

**“She is kind of clueless but cute”:**

**Politeness in sales communication in Hong Kong**

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*This paper investigates the politeness strategies in a sales encounter in Hong Kong with Brown and Levinson's politeness framework. It aims to explore the specific ways of doing politeness when the interlocutors speak two different native languages and to examine whether the flow of interaction may be hampered by a lack of language proficiency of either of the two parities. In the light of the collected data and analysis on some sequences of the interaction, four preliminary conclusions are made. Yet more data and a more nuanced discussion are called for in order to test the generality of the conclusions.*

## **1. Introduction**

Service encounters are one of the social encounters that embody social practice in a society and reflect the perceived pattern of language use and behavioral patterns in a certain period of time (Pan, 2000). Yet they are so normal a part of our everyday experience, and of so short duration that their unique value is often overshadowed by other forms of spoken or written texts in linguistic research.

A service encounter is

“an instance of face-to-face interaction between a server who is ‘officially posted’ in some service area and a customer who is present in that service area, that interaction being oriented to the satisfaction of the customer’s presumed desire for some service and the server’s obligation to provide that service” (Merritt, 1976: 321).

Existing linguistic research on service encounters, the kind of interaction sales encounter belongs to, has taken two routes to approach the topic: genre studies (see Mitchell, 1957; Hasan, 1985; Ventola, 1987, 2005; Orr, 2007) and politeness research (see Lambert, 1996; Kong, 1998; Pan, 2000; Norris and Rowsell, 2003; Placencia, 2004; Kaur, 2005; Traverso, 2006; Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2006). The primary objective of the first route is to describe the textual form and typologies, which constitute such an interaction and its sequence, with the framework of systemic functional grammar. The second approach to service encounters focuses on politeness strategies used by participants in the interaction. The interest in politeness in sales encounters, or service encounters in general, has grown in recent politeness research on spoken interaction in institutional, professional and corporate settings. Kong (1998), Pan (2000) and Kerbrat-Orecchioni (2006) have used Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory or its adapted model to analyze service encounters. Despite the challenges of Brown and Levinson’s notion of face and its applicability in Asian contexts, their model still remains the most applicable for such an analysis because the awareness of face, which is the central notion of Brown and Levinson’s model, plays an important role in Chinese interpersonal communication (Gao, 1999).

The purpose of the paper is two-fold: firstly it aims to analyze how salespersons and customers organize and realize politeness in a sales encounter in Hong Kong using

Brown and Levinson's model of politeness; the second aim is to explore the specific ways of doing politeness when the interlocutors speak two different native languages and the flow of interaction may be hampered by a lack of language proficiency of either of the two parities. The first section of the paper will be dedicated to a theoretical examination of politeness and studies on service encounters, and the second section will describe the data and methodology. Once the latter has been presented, this paper will move on to examine politeness in a Hong Kong sales encounter applying Brown and Levinson's politeness theory.

## **2. Politeness and service encounters**

Politeness is a topic that has been extensively studied in sociolinguistics and more specifically language in the workplace widely adopts (e.g., Holmes and Schnurr, 2005; Schnurr and Chan, 2009). Brown and Levinson's model of politeness (1987) is undoubtedly one of the most well-known. The core concept of the model is face and that a rational human being is assumed to possess two aspects of face: negative face and positive face. Positive face is "the positive consistent self-image or 'personality' (crucially including the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of) claimed by interactants" (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 61). Negative face means "the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction – i.e. to freedom of action and freedom from imposition" (1987: 61). Since most speech acts are intrinsically face-threatening acts (FTAs), politeness strategies are employed to minimize face threat of FTAs: on record with positive politeness or negative politeness, and off-record politeness (unless the speaker chooses to do the FTA bald on record). Off-record politeness denotes the way of speaker's doing an FTA without unequivocal imposition, i.e. to hint instead of to request. And the level of politeness is determined by three independent social factors: solidarity or social distance between interlocutors (D), relative status or power difference between interlocutors (P), and culture ranking of the imposition (R).

