The notion of politeness is shaped by different cultural perceptions. In different situations and contexts, politeness may be interpreted and evaluated differently by various cultures. Through the use of language, various aspects of the values and attitudes in a culture and the perception on politeness are manifested. Therefore, this paper will look into how two diverse cultures, Chinese and American, interpret the notion of politeness. The discussion is mainly based on a movie clip from “Joy Luck Club” and compares the findings with some existing literature.
1. Introduction

When people communicate, they do not only exchange information, but speakers and the listeners consciously or unconsciously shape their interpersonal relationships at the same time. How the relationships develop, i.e. whether they are enhanced, maintained, deteriorated, or repaired, depends on many aspects. One factor that can influence the effects a message brings out, and thereby contribute to determining the development of the relationships between the interlocutors, is the way people use language. According to Coulmas (2005: 84), “[s]peakers make many choices when speaking, including the politeness level of their utterances”. Thus, every verbal utterance, since it is a use of language, bears with it a certain degree of politeness. The focus of this paper is the association between language use and the respective degree of politeness it brings out.

The notion of “politeness” is a broad and complicated one with numerous theories and approaches, and it is socially determined. It is linked with social differentiations, with making appropriate choices which are not the same for all interlocutors and situations (Coulmas, 2005: 86). In other words, the evaluation of what is perceived as polite or impolite may vary in different conditions and contexts. Since culture is associated with socially constructed groups, politeness criteria may not be the same in different cultures.

This paper aims to investigate the different interpretations of the notion of politeness by different cultures, in particular, Chinese and American cultures, which are generally perceived to be representing two extremes with the former one being more conservative and the later being more open.

The analysis of this paper will be preceded by some important findings about politeness by some scholars. The analysis is carried out by comparing a scene from the movie “The Joy Luck Club” with the literature. Since the scene involves interaction between Chinese and American cultures, the discussion will aim to demonstrate how well the theories of politeness can be applied to these two cultures in an attempt to highlight the comprehensiveness and possible inadequacy, if any, of the theories.
2. Literature review

There are numerous definitions of politeness. It is defined by Mills (2003: 06) as “the expression of the speakers’ intention to mitigate face threats carried by certain face threatening acts toward another”. This definition incorporates the notion of “face” derived from Goffman (1967), which refers to “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself” (Goffman, 1967: 5), i.e. a person’s feeling of self-worth and self-image. In an earlier work, Brown and Levinson (1987) have used Goffman’s concept of face to explain politeness. According to the theory, face can be distinguished into two components: positive face and negative face. Positive face refers to “the want of every ‘competent adult members’ that his actions be unimpeded by others”, whereas negative face is “the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others” (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 67). Alternatively speaking, positive face is a person’s need to be accepted and liked by others and the desire to feel that s/he shares certain common ground with the social group. Negative face, on the other hand, is the desire not to be imposed upon and to have the right to independence.

With respect to the notions of negative and positive face, there are two kinds of politeness: positive politeness and negative politeness. Positive politeness orients to preserving the positive face of other people. It is an expression of solidarity with an intention to “emphasize that both speakers want the same thing, and that they have a common goal” (Yule, 1996: 62). Alternatively, negative politeness is doing face saving acts oriented to other’s negative face. It is an expression of minimal interference which tends to “emphasize the importance of the other’s time or concerns, and even include an apology for the imposition or interruption” (Yule, 1996: 62).

While face can be preserved, it can be damaged, which will result in impoliteness. Brown and Levinson further explain this issue with the notion of “face threatening acts” (FTAs). Illocutionary acts that are capable of damaging other people’s face are called FTAs. FTAs can come with four strategies: 1) on record, baldly, with no redressive action; 2) on record with redressive action and positive politeness; 3) on record with redressive action and negative politeness; and 4) off record. “On record” means directly saying something in an unambiguous way, while “off record” means expressing in an indirect way so that it can be interpreted ambiguously as a way to minimize the extent to which the addressee’s face is threatened. On record FTAs can be committed with redressive action, which is “action that ‘gives face’ to the addressee, that is, that attempts to counteract the potential face damage of the FTA”
(Brown and Levinson 1987: 69). In other words, when the message about to be delivered has the potential to damage the addressee’s face, the speaker can modify the message to show that no such face damage is intended. Redressive action can be employed towards either the positive face or the negative face of the hearer. One can, of course, choose not to do an FTA, which results in no utterance of words.

According to Brown and Levinson, the notion of face is universal. Strecker (1993: 120), criticizes Brown and Levinson for “run[ning] the risk of forgetting that ‘face’ is, after all, not an ‘etic’ but an ‘emic’ category and should be studied as such”. “Etic” refers to “concepts and systems of classification which could be applied across cultures without reference to the culture’s own categories for classifying meaning”, whereas “emic” refers to “descriptions of cultural phenomena in terms which make sense to those actually living in a specific culture” (Befu, 1989: 325). The claim that face is an “emic” category, therefore, supports the stance that cultural values are embodied in the notion of face. Without studying the cultural aspect, it would be impossible to fully understand politeness. Conversely, the adoption of different face saving / threatening strategies can reflect some aspects of the culture which the users belong to.

