a fundamental instrument in maintaining positive relationships. It could be observed that aspects of the Chinese culture bring light to the analysis and that gender issues are also regarded as a plausible cause for the use of positive politeness. Holmes (1995) suggests that women are generally more likely to express positive politeness and friendliness in language, as they are more concerned with the feelings of others even though they may not be very close with one another.

As a result, this reflects that social closeness does not necessarily mean that one would choose positive politeness. There is no exact correlation between the two. One could perceive that the theory disregards that the range of race and gender positions may cause certain forms of politeness strategies to be more prominent than others.

\(^2\) *Guanxi* means making connections.
(Ehlich 1992). It could be observed that the theory cannot address this issue sufficiently.

5. Relative power

Brown and Levinson (1987: 77) claim that “[p]ower is an asymmetrical social dimension of relative power”. Despite the difference of power between interlocutors, they suggest that speakers with higher-rankings may use more politeness strategies in their speech compared with lower-ranking participants. The concept of power is believed to closely correlate with negative politeness, of not wanting to impose on others, allowing others to have the freedom to act.

In order to examine the relevance of the concept of power, examples ‘2 & 3’ taken from the questionnaire will further look into the power relation between superior and subordinate.

5.1 Superior vs. subordinate

The results generated from question 10 reflected in Figure 2 disclose that both positive and negative politeness are of similar importance to participants when requesting a subordinate to re-draft a proposal. Now let us have a look at the entailments brought about by using different politeness strategies in example 2a and 2b.

3 Results are generated from question 10 & 12 respectively.
Example 2a

Context: Manager requesting a subordinate to re-do his/her proposal within 24 hours (Question 10)

I can see you must have spent a lot of time on this proposal. And I really appreciate your effort. The first 2 parts have been well written. However, I would like you to make some amendments to the last part. Can you please hand it in within 24 hours?

More than half of the participants choose to use the above positive politeness strategy. In example 2a the superior included strengtheners e.g. “really” and softeners e.g. “please”, so as to maintain the positive face of the subordinate. Moreover, the first two sentences praise the subordinate. As mentioned before appreciation is a sign of maintaining solidarity and in Julie’s exact wording “partnership”. Reciprocity is necessary as the Chinese draw a clear division between zi ji ren⁴ and wai ren⁵ in certain context like workplace (Gudykunst 2001). Moreover, Amy states that compliments are needed but letting your subordinate know what he/she needs to do is important as well. Amy’s claim is very much reflected in the example used above. After the appraisal, the superior states his/her request politely. The manager applies the interrogative “can” in his/her speech. “Can” is often used in task-oriented directives (Holmes & Stubbe 2003). The pronoun “I” is being repeated constantly to show emotional agreement especially in the first two lines. But along with the interrogative it acts as a reminder for the subordinate that his/her superior would like him/her to accomplish the task. One may interpret the last two sentences as negative politeness. Hence, this paragraph contains both positive and negative politeness. However, we should not forget that the appraisal is placed first which demonstrates the importance of appreciation towards colleagues in performing a transactional act.

Example 2b

Context: Manager requesting a subordinate to re-do his/her proposal within 24 hours (Question 10)

I know you are quite busy but I was wondering whether you could re-draft the proposal within 24 hours.

⁴ Zi ji ren means insider of a group.
⁵ Wai ren means outsider of a group.
Sixteen out of thirty five participants select this negative politeness strategy. In this request the superior first acknowledges the workload of the subordinate. Then a hedge is added, “I was wondering” so as to mitigate the illocutionary force. However, this statement contains a contradiction. Brown and Levinson believe that everyone is rational and proposes acts that they assume are possible and sincere, which is regarded as a felicity condition (Austin 1962, cited in Watts 2003). However, by looking closely at the request, one could observe two contradicting ideas. If one is quite busy then one mustn’t have the time to accomplish the task within 24 hours. Yet, Brown and Levinson may argue that this is a type of formulaic politeness and thus does not contain opposing thoughts. However, Brown and Levinson do not provide a clear definition of what is meant by conventional and unconventional politeness. Most importantly, this may differ between different cultures as we “acquire meaning and its underlying values in the symbolic world of our culture” (Ting-Toomey 1996).

From the above analysis of examples 2a and 2b, one could notice that higher-ranking individuals e.g. superiors do adopt politeness strategies. However, we could not observe that they use more negative politeness than positive politeness. Moreover, example 2b contains a contradiction that Brown and Levinson’s theory cannot adequately explain. But, culture seems to provide a key for understanding the participants’ choice of politeness strategies.

5.2 Subordinate vs. superior

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6 Conventional way of using politeness
In Figure 3 the data collected from question 12 reveals that when a subordinate initiates a request to his/her superior, the subordinate tends to be polite. A majority of participants choose to use positive politeness or negative politeness. Goffman (1967) states that one who is under the power of others is more concerned with the use of strategies as he/she would be more self-conscious of how the one in power would perceive him/her. This may explain the high number of politeness strategies among respondents.