Yet since Brown and Levinson's politeness theory was published, it has received numerous criticisms, particularly regarding its claim to be universal and its applicability to other languages and cultures. As a result, modification is called upon so that the model can account for politeness in a specific culture or a given context (e.g., service encounters). Scollon and Scollon in their 1991 work argue that to Chinese there are two kinds of relationship: inside (*nei*) and outside (*wai*). An inside

relationship denotes to that between family members, friends, colleagues, whilst an outside relationship is that in a temporary encounter. In dealing with an outside relationship no sophisticated face redressing strategies are required and Chinese interlocutors tend to go bald on record:

“In Asia in an outside relationship the position of the parties are tightly fixed within a server role relationship; one is a teller, the other a customer; one is a waitress, the other a customer. Before the encounter begins the possible moves are limited within a narrow range...Because this is an outside relationship Asians regard it as impossible for any other topics to be introduced or for any other relationship to develop; therefore, no face work is required, no preliminaries are necessary to establish who you are or why you are there. This topic can (and, in fact must) be introduced directly.” (Scollon and Scollon, 1991: 118 – 119)

However, a more recent study by Pan (1996) has revealed that rich usage of face redressing strategies is found in sales interactions in privately-owned shops in China. Kong (1998) has pointed out that another social variable should be added to “the highly contextual phenomenon of politeness in Chinese settings”: the interlocutors’ mutual expectation of relationship continuity (Kong, 1998: 571). However, the ways to do politeness in sales encounters will be made more complicated when one interlocutor is Chinese and the other from a non-Chinese speaking society and when the sales encounter is carried out in a second language, a situation that is rather common in Hong Kong with its colonial past. On the one hand, due to his/her limited linguistic repertoire in English, the non-Chinese speaker might not be able to mitigate an FTA even when s/he intends to. In a temporary encounter such as a sales encounter, it is neither polite nor impolite for Chinese speakers not to do politeness but it is rude in the western community. Would the non-Chinese speaker ascribe a lack of politeness markers to a lack of pragmatic competence or to a lack of face concern of the addressee? On the other hand, how would the speaker with lower language proficiency manage to compensate for his or her limited linguistic repertoire in order to redress the face needs? The current study is going to address these questions by analyzing a sales encounter in Hong Kong.

### **3. Data and methodology**

The data in the study is a sales interaction that happens on a promotion sales counter in Central, Hong Kong. The sales person, Sarah, is a young Hong Kong local, and her English is of conversational level. The customer, Jack, a friend of the researcher, is an American student in a tertiary institution, whose native language is English. The sales counter belongs to Sharpness, a well-known international brand for cookware and choppers. The interaction lasts for about 5 minutes.

The data for this study are authentic. Jack, who intended to buy a chopper for his family informed me about the shopping destination as he knew I was undertaking a project about sales communication in Hong Kong. Jack intended to buy the knife from Sharpness, a company with which I have established research contact. Before Jack went to the sales counter, I approached Sarah and asked for her consent for being recorded for the project. On the day of recording, I was observing from a distance in case my presence would remind Sarah of her being recorded thus her linguistic performance would be affected. After five minutes, Jack left the sales counter. When the researcher asked Jack what he thought of Sarah's performance as a salesperson he said: "She is kind of clueless, but cute. She could not persuade me." So Sarah had left a pleasant impression on Jack but her argumentation seemed clueless. Jack did not buy the knife.

### **4. Discussions**

In order to discuss how sales persons and customers actually negotiate each other's face needs, I have selected several sequences in the interaction as examples.

#### ***4.1 Opening and closing***

All interactions have two symmetrical framing sequences called "opening sequence" and "closing sequence" (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2006). Though they are mostly organizational (to signal the beginning and the end of the interaction), the linguistic choices made by the interlocutors can still shed some light on how interlocutors attenuate each other's face wants.