Spencer-Oatey defines culture as “a fuzzy set of attitudes, beliefs, behavioural norms, and basic assumptions and values that are shared by a group of people, and that influence each member’s behaviour and his/her interpretations of the ‘meaning’ of other people’s behaviour” (Spencer-Oatey, 2000: 4). That means, the set of values that a person possesses play the role of governing their interpretation of what others try to convey. Since members from different cultures hold different sets of values, the interpretations they make are likely to be different. Therefore, it is always possible that what is considered polite in one culture may be regarded as impolite by people with a different cultural background.

Therefore, as a whole, the employment of politeness strategies can reflect the values of the culture of which the user is a member. These underlying values that the cultures possess are also responsible for guiding the members to make judgments of what is polite and impolite, what threatens face and what does not.

The discussion below will demonstrate how messages and use of politeness strategies from different cultures are conveyed as well as interpreted differently by members of another culture using different sets of values; and alternatively, how values of different cultures can be revealed by the choice of politeness strategies.
3. Data

The example used to discuss in this paper is a scene from the movie *The Joy Luck Club* (1993) directed by Wayne Wang. The movie is based on the novel “The Joy Luck Club” written by Amy Tan. It is about four Chinese American mothers and their daughters. The mothers, even though they have been living in America for a while and can speak English, are rooted in the Chinese tradition while the daughters are very Americanized. The chosen scene focuses on one of the mothers, Lindo Jong, and her daughter, Waverly Jong, whose boyfriend, Rich Schields, is an American.

4. Discussion

*Context:* Waverly Jong, brings her American boyfriend, Rich Schields, to her mother’s, house for dinner. Knowing well her mother’s deeply rooted Chinese attitudes, Waverly teaches Rich Chinese manners and customs, although she rejects them and sees them as unnecessary rituals. She hopes that Rich’s behaviour would impress her mother. The scene captures what happens when Rich and Lindo meet each other that evening and dine at the dining table. The narration is done by Waverly.

[00:43:35 – 00:46:13]

1  Narration: The next week I brought Rich to mom’s birthday dinner,
2       sort of a surprise present.
3       I figured she was going to accept Rich, like it or not.
4  Waverly: Oh, Rich, this is my father.
5  Rich: How ya doin’?
6  Father: How do you do?
7  Waverly: Happy birthday, mom.
8       And mom, this is Rich.
9  Rich: Great to meet you.
10  Boy, something smells wonderful.
11  I guess we came to the right place, huh? Here you are.
12  You know, Waverly has been telling me that you are the best
13       cook.
Lindo: [Smiles and shakes hands with Rich.
Nothing is said. Then she walked away.]

Waverly: I think maybe we got her.
[ Goes to talk to Lindo.]

Lindo: So many spots on his face.

[THE SCENE MOVES TO THE DINING TABLE.]

Narration: Of course, the night was still young. Thank god.
I already prepped him on the Emily post of Chinese manners.
Actually, there were a few things that I forgot to mention.

Rich: Uh, let me make a toast.

[He finishes the whole glass of wine at one time
and refills his glass immediately after.]

Narration: He shouldn’t have had that second glass
when everyone else had had only half an inch just for taste.

Rich: Shrimp, my favourite.

[He takes the dish of shrimp
and pours nearly half of it onto his plate.]

Narration: He should have taken only a small spoonful of the best dish
until everyone had had a helping.

Lindo: He has good appetite.

[RICH TRIES TO USE CHOPSTICKS TO PICK UP SOME FOOD BUT FAILS.]

Narration: He should not have bragged he was a fast learner.
But the worst, was when Rich criticized my mother’s cooking,
and he didn’t even know what he had done.
As is the Chinese cook’s custom,
my mother always insults her own cooking,
but only with the dishes she serves with special pride.

Lindo: [Takes out a dish.]
This dish not salty enough. No flavour. It’s too bad to eat.
But, please.

Narration: That was our cue to eat some,
and proclaim it, the best dish she’d ever made.

Rich: You know, Lindo…All this needs is a little soy sauce.
[He takes the bottle of soy sauce
and pours a lot of it to the dish.]
Rich greets Lindo with a compliment about the good smell of the food and her cooking skills (lines 10-12). This expression of compliment is a concern for Lindo’s positive face need and is considered to be appropriate in Chinese culture. This is the reason why Waverly gives a positive comment on Rich’s performance and thinks that this act would have impressed her mother.

