

Research Article

## Analysis of Western and Chinese Gift Giving Etiquette from the Perspective of the Face Theory

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**Abstract:** As a common phenomenon in today's society, gift-giving plays a vital role in people's life and daily communication. And it has become a global social etiquette. Meanwhile, as a basic but important need of human beings, face is frequently used by people in daily life, especially in gift etiquette, and face is precisely an aspect of gift etiquette, which can't be ignored. In order to avoid face-threatening behavior in intercultural gift etiquette, we have to understand and be familiar with the differences of face among people who have different culture background. Although domestic and foreign scholars have done a positive research on gift etiquette, the research from the perspective of face theory still has a great space and needs further study. In this paper, Brown & Levinson's face theory is applied to analyze Chinese and Western gift etiquette and this thesis also tries to explore the cultural factors that cause the differences through some examples. This thesis will not only help us better understand the face theory, but also render us a helping hand in finding strategies of avoiding Face Threatening Acts, and promote interpersonal communication, especially benefit to intercultural communication.

**Keywords:** gift etiquette, face, face theory, intercultural communication..

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### INTRODUCTION

Gifts play a very important role in people's lives. The ancients said: 礼尚往来, 往而不来, 非礼也. Gift giving is regarded as an important nonverbal form of communication, as we all know that gift appears in the form of some objects, and feelings are expressed by these objects. Appropriate gift giving is like a silent envoy, adding luster and new vigor to communicative activities and people's friendships. There are four reasons for People's gift giving. The first reason is for communicating, the second is for promoting interpersonal relationships, the third is for expressing respect or gratitude and the last is for pure utilitarian purposes.

However, the existence of cultural differences leads to a fact that gift giving etiquette varies greatly from countries to countries. As a basic but important need of human beings, face is frequently used by people in daily life, especially in gift etiquette. Everyone wants to maintain their own and others' face, and face is precisely an aspect of gift etiquette, which can't be ignored, face awareness has been integrated into the Chinese and western gifts etiquette under the influence of these two entirely different cultural. There are a lot of expressions about face in Chinese such as “脸面, 颜面, 丢脸, 翻脸, 给脸, 争面子, 要面子, 给面子,

面子上过得去, 事情办得体面, 有嘴有脸, 不看僧面看佛面, 死要面子活受罪”and so on. Chinese Anthropologist Hu Xianjin (1944) defined the Chinese "Face" from two aspects, one is “lian”, which refers to social confidence in the moral character of a person, the other is "mien-tzu", which is defined as people obtain prestige from the social achievements, it is the society's recognition on one's accomplishment. Abroad, the English scholar Brown and Levinson (1978) published an article entitled Universals in Language Usage: Politeness Phenomena, which arouse great concern in the field of linguistics, the Face-Saving theory they put forward is the most influential courtesy model. They divided the face into negative face and positive face, and proposed five kinds of politeness strategies to deal with Face Threatening Acts (FTA).

All these studies about gift giving are carried out from different perspectives, but they didn't take the intercultural factors into consideration. In the fast developing society, we should apply gift etiquette to intercultural communication.

### 1. DEFINITION OF FACE THEORY

British scholar Brown and Levinson (1987) proposed the Face Theory, which includes three basic

concepts: face, face-threatening acts and politeness strategy.

According to Brown and Levinson, the word "face" is refers to "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself". And they further divided face into positive face and negative face. The positive face refers to the basic needs of every member and hope that this need can be recognized and respected by others. Negative face refers to that one's behavior is unimpeded and not interfered by others which mean independence.

### 1.2 Definition of Face-threatening Acts

Brown and Levinson put forward the concept of face threatening acts (FTAs) . They claim that Positive face and negative face of both sides will be threatened in the conversational process. So most speech acts are face threatening acts (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Brown and Levinson (1987) regard these acts that leads to face-losing as Face-threatening Acts(FTA), and they further categorize the FTA into two genres, one is positive face-threatening acts, such acts include criticism, scorn, complaint, condemnation, insult and expressing opposing opinions, and the other is negative face-threatening acts, which include warnings, orders, reminders, and suggestions.