### Example 1

*Context:* Jack approaches the sales counter and Sara is the only one at the counter.

- 1 S: (hello)  
2 J: oh hello + actually I need a chopper + a new chopper?

### Example 2

*Context:* At the end, Jack decides not to buy any choppers.

- 109 J: and this is 599  
110 S: yeah  
111 J: ok alright well I'll I'll have to think about it but thank you very  
112 much I appreciate it  
113 S: yeah

In Example 1, a greeting was used to formulate the opening sequence, soon followed by Jack's request for a product. The speech act of requesting has long been an interesting topic for language research because of its potential of being an FTA, and the plethora of ways it can be formulated. Kerbrat-Orecchioni (2006) describes three styles of making a request: blunt, elliptical and softened. Jack's request fell into the first category, which might pose a problem with respect to politeness. As according to Brown and Levinson's calculation of level of politeness, the social distance between Jack and Sarah was not close, and a request was an imposition on Sarah, so Jack should employ politeness strategies to mitigate this FTA. However, he just directly declared what he wanted, which constituted a bald-on-record FTA. Pan (2000) and Kong (1998) suggest that a lack of face work in a Chinese service encounter is due to characteristics of the Chinese culture: face work is barely required in an outside relation such as a sales encounter, and there is an expectation that the relationship would not last long. The only reason for Chinese sales persons and customers' face-to-face interaction is to transact business for once but not to cultivate an interpersonal relationship.

What is important in determining appropriate politeness strategies in service encounters in Chinese societies is not the distinction between in-group and out-group behavior, but participants' mutual expectations of continuity in the selling/buying

relationship, and the power difference between them (Kong, 1998: 573). However, both Kong and Pan's conclusions might not stand under close scrutiny. At the closing sequence in lines 111 and 112 Jack used thanking to strike a "ritual balance between interactants" (for example, when A thanks B, B must thank in return. (see Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2006: 84)). It is also a hedge for his FTA of not buying. Still Jack was constantly attending to Sarah's positive face needs. The reason for Jack's lack of politeness strategies employed at the very beginning might be due to the fact that Hong Kong is a fast-paced society. Interactants usually presume that there is little time available and would handle business as fast as they could. It is neither polite nor impolite when the speakers do not adopt any politeness strategies in this situation.

#### ***4.2 Repetition and minimal response as a way of doing positive politeness***

##### **Example 3**

*Context:* After greeting, Jack asks to buy a five-star chopper, but Sara does not seem to be able to provide what he wants. So he repeats his demand and elaborates his reasons.

- 15 J: well I I have a set of five star so I want to I want to match  
16 S: oh I see but Chinese chop knife is dose not have five star + four  
17 star just have Pollux //yeah yeah\  
18 J: /ok\  
19 S: yeah yeah  
20 J: what I mean is + is it of good quality though? because the reason I like  
21 the five star set of knives is cause it's very good quality //but\  
...  
26 J: yeah I know I want a five star  
...  
28 J: so why can't I get a five-star chopper?

**Example 4**

*Context:* Jack wants to make sure that the blade on the Chinese chopper of the Pollux Line, a chopper Sarah is selling, is the same as the blade of the Four-Star, or the Five-Star Lines, which do not have the chopper Jack is asking for.

- 55 J: really?  
 56 S: really because very=you know how to say not thick  
 57 J: what's not just the thickness is all on the edge as well right?  
 58 S: yeah yeah  
 59 J: I like this because I never have sharpness on the edge of the blade  
 60 which is very good  
 61 S: //oh I see\  
 62 J: /so the edge\\ is the same here as this one?  
 63 S: yes the same  
 64 J: the same?  
 65 S: yes  
 66 J: really?  
 67 S: really  
 68 J: even though it is not a five-star four-star?  
 69 S: er=no + er + not a four-star five-star but still good quality of the-  
 70 J: I know of good quality but I want the same quality of blade as this  
 71 S: yeah the same yes  
 72 J: the same # are you sure?  
 73 S: yes I am sure yes

**Example 5**

*Context:* In the middle of the interaction, Jacks tells Sarah that he wants a good quality chopper.