During the dinner, Lindo brings out a dish, but apologizes for it being under-seasoned and even insults her own cooking skills (line 40). Lindo’s insult upon herself is a kind of self-denigration, which is a regular practice in modern Mandarin (Kádár, 2007: 34), because the Chinese generally believe that “appearing humble will help maintain and enhance their face and image” (Chen, 1993: 55). This example of self-denigration actually incorporates the shame concept that is Chinese-culture specific. In Chinese culture, “[s]hame is employed strategically and serves as an important means of behaviour control, both in socialization of children and later in adult life” because it is believed that a person without sense of shame of disgrace would make other people feel “very indignant and would feel that this person is hopeless and disgusting” (Li et al., 2004: 790). According to this, Lindo’s expression of dispraise of herself can be considered as a way of demonstrating politeness, because to her, bragging about her cooking skills would make Rich feel uncomfortable and she does not want to arouse such ill feelings in Rich. This also explains why Waverly comments that Rich “should not have bragged he was a fast learner”. Notice that the Chinese way of doing politeness is through damaging the positive face of one’s own self.

However, this act of threatening one’s own face is not an attempt to seek agreement from others in the Chinese culture. Rich, obviously, does not recognize this strategic use. In response to Lindo’s self-insult, he agrees with Lindo’s comment that the food is under-seasoned with the use of an on record FTA without redressive action (line 44). Analysed from Rich’s point of view, he is actually demonstrating positive politeness in hope of claiming a common ground between Lindo and himself. However, this agreement is, to a certain extent and from Lindo’s perspective, an acceptance of her apology and implies a criticism of the dish, and thus is threatening Lindo’s positive face. Rich’s follow-up actions of asking for soy sauce and pouring it to the dish further threaten Lindo’s face because the request for sauce to season cooked food in Chinese settings implies that the host/ess is incompetent in preparing proper food. Therefore, even though Rich’s utterance is made with a good intent to demonstrate politeness, it is regarded as impolite by the Chinese.
Lindo, on the other hand, seldom does FTAs to Rich even though she is not pleased with his behaviour. The only FTA that Lindo does is when Rich takes the whole dish of shrimp and pours nearly half of it onto his plate. Lindo reacts by commenting on his appetite (line 32) rather than telling Rich directly to stop misbehaving. This is an example of off-record politeness, that unequivocal impositions are avoided with the use of hinting. This, from the speaker’s perspective, is a concern for the addressee’s negative face because hinting often involves more than one interpretation and it is understandable and possible that the addressee may only be able to infer one but not the other meaning(s). That is, in this particular example, “he has good appetite” can be interpreted as being only a general comment given by Lindo, as an irony implying Rich has taken too much food and should stop. Rich’s negative face is, then, protected in the way that he is provided a choice to select which interpretation he will take.

Other than using this off-record politeness strategy to do the FTA, Lindo remains silent and chooses not to voice out or make any criticism face-to-face that would threaten Rich’s face although she has ill feelings towards him. Lindo’s preference of not doing FTAs is significant in highlighting the function of silence in the Chinese culture. Silence is symbolic in the Chinese culture in the way that it is often used with disagreement. To Chinese people, remaining silent is a good and commonly used way of expressing disapproval because it does not involve any act that would threaten face or cause face-to-face confrontation, while, in contrast, expressing disagreement will cause both parties to lose face. Notice that the Chinese belief that the use of silence can save other people’s face coincides with Brown and Levinson’s claim that not doing any FTA is the most polite strategies regarding FTAs.

Lindo’s politeness strategy of not using any on-record FTAs can be explained by the concept of “reciprocity” in Chinese culture. According to Chen et al. (1995), a fundamental principle for social interaction is that it is based on reciprocity. That means it is believed by the Chinese that a speaker’s own face cannot be preserved unless the other person’s face is maintained as well. According to this concept of reciprocity, Lindo has to save Rich’s face in order for her own face to be preserved. So overall, the reciprocity concept and the traditional belief that the face of a person is important regulate the behaviour of Lindo, leading her to tend not to adopt on record FTAs. Notice that Rich, obviously, does not share these same concepts, i.e. he does not consider face as equally important as the Chinese do and there is no concept of reciprocity in his culture. These differences justify his tendency of not using off record FTAs, or at least not as often as the Chinese.
5. Conclusion

The foregoing discussion and analysis of the data has illustrated the role of culture with regards to politeness. The values established and embedded in a culture typically not only accounts for the different politeness strategies that people from different culture use to adopt, but they also impose serious effects on how members determine what is polite and what is impolite.

The data, in particular, has explored the different politeness strategies used by the Chinese and the Americans. It is found that since their attitudes and values towards face are different, what is considered to be able to preserve one’s face in one culture may often be interpreted as face damaging in another. That is, even when people from these two distinctive cultures have good intent of demonstrating politeness and attempt to save the other’s face during the interaction, the consequences may not turn out to be as pleasant as expected. Misunderstandings may arise with both parties having the impression of being treated impolitely, and at the same time lacking a realization that their politeness strategies are considered inappropriate by members from the other culture.

This paper has only investigated one particular aspect of culture, and has not considered other social variables, e.g. participants’ gender. Therefore, overall, it would be inadequate to explain politeness, as it is an “emic” category, in a nutshell.

References