### 1.3 Politeness Strategy

Brown and Levinson (1987) proposed five politeness strategies to cope with Face-threatening Acts: Bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, off record, and doesn't do the FTA. This thesis will analyze positive politeness, negative politeness, off record in detail.

## 2. Analysis of Western and Chinese Gift-giving Etiquette

In this chapter, Brown & Levinson's face theory is applied to analyze Chinese and Western gift etiquette and this chapter also tries to explore the cultural factors that cause the differences. By giving conversational examples, we try to find effective face saving strategies to avoid face threatening acts. Then let's see two examples to know about what face is and what the differences are between Chinese and western face.

In China, face is closely related to the sense of shame. If you lose your face, you may feel ashamed; this will have a bad impact on interpersonal communication. So people pay much attention to face in gift etiquette in order to leave a good impression on the other. Everybody wants to get a positive evaluation from others, so that they can 挣到面子(earn face), 要到脸(get face).

### Example 1 :

陈局长：“你这是什么意思？”

小赵：“没什么，意思意思。”

陈局长：“你这就不够意思了。”

小赵：“小意思，小意思。”

陈局长：“你这人真有意思。”

小赵：“其实也没别的意思。”

陈局长：“那我就不好意思了。”

小赵：“是我不好意思。”

This is an interesting dialogue, from the dialogue we can see that both sides are trying to maintain each other's face, the word "意思" here has different meanings. Secretary Chen said, "你这是什么意思?" which means why do you give me the red envelope, Zhao uses "没什么,意思,意思" to express his own goodwill and respect for the Secretary Chen, which helps eliminate embarrassment and save the Secretary's face. "你这就不够意思了" Means that it's unnecessary to give him this, such words not only give enough "face" to Zhao, but also maintain Secretary's own face. Then Chen said"有意思" to express that Zhao is sensible enough to do this, and maintain Zhao's "positive face." Instead, Zhao said"其实也没有别的意思", which actually has a special intention, so that by using euphemism Zhao expresses his own intentions and avoid falling into embarrassing situation, which save the face of both sides. Chen said"那我就不好意思了", it means that he received this gift, this is 赏面子 ("give face"). "是我不好意思", This is Wang's modest statement, which takes Secretary's negative face into consideration. In this gift-giving conversation, Zhao and Secretary Chen not only actively maintain their self-esteem, but also take care of the face of the other side, which is beneficial to promote the harmonious relationship between them.

In a word, "爱面子" ("love face") is one of the important characteristics of Chinese people's inner personality. Giving "face" or not is often an important condition for harmonious interpersonal relationships. In gift giving etiquette, it's typical of Chinese to be modest. They may say 随便买的("buy it casually"), 区区薄礼, 不值一提("just a mere gift, and it can't show my respect"), 小意思("small token of kindly feelings") or 很对不起("I'm sorry"), even if they spent a lot of vigor, time, or money on this gift. It's difficult for Westerners to understand such deeds that affirm his gift's value in the negative way; they do not know such understatements. In other words, they can't realize the affirmative meaning hidden in the negation.

### Example 2:

A: Elsa! This is a small present from Beijing.

B: thank you. You're just wonderful. May I open it?

A: go ahead.

**B:** a beautiful vase. I'm sure we will use this a lot! This is just also pay attention to different countries' gift giving what I want to have taboos. In China, we should avoid sending the old 钟 ("bell") whose pronunciation is similar to that of 终 ("end"). Besides, the gift's color and number are also important, white and the number "4" are considered inauspicious.

**A:** I'm so glad you like it.

In Western countries, gift represents love for "receiver", they pay less attention on face or gift's price, what they are concerned about is the friendship expressed by the gift, and want to make receiver feel happy by receiving gifts. Besides, westerners are particular about opening gifts when they are presented, and show respect for the giver by expressing surprise and gratitude in their presence. When westerner accepted the gifts, they will immediately say "That's what I just wanted", "It's very nice", "I really like it" to live up to the giver's good will. While Chinese people is used to keeping a low profile when giving gifts, and only after the guests leaving will the host be aware of the gifts.

