

## An Overview of Politeness

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**Abstract.** Politeness is such an important phenomenon that it is indispensable to human interaction. As a universal phenomenon, politeness can be observed in all languages and cultures. In this essay, the author will give you the detailed analysis of the politeness principle between East and West. From the analysis, we will better understand that the polite behavior (including values and norms attached to such behavior) is culture-specific and language-specific.

### Politeness Model in English Culture

Politeness is such an important phenomenon that it is indispensable to human interaction. As a universal phenomenon, politeness can be observed in all languages and cultures. Yu has stated that politeness is “a kind of system of interpersonal relations which has been designed to facilitate interaction by minimizing the potential for the conflict and confrontation inherent in the human interchange” (Yule, 2000:106).

### Leech’s Conversational-Maxim View

Leech’s Principles of Pragmatics is a great elaboration of the conversational-maxim perspective on politeness. Leech adopts Grice’s CP as a framework of his theory. He states in his works that there has been existed a set of the different politeness maxims and sub-maxims which has guided the verbal communication of our human beings. He focuses his attention on the politeness and more focused on how politeness provides the blank between CP and the question of how to relate sense to force (Leech, 1983:104). Leech has made the distinction between the relative and absolute politeness. Relative politeness emphasizes that the politeness is always related to the norm of behavior. Absolute politeness is a kind of scale or a set of scales, which has the negative and positive pole. Among them, negative pole is always related with negative politeness including maximizing the polite illocution (ibid: 83-84). Leech centered on the study of the absolute politeness which has been made by the scholars all over the world.

### Brown & Levinson’s Face-Saving View

Brown & Levinson’s (1987) theory of politeness is often referred to as a face-saving theory of politeness, as they claim that their model builds on Goffman’s notion of face. It also builds on the Gricean model of Cooperative Principle (CP), since they claim it is in everybody’s interest to cooperate so that maintain everybody’s face (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In contrast to Leech’s Politeness Principle (PP), Brown & Levinson’s theory of politeness represents an attempt to formulate a theory of how individuals produce linguistic politeness (Watts, 2003:85), i.e. it is a production model which refers to the speaker’s initiation. In Brown & Levinson’s model, the focus is on the speaker; whereas in Leech’s PP, it is on the hearer. Brown & Levinson maintain that Grice’s CP has a very different status in their theory from any so-called politeness principles, so they propose a politeness model that aims to account for the main deviation from Grice’s CP. In other words, Grice’s CP has provided a principal foundation for Brown & Levinson’s politeness theory.

The basic notion of Brown & Levinson’s theory has included the following notions: face, FTAs

and politeness strategies. From the perspective of Brown and Levinson, “face” can be defined as the dignity of the individual and further divides into “positive face and negative face”. A person’s positive face is closely aligned to the basic human needs of esteem and need for control, so it certainly includes the feeling of competence about one’s appearance, intelligence and general ability to cope with and will be reflected in speaker’s desire to be liked, accepted, recognized, approved of, respected and appreciated by others. Positive face is supported by expressions of understanding, affection, solidarity, and positive evaluation or formal recognition of one’s qualities, but it is threatened by expressions of violent negative emotions, disapproval, criticism and mention of taboo topics (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Lira & Bowers, 1991). While an individual’s negative face will be reflected in the desire for independence and autonomy, that is, not to be impeded or put upon.

### **Politeness Model in Chinese Culture**

As far as Chinese politeness is concerned, Gu’s politeness model should be mentioned and his paper proved to be more cited both at home and abroad. In order to make the comprehensive description of the politeness in China, Gu has made the elaborate on the notion of Chinese politeness principle related with Chinese culture. Chinese politeness and maxim of the principles of Chinese politeness should be more suitable to the Chinese environment. Gu argues that “the Chinese concept of politeness is to some extent moralized, which makes it more appropriate to analyze politeness in terms of maxims” (Gu, 1990:243) and thus adopts and revises Leech’s norm approach as the basis of his framework. Based on the feature of Chinese culture, Gu has proposed that there are fundamentally four notions underlying the Chinese conception of *Limao* included: “respectfulness, modesty, attitudinal, warmth, aril refinement”. “Respectfulness” is the self’s positive admiration, others should take the latter’s face, social status into consideration. “Modesty” is a kind of way concerning “self-denigration”; “Attitudinal warmth” is the way to display the individual’s kindness, consideration and hospitality. “Refinement” which can be regarded as the self’s behavior to others which reach the certain standards (*ibid*: 239).

Based on these observations, Gu has modified (1990) and extends Leech’s PP and puts forward Chinese politeness, which he claims to be very unique to the Chinese culture. He has summarized the four maxims of the Chinese politeness. It has included “Self-denigration Maxim, the Address Maxim, the Tact Maxim and the Generosity Maxim”.

After that, Gu(1990) has revised further of the maxims.

The self-denigration maxim: two clauses or sub-maxims are included:

denigrate self and (b) elevate other. Based on the notion of respectfulness and modesty, this maxim has more complete.

The address term maxim: it always concerned with the interlocutor with the appropriate address term. it has absorbed a lot from the previous concept of respectfulness and attitudinal warmth.

The refinement maxim: it refers to the individual’s behavior, all the behavior should meet the different standards during the process of communication, it mainly focused on the refined language and avoided the foul language; it emphasized on the use of euphemisms and less use of direct language.

The agreement maxim: this kind of maxim which has mainly focused on both of interlocutors, who have made the great efforts to maximize agreement and harmony and minimized disagreement.

The virtues-words-deeds maxim: this maxim has centered on the minimize the cost, the maximize benefit to others. It is the way to maximize the benefit which others can give to self and minimize the cost in which self-pays at the conversational level.

From Gu’s politeness principle, we know that it has displayed the different perspective on the study of politeness phenomenon compared with western scholars’ findings. This proves that what counts as polite behavior (including values and norms attached to such behavior) is culture-specific and language-specific.

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