

# *Linguistic Politeness in Mandarin*

Xiaotian Wang

*Georg-August-Universität Göttingen, Göttingen, Lower Saxony, Germany*

**Keywords:** Sociolinguistics, Linguistic Politeness, Mandarin

**Abstract:** Politeness in Mandarin has been studied and investigated from many different aspects, such as honorific markers, humble expressions, courteous sentence structures, the usage of euphemism, and so on. The polite speech patterns of Mandarin speakers can be influenced by factors, such as age, gender, and social status. At the same time, the polite speech pattern has been evolving from time to time as well. This study tends to examine the relationship between speech politeness and three variables, including age, gender, and familiarity between speakers. An in-person rapid and anonymous survey that focuses on people's responses to "xiexie" [ɛə ɛə] 'thank you' is conducted. Information related to the speakers responding and the context of the conversation are both recorded along with the exact response of the interlocutors. The age of the speakers is divided into three groups, including 19-25, 25-40, and older than 70. All the speakers are native Mandarin speakers who currently live in Dalian, China. The relationships between the politeness of speakers and their gender, age, and familiarity with the other speaker is demonstrated in figures respectively. The results show that the social norms related to the understanding of politeness established in the culture have a huge impact on the formation of people's speech. Native Mandarin speakers are still following most of the notions proposed in Confucianism.

## 1. Introduction

The presence of politeness which serves as a general attitude of people and a social norm can be observed in everyday life, from both actions and speech patterns of people. The demonstration of politeness might differ from region to region. In the United States, for example, smiling at people passing by, holding doors for other people, and keeping proper personal space are considered polite actions; in Chinese and East Asian cultures, bowing to elders, using both hands when receiving things and bending over slightly when shaking hands may help convey politeness. Politeness in speech can be seen from both apparent linguistic modification on words, such as the T-V distinction or honorific markers, and simply the way people phrase their responses or statements. For example, in Mandarin, it is polite to address elders with "nin" [nɪn], which is the honorific form of you and in the United States, polite speech can be not asking embarrassing questions about people's personal life and using courteous expressions to inform people before taking certain actions [4].

Many previous researches tend to focus on the politeness of Mandarin speakers. For example, Lee [4] analyzes the politeness of speech patterns in Mandarin from 4 aspects, including honorific markers on noun phrases, humble expressions, courteous sentence structures, and the usage of euphemisms. These aspects provide a complete overview of the polite speech patterns used by

Mandarin speakers. Other studies tend to focus more on specific speech patterns. For example, Hong [1] looks at impersonal pronouns and personal greetings. The result shows that while the choices of impersonal pronouns are based on the age of the other speaker, personal greetings in Mandarin are “informational and familiar, rather than ritual, and secular and mundane, rather than religious” [1]. There are also other studies that tend to evaluate the change of politeness in Mandarin. For example, Pan & Kádár [5] provide a comparative overview of historical and contemporary Chinese politeness. The study shows that politeness in Mandarin underwent a great transformation during the late-19th and 20th century.

Based on these previous studies, this paper tends to focus on the politeness of Mandarin speakers by recording their responses to “xiexie” [ɕə ɕə] ‘thank you’. The responses people gave and the information of the speakers and the conversations are recorded. The relationships between the speakers’ information and the politeness of their responses are evaluated.

## 2. Politeness in Chinese Culture

In order to interpret the politeness in Mandarin speech patterns, it is crucial to understand the culture of politeness in China. Horng-Yi Lee [4] argues that language and culture are highly related, where speakers’ culture has a significant impact on the formation of their speech. In Chinese culture, politeness is closely related to the concept of face, which is translated to *lian* or *mianzi* in Mandarin [4]. Goffman [2] defines face as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular concept” [2]. In general, face represents one’s reputation and dignity, thus speakers tend to use polite speech patterns in order to offer others a good impression, which helps the speakers fit into the community better at the same time. Since one’s politeness significantly influences his reputation and his connection with other individuals in the community, it should be common and spontaneous for speakers to use polite speech patterns all the time.

The notion of politeness in Chinese culture mainly developed from Confucianism, especially the philosophy of “*li*” [li], which roughly translates into manner in English. Appropriate social communication is considered an important part of the moral concept of “*li*” [li] [5]. Since the social status of elders in Chinese culture is highly emphasized in Confucianism, it is necessary for the younger generation to express their respect to the elders in the community[3].

The politeness of women in the society is also mentioned in Confucianism, where Confucius believed that women should be careful with their “*fude*” [fu də] (female behaviors/virtues), “*fuyan*” [fu jan] (female words), “*furong*” [fu ʃoŋ] (female appearances), and “*fugong*” [fu goŋ] (female work). However, the politeness of men is not independently illustrated in Confucianism.