In a word, in Chinese and Western cultures, all people keep a watchful eye on face, but their degree of recognition and attention of face is very different due to that Chinese culture attaches importance to the collectivism while Western culture puts emphasize on the individualism. Westerners give gifts often out of courtesy. To them, the meaning of the gift is more important than its value and they seldom think about the receiver's face. Therefore the way that gifts are sent is more casual. Instead, Chinese think highly of gift giving. A precious gift stands for not only respect but also face. So they take gift's value and occasion of gift giving seriously. In the process of giving and receiving gifts, faces of both sides are satisfied and interpersonal relationships are also established.

### 2.1 Positive-face-threatening Acts

Positive face refers to hope that their behavior is affirmed and approved by others and reach a consensus with each other.

There are many acts threatening the hearer's positive face by ignoring the hearer's self-image, such as criticism, scorn, complaint, condemnation, insult and expressing opposing opinions.

#### Example 3 :

小陈：“小赵，这是我送你的结婚礼物，不是什么好东西，凑合着用吧”

小赵：“这种挂饰我有好几个”

In this dialogue, Chen modestly said "不是什么好东西，凑合着用吧". In fact, this gift is carefully selected by him, but Zhao's words "这种挂饰我有好几个" apparently didn't take Chen's "face" and his good will into consideration, which threatened Chen's positive face.

When it comes to face threatening acts, we should also pay attention to different countries' gift giving have taboos. In China, we should avoid sending the old 钟 ("bell") whose pronunciation is similar to that of 终 ("end"). Besides, the gift's color and number are also important, white and the number "4" are considered inauspicious.

In Western countries, most important, we should avoid giving too precious gift, which will give people a sense of insincerity. Secondly, white and black are often associated with the funeral that is considered bad luck, so do not use these two colors to pack gifts. Finally, pay attention to the number of gifts, for instance 13. If you do not attach importance to these taboos in the process of intercultural communication, it is easy to threaten the positive face of the other side, moreover, lead to deterioration of the relationship.

Meanwhile, we have to pay attention to different personal taboos. Due to different cultural backgrounds and personal hobbies, everyone has different personal taboos when accepting gifts. Personal taboos are caused by certain personal factors. For example, it is a good idea to send cooking Books to a housewife who loves cooking. But if she is not good at cooking, the gift will become a kind of satire and insult, which will threaten her positive face.

In a word, in gift giving etiquette, we should pay attention to these taboos which will threaten the listener "positive face". Only protecting others' face can we save our own face and establish close interpersonal relationship.

### 2.2 Negative-face-threatening Acts

Negative face refers to the need to perform at one's will and not be enforced. There are some acts threatening the hearer's negative face by imposing on the hearer, such as warnings, orders, reminders, and suggestions.

#### Example 4

A: 这是我的一点心意，行个方便。

B: 实在不好意思，现在上头查得紧，明令禁止收礼行贿

A: 只此一次，下不为例啊

B: .....

In the whole process of vocal communication, in order to achieve the goal of giving gifts, A carried out the request behavior, that is 只此一次，下不为例啊 ("I won't do this any more") these words inevitably interfere with the freedom of B's action. According to Brown & Levinson, negative face is a person's rights in a certain range where one's acts are not impeded or enforced by others. Therefore B's behavior threatened the listener's need for negative faces.

### 3. Face Saving Strategies for Western and Chinese Gift-giving

In order to make interpersonal communication smoothly and satisfy people's common need of face, it is necessary to use some effective communicative strategies. Here this thesis is going to explore some effective face saving strategies to help people save face for both sides in the cross-cultural communication and maintain good relationships. This chapter will analysis positive politeness strategies, negative politeness strategies, and off record strategies in detail.

#### 3.1 Positive Politeness Strategies

Brown and Levinson pointed out that the positive politeness strategy is used to meet people's positive face demands, such words are filled with appreciation and agreement. Brown & Levinson proposed 15 positive politeness strategies and in this chapter, four strategies of them are used in specific Chinese and western gift etiquette.

**Strategy 1:** Notice the hearer's interests, wants, needs, and 投其所好("hit on what one likes") .

#### Example 5

A : Happy Birthday!