- 41 S: but Chinese chopper just have this+[laughs]:no good quality:  
 42 J: this is of bad quality? is this what you are saying?  
 43 S: no no no no no bad quality but this + no better than that one

In examples 3 and 4, Jack was repeating his demand and requirement for the product. It would be an FTA if both interlocutors were speaking in their native languages: the customer's repeated asking of the same question could be construed as a doubt on the qualification of the sales person, thus the latter's positive face is threatened. However this case might be different. At first glance, it was an FTA to Sarah because it made her aware of her limited language level. Yet with a second thought, it was in Sarah's favor if she was given more chances to clarify what she means. Jack, as a native speaker, did not leave due to Sarah's lack of English proficiency but stayed till he found there was nothing suitable for him and that "Sarah could not persuade me" (as he said in an follow-up interview). If Jack had left as soon as he found Sarah's English was not fluent enough, he would make this fact obviously known to Sarah thus threatening her positive face. When he stayed and gave chances for Sarah to clarify what she means, Jack was implying that her English was still sufficient for communication thus attending to her positive face needs.

On the other hand, Sara had used "yeah" or "yes" seventeen times as a minimal feedback whilst Jack had used it only three times in this function. Minimal responses are forms such as *mmhmm*, *yeah*, *uh-huh*, and *right* which are uttered by a listener during a speech event to signal a certain level of engagement with the speaker (Fellego, 1995: 186). Short answers to direct questions have also been considered minimal responses (Fishman, 1978: 402) Due to Sarah's limited linguistic repertoire, she had limited choices to do linguistic politeness to Jack. But by using "yeah" or "yes" to reaffirm Jack's remarks she was trying her best to make Jack feel paid attention to thus attending to Jack's positive face.

### ***4.3 Redressing negative face***

#### **Example 6**

*Context:* When Sara knows Jack would like to buy a chopper at the beginning of the interaction, she takes out a promotion set instead of a single item. Jack does not understand why she does so.

- 7 S: /yeah yeah\\ we have the set of this  
 8 J: why do I want a set? I just want the chopper

9 S: because 1 chopper's 599 but now we if you don't want it you can give me

10 J: [laughs]: that doesn't seem fair: can you give me a discount//if I if I

Sarah was trying her best to sell and she offered more than Jack needed which seemed to be imposing on Jack to buy more. This was threatening Jack's negative face. Realizing Jack was very uncomfortable with this, she did not only explain the reason – that the brand was on sale and Jack could save a lot if he bought the whole set. She also joked that if Jack did not want the good bargain, he could give it to her. With this sequence of humor, Sarah had attenuated Jack's negative face need and solved the crisis.

#### ***4.4 Politeness without linguistic markers and off-record politeness***

##### **Example 7**

99 J: are you coming up with a new version or you ever only have this?

100 S: I have another um-

101 J: so you do have more than one chopper then?

102 S: but I think this is better

When Jack was not satisfied with any of the choppers Sara recommended and asked for another version, he was doing an FTA off-record and the FTA threatened both Sarah's positive and negative faces: it did not only imply depreciation of Sarah's recommendation (her recommendation is apparently not good enough, and Jack wants a better version) but also imposed on Sarah to show something new to him. However, according to our daily experience, to be asked for something does not necessarily feel face-threatening for the sales person because this may be what the sales person aspires for. However, in this situation Sarah might feel imposed since her previous offer was turned down and she had to show something new. Even when Sarah's face might be threatened by Jack, she responded by showing another chopper, thus attending to Jack's positive face, confirming that Jack's opinion was right. And she was being polite more with the action than the word. It is not rare as most speech acts are issued without politeness markers in a typical Chinese service encounter (Pan, 2000: 57). However, Jack's remark "so you do have more than one chopper then?" is face-threatening in that Sarah used to say that her brand has only one line of Chinese chopper (see line 49). Jack has picked it up and has challenged Sarah's integrity, thus threatening her positive face. The final response "But I think this is better" is

intrinsically both face-saving and face-threatening. It implied that “I think the one in hand is better than another one you want” which threatened Jack’s positive face. On the other hand, by claiming that “but I think this is better”, Sarah saved her positive face by explaining the reason for her to show another version was not because she was cheating but she considered it better for Jack.