## 3. Methodology

In order to get as many responses as possible, I decided to perform an in-person rapid and anonymous survey, observing people’s responses to “xiexie” [ɕə ɕə] ‘thank you’. I also wrote down the exact situation where the conversation took place so that the measurement of formality is more accurate. However, since the data shows that none of the conversations took place under a formal circumstance, formality of the conversation is not included in this project.

The data included both information of the speakers responding and the conversations, including the name of the speaker saying thank you, the gender, age, and occupation of the speakers responding, and the familiarity between the two speakers. The age of the speakers is divided into three groups, including 19-25, 25-40, and older than 70. All the speakers are native Mandarin speakers who currently live in Dalian, Liaoning. As the other speaker in the conversation, I am also a native speaker of Mandarin. I am 19 years old, which means that I am younger than most of the

speakers in the survey, and people who are older than 35 are generally considered another generation. Based on the understanding of politeness in Chinese culture and the responses the speakers actually gave, as long as the speaker responds to me, the response is considered polite. On the other hand, if the speaker did not respond with anything, the absence of his response is considered an impolite response. The information is recorded in table 1. Note that the expected response refers to a polite response.

Table 1: Information of Speakers and Conversations

Speaker	Response	Is it an expected response	Age	Gender	Familiarity
AW	no response	no	70+	F	familiar
AW	no response	no	25-40	F	familiar
AW	“meishi” ‘no problem’	yes	25-40	F	unfamiliar
AW	no response	no	25-40	F	unfamiliar
AW	“en” ‘mhm’	yes	25-40	M	unfamiliar
AW	“meishi” ‘no problem’	yes	25-40	M	unfamiliar
AW	a nod	yes	25-40	M	Unfamiliar
AW	“bukeqi” ‘you’re welcome’	yes	25-40	M	Familiar
AW	“meishi” ‘no problem’	yes	19-25	F	familiar
AW	“en” ‘mhm’	yes	19-25	M	familiar

In order to compare these factors with the responses given by different speakers, I made three histograms that show the relationships between the politeness of speakers and their gender, age, and familiarity with the other speaker respectively.

#### 4. Data Analysis

Based on the traditional views of politeness in Chinese culture, female speakers are expected to use more polite speech patterns than men in order to demonstrate their female virtues. Younger speakers are expected to use more polite speech patterns to the elders so that they could demonstrate their respect. Also, since politeness is related to one’s face, which influences one’s participation in the community, speakers are expected to talk politely to all speakers, no matter how familiar they are with the other speakers.

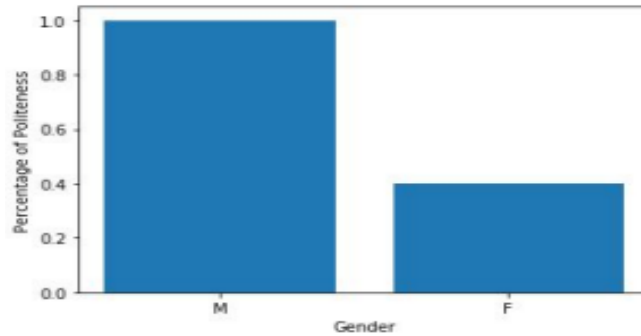


Figure 1: Percentage of Politeness in Speech vs Gender

According to figure 1, while more than 90% of the male speakers used polite responses, only about 30%-40% of the female speakers responded with polite responses. This result is the opposite of what I predicted based on the view of politeness in traditional Chinese culture. However, this result is actually not surprising. According to Hong [1], the loss of politeness in speech patterns is a phenomenon caused by modernization. With the impact of feminism and the establishment of multi-racial communities, a lot of female speakers in China refused to follow the notions of Confucianism since it considers women as the inferior members of the community. This result follows the pattern of gender paradox that Labov (1994) mentioned, where female speakers are more likely to adopt innovation in speech patterns. Chinese women started losing this politeness in the early 1980s because this speech pattern is considered prestigious since it is intertwined with the independence and individuality of women.