**Example 3**

*Context:* Subordinate rejecting the request of his/her manager  
(Question 12)

*Is it okay for me to hand it in to you the day after because I am off tomorrow?*

The positive politeness statement in example 3 reveals that the speaker slightly changes her request into a question by saying, “Is it okay if…”\(^7\). By means of using this question form to approach a manager, the subordinate recognizes that the manager would like to be respected. This provides evidence that the subordinate tries to maintain good terms with the manager and group reciprocity, which has been mentioned earlier as fundamental for the Chinese. Moreover, it allows the manager to have the option to agree or not to agree. The reason for not accomplishing the task “because I am off” is also kept near the end of the sentence so as to mitigate the impact of the request and most importantly avoid hurting the face of the manager. This syntactical structure\(^8\) is regarded as a reflection of the Chinese people’s thinking within their culture (Ting-Toomey 1996).

In other words, from section 5.1 and 5.2 we could not observe significant differences in the use of politeness strategies between higher and lower ranking individuals. However, the phenomenon that subordinates use slightly more positive politeness than superiors could be explained: Superiors normally make requests while subordinates have no right to direct a superior (Holmes & Stubbe 2003). Thus politeness devices must be adopted as the speaker has no right to order her boss to accept her excuse, therefore she must carefully manage her words in order to avoid hurting the face of

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\(^7\) According to Pattee (1997) the phrase “Is it okay if I do something?” is the use of positive politeness strategy. This phrase acknowledges that the listener has the desire to be respected.  
\(^8\) “The Chinese syntax establishes a context and contingent conditions and then introduces the main point (Ting-Toomey 1996: 88)... The Chinese use language in a comparatively more implicit way where the listener of the message is expected to ‘read between the lines’” (100).
her manager. Baxter (1984, cited in Brown & Levinson 1984) argues that positive politeness is more polite than negative politeness. This statement is highly relevant to the Chinese as they regard the “self” as something collective and not individualistic. Hence, “the desire to be independent and unimpeded in one’s action (negative face) is almost alien to the Chinese” (Pan 2000: 102). This may reflect why the participants have chosen to use more positive politeness than negative politeness in the scenarios. Although the questionnaire was unable to show any distinction in the use of politeness strategies between genders, both interviewees did quote that it was less necessary for them to be excessively worried about the choice of politeness strategies when conversing with male subordinates, as males are more capable of accepting criticisms. Amy even mentioned that she would not use any politeness strategies at all if her subordinate were male.

6. Further research

Researchers should further seek to understand the degree to which the two politeness strategies are different. At times, it was hard to differentiate the two strategies, as there were aspects that both of them could attain e.g. hedges. Moreover, Brown and Levinson do not have much evidence to support their theory in terms of gender issues. They acknowledge that the concept of gender may bring light to their theory or pose a threat. Thus, further research should be done in order to see whether it is possible that both men and women adopt similar politeness strategies. If they do, would it involve cultural issues? Brown and Levinson claim that all cultures want face and thus adopt the proposed politeness strategies. However, there is much doubt towards this concept and to a great extent it is seen as a flaw to the theory. Duranti (2003) states that language and culture cannot be separated. In this case, there cannot be specific criteria for politeness strategies as each culture has a different way of using their language to perform politeness. Culture varies, especially if we look at the West and the East. These two areas carry very different beliefs. The Chinese are highly influenced by Confucianism, emphasizing paying respect to others, harmonious living environment and most importantly collectivism of the society. Many western cultures, by contrast, are mainly concerned with individual interests. Hence, in this paper the Chinese cannot be seen as performing according with the politeness strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson. Globalization maybe one of the possible causes for a universal use of strategies which would certainly be quite an interesting phenomenon to investigate.
7. Conclusion

From this research project, it could be observed that Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory is not as universal as it claims. The proposed sociological variables do not necessarily correlate with the assumptions that were made. The data shows that minimal social distance between colleagues does not mean one would adopt positive politeness and neither does relative power show that people engage in negative politeness. At times, there were contradictions that Brown and Levinson’s theory could not adequately explain. The data could only provide evidence that face need is essential and people would adopt politeness strategies in order to maintain a harmonious interaction. All in all, the research provides a plausible politeness theory. However, it lacks sufficient support to prove that these politeness strategies could be used in any situation. At least in this research, no intrinsic links between the sociological variables and certain politeness strategies could be found. Other factors like culture and gender contributed to the understanding of the Chinese usage of politeness strategies in the workplace data collected for this research.

Appendices

1. Questionnaire (abbreviated version)

Instructions: Please highlight the boxes of your choice in red. If the question(s) include ranking, please write the number next to the box.

1) What is your age?
   □ 20-25 □ 26-30 □ 31-35 □ 36-40 □ 41 or above

2) What is your current post at work?
   ____________________________________________
   ____________________________________________
   ____________________________________________

3) Which department are you currently working in?
   ____________________________________________
   ____________________________________________
4) How long have you taken up this post?
□ <1 year □ >1 year □ >2 years
□ >3 years □ >4 years □ >5 years

5) What was your previous post?