After a discussion of some of the sequences in the sales encounter, we could see that in Hong Kong, there is a lack of politeness strategies in the opening and closing sequence of the interaction. During the course of the interaction, the native speaker (the customer) used repetition and off-record politeness to mitigate the face needs of the non-native speaker (the sales person), and the sales person used minimal responses and humor to redress the customer’s face needs. And sometimes the sales person would do politeness without any linguistic markers. It is interesting to note that the sales person would try her best to attenuate the customer’s face needs but when the customer’s speech act is a bald-on-record FTA, she managed to save her own face (see example 7).

## **5. Conclusion**

What it means to be “polite” in the sales encounter is not a straightforward issue. In this article, I have reviewed some research done in service encounters and then adopted Brown and Levinson’s politeness model to analyse how the customer and the salesperson actually negotiate their face needs. As shown in the discussion section alone, I argued that this service encounter in Hong Kong is characterized as follows:

1. When the language used in the interaction was not native to one of the interlocutors, the native speaker seemed to repeat important points, so that the pace of the interaction slowed down, and he gave time for the non-native interlocutor to respond.
2. The salesperson, i.e. the interlocutor with lower language proficiency, tended to use minimal responses to signal positive politeness to the customer, perhaps due to limited language choices.
3. Hong Kong is a fast-paced commercial society. The opening and closing of a sales encounter might lack in politeness strategies for the sake of efficiency.
4. The salesperson tried to save her own face if the customer’s speech act was a bald-on-record FTA.

As a result, Brown and Levinson's politeness framework is still applicable to explain politeness in this Hong Kong service encounter. However, the above findings should be tested by more data of sales interactions collected in Hong Kong with speakers of more diverse ethical backgrounds.

## Appendices

### *Transcript of the recording*

- 1 S: (hello)
- 2 J: oh hello + actually I need a chopper + a new chopper?
- 3 S: a chopper?
- 4 J: yeah
- 5 S: like that?
- 6 J: yeah //exactly\
- 7 S: /yeah yeah\ we have the set of this
- 8 J: why do I want a set? I just want the chopper
- 9 S: because 1 chopper's 599 but now we if you don't want it you can give me
- 10 J: [laughs]: that doesn't seem fair: can you give me a discount//if I if I\
- 11 S: /um\ you just want this one?
- 12 J: well what chopper is this? is that a five-star?
- 13 S: um + no + this chopper Pollux, this + um + no five star + because Chinese
- 14 chop + Chinese chop knife +
- 15 J: well I I have a set of five star so I want to I want to match
- 16 S: oh I see but Chinese chop knife is dose not have five star + four
- 17 star just have Pollux //yeah yeah\
- 18 J: /ok\
- 19 S: yeah yeah
- 20 J: what I mean is + is it of good quality though? because the reason I like
- 21 the five star set of knives is cause it's very good quality //but\
- 22 S: /yeah I see\ yeah but er + there has no + like this + eh + yeah
- 23 J: + yeah + that's why I like it # this is really well-made # this doesn't look
- 24 really well-made
- 25 S: eh=if you want good quality I think er=I think + four-star five-star is better