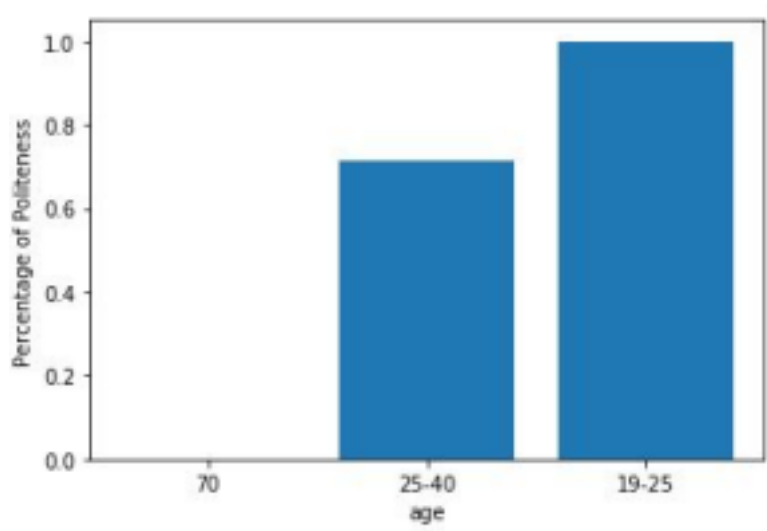


Figure 2: Percentage of Polite in Speech vs Age

According to figure 2, when the other speaker is older than 70 years old, they stopped using polite speech patterns when talking to people who are much younger. Speakers who are 25-40 years old tend to use more polite responses with me, but the percentage is still much lower than speakers who are of similar ages with me. This result is predictable since it is caused by the traditional view of politeness people hold. According to Pan & Kádár [5], speakers assume that people who are older possess a higher ranking in society, thus using polite speech patterns with elders is a natural reaction. In this case, since I am much younger than most of the speakers in the survey, it is natural for them to eliminate politeness in their speech since they assume that I have a lower social ranking.

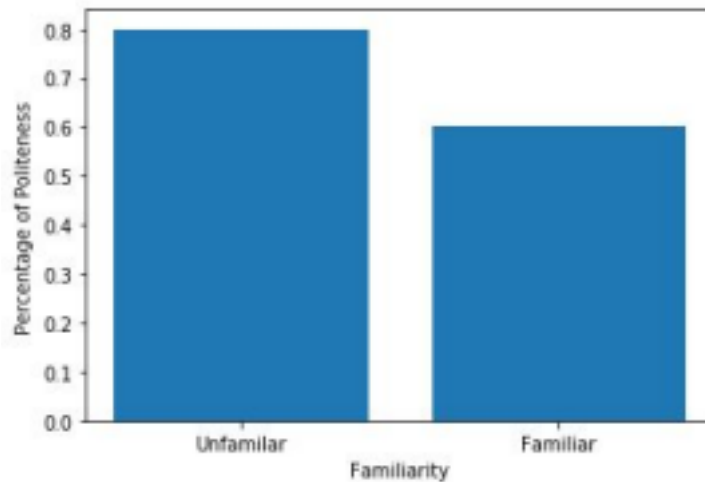


Figure 3: Percentage of Polite in Speech vs Familiarity

Finally, according to figure 3, familiarity does not have a significant impact on the politeness of people's speech patterns. Even though people who are not familiar with me tend to have more polite responses, the difference in percentage is trivial. This also follows the hypothesis because if politeness is used to enhance the connection within people in a society all the time, the familiarity between speakers should not be a factor that influences people's choice of responses.

## 5. Conclusion

In general, the linguistic politeness in Mandarin is closely related to Confucianism. People tend to form their speech under the guidance of "li" [li]. From the survey, it is apparent that the age of the other speaker is a factor that people consider when talking. People who are older are not obligated to respond with high politeness in their speech, while younger speakers have to in order to show their respect and keep their own *face*.

Familiarity is another factor that is examined in the survey. Even though it is not directly discussed in Confucianism, the definition of manners indicates that politeness in speech should not be influenced by the familiarity between speakers. This notion is also reflected in the result since the two categories of speakers have almost the same percentage of politeness speech used in their responses.

The most surprising result is shown in the comparison of genders. While women are obligated to show more politeness in their speech than men in Confucianism, men used much more polite responses than women. This result can be explained by the current modernization occurring in Chinese society, where women are adopting innovation in speech patterns in order to show more independence. Since independence and individuality is considered crucial and prestigious, this social factor is now considered by female speakers in China when forming speech.

From the results, it is obvious that the social norms related to the understanding of politeness established in the culture have a huge impact on the formation of people's speech. Native Mandarin speakers are still following most of the notions proposed in Confucianism. The age and gender of the other speaker is always considered as two important factors by the speaker during a conversation. However, it is also important to note that social norms are not stable and they might change from time to time, following some bigger changes occurring in society. The change in speech patterns of Chinese women is a good example of this phenomenon. More prestigious speech patterns are adopted by female Mandarin speakers after modernization.

## References

- [1] Hong, B. (1985). *Politeness in Chinese: Imperial Pronouns and Personal Greetings*. *Anthropological Linguistics*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Summer, 1985), pp. 204-213.
- [2] Goffman, E. (1955). *On face-work: An analysis of ritual elements in social interaction*. *Psychiatry: Journal for the Study of Interpersonal Processes*, 18, pp.213-231.
- [3] Presbitero P. *The gender paradox.*[J]. *Eurointervention Journal of Europcr in Collaboration with the Working Group on Interventional Cardiology of the European Society of Cardiology*, 2009, 4(4):415, 417.
- [4] Lee, Horng-Yi. (2020). *Linguistic Politeness in the Chinese Language and Culture*. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 1, pp. 1-9.
- [5] Pan, Yuling. Kádár, Z. (2011). *Historical vs. contemporary Chinese linguistic politeness*. *Journal of Pragmatics* 43, pp. 1525-1539.