B: Oh, a present! Thank you, you're so wonderful. How could you remember my birthday?

A : I may forget my birthday but not yours.

B : May I open it?

A : Of course, I hope you like it.

B : Oh, my God! A beautiful hair decoration! You are so sweet.

In this dialogue, A said, "I may forget my birthday but not yours." This sentence recognized the interests of B, A did not forget the birthday of B, and sent a gift to meet B's needs for birthday. In a way A affirmed the positive face of B. On the other hand, B said "my God! A beautiful hair decoration! You are so sweet." such words are feedback to A's face. It's quite reasonable to come to a conclusion that learning to recognize each other's interests and needs is of great benefit to interpersonal relationships, not only can we earn face, but also maintain the face of others.

**Example 6 :** “听说您喜欢喝茶，我特意给买了上好的西湖龙井送您，您肯定会喜欢的”，

In this sentence the speaker noticed the other's needs, and use his action to confirm the other's hobby, which is helpful to maintain the positive face of the other.

**Strategy 2 :** Use in-group identity markers.

By using person or dialects, we can close the distance between each other and promote the gift-giving behavior to achieve good results.

#### Example 7:

A : 老乡，身体好些了吗，我给你带点补品。

B : 兄弟，你这就太见外了。

A : 出门在外，老乡们相互照顾是应该的，就收下我这点心意吧。

B : 真是让老弟费心了。

In this dialogue, 老乡("fellow-villager"), 兄弟("brother") these two calls close the relationship between A and B, which effectively eliminate the sense of distance and warm hearts, A not only expresses his care for B, but also avoids making B embarrassed by calling B "老乡", A maintains the positive face needs of B . Meanwhile B use "老弟"to praised A's acts, which protects A's face.

**Strategy 3** Give reasons.

Providing reasons when you giving gifts will make the other side less embarrassed, such reasons imply a meaning: "When you do as I do, you will know that my behavior is reasonable." So these words will put both sides into a cooperative situation.

#### Example 8:

Grandpa: this is for your graduation, a computer.

Grandson: oh my God, grandpa, it is too expensive.

Grandpa: you worked hard for your exam. You deserve it!

In this conversation, the grandson wants to refuse this gift for it's too precious to accept. However, grandfather's words "you worked hard for your exam, you deserve it!" provide a reason for grandson to accept it merrily, which meets the grandson's positive face needs.

#### Example 9 :

领导：“到我这来，还拿东西干嘛？”

员工：“领导，您这么辛苦，在公司是德高望重，我来看望你是应该的”

领导：“哪里哪里，那都是应尽的职责。”

员工：“今后工作上，还望您能够多多提携”

In this example, apparently, this worker's gift-giving purpose is out of her own promotion, but considering that the gift will be rejected and threaten leader's face, so she said “领导，您这么辛苦，在公司是德高望重，我来看看你是应该的”。 This reasonable reason not only resolved embarrassment, but also sent out the gift successfully. For one thing, the worker implicitly expressed his purpose of giving gifts. For another, he also protects the leader's positive face and his own face.

#### Strategy 4 : Assert common ground.

For example, talk about safe well-known topics.

#### Example 10:

In the UK, the British gifts etiquette is closely related to Christmas. On the Christmas morning, all the royal family members and the entire civilian population will give gifts to others. So gifts become a "safe topic" in this day because everyone does so. That is to say, sending gifts in an appropriate situation virtually affirm others' positive face.

### 3.2 Negative Politeness Strategies

Negative politeness refers to meet the other's negative face needs without disturbing the hearer's freedom of action. In Brown & Levinson's negative politeness strategies, this chapter will analyze three negative politeness strategies.