- 26 J: yeah I know I want a five star  
27 S: yeah yeah yeah  
28 J: so why can't I get a five-star chopper?  
29 S: because + this chopper no five-star just have just er + + just have this line  
30 Pollux line  
31 J: well well well what kind is this# is this like a four star?  
32 S: eh Pollux  
33 J: what does that mean?  
34 S: eh=[laughs]: I don't know:  
35 J: you don't know?  
36 S: er Pollux I don't know means um=means 3 like that # this knife is Pollux  
37 J: yeah so this is of much lower quality than the five-star clearly //right\  
38 S: er you can \ you can  
39 J: yeah yeah so I want a good quality one #I do not want a poor quality one  
40 so-  
41 S: but Chinese chopper just have this+[laughs]:no good quality:  
42 J: this is of bad quality? is this what you are saying?  
43 S: no no no no no bad quality but this + no better than that one  
44 J: why don't you make a five star chopper# I don't understand  
45 S: because er + Chinese er chop knife is doesn't have a better quality  
46 J: surely I have seen really good quality choppers //I mean that's-\  
47 S: /yeah\ in + in our brand?  
48 J: no in other brands  
49 S: oh I see but our brand is just have one line of Chinese chop knife # if you  
50 want a lighter you have this one in here  
51 J: yes that's what I want & it's the high quality blade as well//the blade's of\  
52 S: /yeah\ the blade is er good quality but just + don't have this one  
53 J: +so this this blade is same quality as this?  
54 S: yeah yeah yeah yeah  
55 J: really?  
56 S: really because very=you know how to say not thick  
57 J: what's not just the thickness is all on the edge as well right?  
58 S: yeah yeah  
59 J: I like this because I never have sharpness on the edge of the blade which is  
60 very good  
61 S: //oh I see\  
62 J: /so the edge\ is the same here as this one?  
63 S: yes the same

- 64 J: the same?
- 65 S: yes
- 66 J: really?
- 67 S: really
- 68 J: even though it is not a five-star four-star?
- 69 S: er=no + er + not a four-star five-star but still good quality of the-
- 70 J: I know of good quality but I want the same quality of blade as this
- 71 S: yeah the same yes
- 72 J: the same # are you sure?
- 73 S: yes I am sure yes
- 74 J: ok then why don't you have like the distinction between four-star five-
- 75 star and then whatever this is
- 76 S: because Chinese people doesn't matter or this one or=the handles just like
- 77 that so we don't have the other line of Chinese chop knife
- 78 J: you think Chinese consumers don't care about quality?
- 79 S: no don't care about the handles
- 80 J: So the only difference between //the four-star five-star\ is the handle that's
- 81 it not the blade?
- 82 S: /yeah\yeah yeah
- 83 J: really? are you sure?
- 84 S: yeah I am sure
- 85 J: so this blade is same as this and same as this
- 86 S: yep same as this
- 87 J: um ok alright um + so why is there such a big difference in price then
- 88 between four-star and five-star?
- 89 S: um + because um the four-star is the new one and the five-star is er + er +
- 90 the old style so-
- 91 J: ok
- 92 S: so + the price is cheaper yeah
- 93 J: oh ok
- 94 S: yeah
- 95 J: so + ok + so the only difference is in the handle
- 96 S: yeah yeah yeah
- 97 J: right but you + this is the only chopper that you have
- 98 S: yeah yeah
- 99 J: are you coming up with a new version or you ever only have this?

- 100 S: I have another um-  
101 J: so you do have more than one chopper then?  
102 S: but I think this is better  
103 J: why  
104 S: because the handles  
105 J: ok but the blade is the same  
106 S: the blade + er + yeah it's the same the same  
107 J: how much is this?  
108 S: um 449  
109 J: and this is 599  
110 S: yeah  
111 J: ok alright well I'll I'll have to think about it but thank you very  
112 much I appreciate it  
113 S: yeah

### ***Transcription conventions***

- [laughs] : : Paralinguistic features, colons indicate start/finish  
+ Pause of up to one second  
... //.....\ ... Simultaneous speech  
... /.....\ ...  
(hello) Transcriber's best guess at an unclear utterance  
? Rising or question intonation  
so- Incomplete or cut-off utterance  
# Signals end of "sentence" where it is ambiguous on paper  
= Utterance continues

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