______________________________________________

6) How long have you taken up the previous post?
□ <1 year □ >1 year □ >2 years
□ >3 years □ >4 years □ >5 years

7) How often do you go out with your colleagues after work?
□ Always □ Often □ Sometimes
□ Seldom □ Rarely □ Never

8) Do you do small talk (閒談) at work?
□ Always □ Often □ Sometimes
□ Seldom □ Rarely □ Never

9) Do you know most of the people in your department?
□ Yes □ No

10) You are the Manager. You have to ask your subordinate to re-draft his/her proposal within 24 hours. What would you say?

a. I can see you must have spent a lot of time on this proposal. And I really appreciate your effort. The first 2 parts have been well written. However, I would like you to make some amendments to last part. Can you please hand it in within 24 hours?

b. You have to re-do your proposal. Please hand it in within 24 hours.

c. I know you are quite busy but I was wondering whether you could re-do the proposal within 24 hours?
11) You are working on a project with your colleague, Peter/Mary. You would like to work on one of the parts. How would you tell him/her?

a. I will do part A and you will do part B.
b. You have more experience in that area so is it okay if I do part A and you do part B?
c. I just want to ask if you could do part B while I’ll do part A.

12) Tomorrow is your day off but it seems that your boss, Peter/Mary has forgotten that. He/She asked you to do a task and hand it in to him/her tomorrow, how would you respond?

a. I am not sure if you remember that I will have a day off tomorrow.
b. Is it okay for me to hand it in to you the day after because I am off tomorrow.
c. I am off tomorrow.

This is the end of the questionnaire. Thank you for your precious time and information!

2. Abbreviated dialogues of the interview

Conversation 1 (Interview in Cantonese translated into English)

A: Interviewer (Anna)
B: Interviewee (Julie)

A: Do you go out with your colleagues after work?
B: No, this is because our working hours are comparatively long and we usually share our time with our own clients.
A: How do you tell you subordinate that he/she needs to re-do a proposal?
B: Well, I think I would tell him/her…eh…Firstly, I think you need to keep a good relationship with your subordinate all the time. So when you tell him/her, he/she might assume that you would like to tell him/her something. So I will tell him/her the whole situation, the story from top to bottom. And tell him/her the pros and cons if he/she doesn’t finish the proposal, that’s why I need him/her to finish everything within 24 hours.
A: Would you use polite ways or more direct ways of telling your subordinate what methods would you use?
B: First I will tell him/her what she has done wrong and how that aspect will affect other things. And hopes that he/she could finish within the proposed time period. Because there is a partnership between the superior and subordinate. If this partnership is held well then things will be more efficient.
A: Would you praise your subordinate in this situation?
B: Yes, I will. I will tell him/her that I appreciate his/her effort and tell him/her what he/she has done well. But there are areas that need to be improved.
A: Supposing if your subordinate is a male or female do you think you would talk to them differently?
B: Yes, I guess so maybe in the use of words. If it is a female then maybe they would accept a comparatively more friendly conversation. So that would be better. But for male you could use stronger words because supposedly he would be able to stand the tough terms.
A: So if you’re talking to males you would be more direct?
B: Yes, would be more direct because males don’t like turning in circles.

Conversation 2 (Interview in English)

A: Interviewer (Anna)
C: Interviewee (Amy)

A: Do you go out with your colleagues after work?
C: It is not really an important thing in this industry, really. Because it is not your colleagues or co-workers that that you need to take care of. They are not the persons you need to take care of and spend a lot of time on. And you don’t need to please your co-workers. The things that you need to worry about is your clients and help them.
A: Do you do small talk with your colleagues?
C: Oh yea, of course. Let’s say the nature, feature of our work because like we are going out to meet customers, right? But really when customers have time to meet you is strictly lunch, their own lunch time or their after work time. So I always say that from 3 o’clock to 6 o’clock we have nothing to do.
A: Would you tell them directly like uh uh you have to do this all over again or find some tactics to tell them like say oh give them compliments, compliments…like you’re doing not bad, I appreciate your effort but you know maybe this part you could…Do you think it’s needed?
C: In a way yes but I will I will I am direct so I will tell he/her this one is okay, is an
average proposal but if you want to have a better one, then you should think it all over again.

A: Would the would you say it differently if I was like a male subordinate?
C: Oh, If you were a male, yes. I’ll say that “What have you been thinking about. Do you think this will (win you a bigger cracker). Think it all over again yea. [laughs] Maybe you don’t need to care too much about the situation of a man. Don’t say it’s being rude. Maybe uh. Let’s see who it is. Let’s see who he is.

A: You think he can handle these…you think he can handle the pressure, right?
C: I will not say handle the pressure but you don’t really +++ care. I wouldn’t say they don’t need to be cared but um usually males ++ I don’t know in a way if you try to tell them you could do it better maybe they would do it but its more likely that they would feel that its actually good but okay. For females if you tell them you can do it better. They will feel like I can do it better and try to think. I don’t know.

A: So you think there is a difference
C: Yes. [laughs]

References


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