#### Strategy 1: Question and hedge.

This refers to indirect euphemistic expression of your own mind, which is a very important negative courtesy. That is to say we don't presuppose each other's attitude, because in gift etiquette we are not sure that the other will accept or like our gift. The corresponding strategy is to avoid any exact expression. Such expressions include: I was wondering if , if any, if you want, perhaps/maybe/probably, might/may, I suppose/guess/thought..... In Chinese, they are“或许”、“大概”、“可能”、“恐怕”、“我猜”、“我个人感觉”

#### Example 11 :

**Tom:** this is a hair grip I made for your birthday, I think you probably like it.

**Lily:** Oh, really, you are so considerable, I like it very much.

In this brief conversation, Tom said "I think you probably like it", These two words "think", "probably" are only Tom's own speculation and desire, and these two words avoid interference with Lily's preferences, and give her freedom of thinking and choosing, which preserves Lily's negative face.

#### Strategy 2 : Give deference

In other words, in the gift giving etiquette we can try to reduce our own identity, promote the identity of the other. This strategy generally use honorific, such as 您 ("nin"), 请 ("please"), 笑纳 ("kindly accept") which demonstrate that the other's status is higher than ours.

### 3.3 Off Record Politeness Strategies

Off record strategy is the most polite strategy. It means the speaker just give the literal meaning or

provides clues for the addressee to infer the intended meaning of utterance, so that the speaker needn't to be responsible for the specific intention. The Off record strategy Includes: giving hints, understating, using contradiction and so on.

As a matter of fact, this strategy is seldom applied to gift etiquette. In a way, it is similar to Chinese modest characteristics. 区区薄礼, 不值一提 ("just a mere gift, and it can't show my respect"), 小意思 ("small token of kindly feelings"), 你不用这么破费 ("you don't have to spend so much money"), or 您太客气啦 ("you are quite welcome").

## CONCLUSION

Based on the full analysis conducted above, there are some new findings in the study: Firstly, in the gift giving etiquette, both Chinese and Westerners are eager to maintain their positive and negative face, but the difference is that Chinese tend to maintain their positive face because of their strong sense of collectivism. It's typical of them to put others' interests in the first place in order to build a harmonious society. Chinese people pay much attention to the value of gifts, which will be helpful to establish and maintain a good interpersonal relationship. So 拿不出手 ("not be presentable"), 没面子 ("losing face") are not strange to Chinese. On the contrary, Westerners are more concerned about their negative face. What they care about is not the gift's price or face, but the receiver's happiness. The reason may lies in the fact that westerners pursue freedom and human rights, they promote "All men are created equal." In their opinion, everyone is independent; the realization of personal interests is above everything. Therefore, face in Western culture is inevitably accompanied by individualistic color, which emphasizes the individual's self-image or demand.

Secondly, face-threatening acts are prevalent in interpersonal communication, especially in gift giving. But the Chinese and Westerners have different perceptions of FTA. As for Chinese, too cheap gift will make themselves and the other side 脸上下不来 ("feel embarrassed"), which may threaten both sides' face. While in the eyes of Westerners, to some extent Chinese self-humility hindered personal freedom, thus negative face will be threatened.

Thirdly, face-saving strategy is an important principle of interpersonal communication; people always unconsciously take the face into consideration in gift etiquette. The Chinese tend to use positive politeness strategies, such as using honorifics, praise and approval to belittle ourselves and respect others in order to 顾面子 ("save face"), 争面子 ("win face") 要面

子(“keep face”). Instead, westerners pay more attention to self-freedom and personal satisfaction.

Face theory is based on English corpus, and the research is only in line with the English cultural habits. Therefore, the concepts of politeness and face are deeply influenced by western values, which contain individualism. So the use of Brown & Levinson's face theory to explain all the gifts etiquette has some limitations, For example, it's difficult for westerners to understand 区区薄礼, 不成敬意, 请笑纳 (“the trivial meager present is just a little token to show my respect to you and still hope to be kindly accepted”). Different national culture give a different understanding of the face, it's also impossible for face theory to fully explain the face of other cultures, politeness strategy can't correctly guide all the gift-giving behavior, either.

Besides, in analyzing "face saving strategy ", Brown and Levinson put more attention on protecting the hearer's face. To them, the speaker mainly considers the listener's face so as to avoid offending the other, which is not comprehensive.

In term of this thesis, examples of western gift etiquette are not adequate enough. This paper hopes that future scholars could collect more typical gift giving examples from China especially western countries to make it more persuasive.

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