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Using ethnography in politeness studies: A discursiveness-based approach

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Abstract: The current study points out the methodological limitations of contemporary discursive politeness research and suggests that in-depth ethnographic data provides a potentially crucial solution. Discursive politeness studies advocate a data-driven, bottom-up analytical approach that stresses the importance of participants' own contextual assessments. Analysis of such kind requires the corresponding methodological design which allows researchers to obtain the defining information that can be seemingly absent in the on-going interaction. However, in the current body of literature, politeness research focuses on theoretical discussion without specifically organised consideration regarding methodology. Therefore, aiming at providing a more valid methodological approach, the current study proposes to consider ethnography as the foundational data-collection method for discursive politeness research, stressing 'long-term' and 'in-depth' as the core features in conducting fieldwork.

In order to clarify this view, the current study demonstrates a case study via examining an interaction naturally occurring among several family members during dinner time in China. This interaction is examined on two levels respectively (i.e., based on demographic data and in-depth ethnographic data). This paralleled analysis reveals that in complicated real-life interactions, lacking of thorough contextual information of both cultural norms and individually shaped cognition can be misleading in analysis. Therefore, understanding (im)politeness as an interactionally situated contextual/cognitive judgement, long-term ethnography is needed and that the fieldwork should be conducted carefully and patiently in order to gain access to comparatively more solid data and achieve more valid conclusion.

Keywords: ethnography; discursive politeness; framing

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1. Introduction

The current study considers in-depth ethnography as one of the solutions to methodological issues in politeness studies; this argument is essentially connected to the cognitive-based 'discursive turn' in this field. To be more specific, the main contemporary approaches to politeness, discursive and frame-based studies, are limited in various ways, most of which are caused by confined methodological designs. The current study suggests that through conducting detailed long-term in-depth ethnography, part of the dilemma may be solved. In order to clarify this argument, it is necessary to first elaborate the issues emerging in the body of current literature.

2. Politeness as a discursive/cognitive phenomenon: current issues

2.1. Discursive approach and its limitation

The contemporary discursive politeness studies are established on developing and critiquing early works in this field, such as the maxim-based studies (Lakoff, 1973; Leech, 1983) and the face-based perspective (Brown and Levinson, 1987). The notion of discursive politeness emerges from critiquing the positive correlation between the indirectness of linguistic forms and its degree regarding being polite. In doing so, Eelen (2001) and Watts (2003) firstly argue for a distinction between politeness2 and politeness1. By leaning towards politeness1 (Eelen, 2001; Watts, 2003) and conceptualising it as a contextual phenomenon, both theoretical and methodological features are kept consistent in the literature of discursive approach (Eelen, 2001; Watts, 2003; Locher and Watts, 2005).

More specifically, in terms of theoretical foundations, this approach: 1). views politeness as context-sensitive and negotiated within the interactions; 2). considers meaning as dynamic and emergent; 3). views social norms as to predetermine meanings, but instead to connect with markedness regarding appropriateness and inappropriateness and; 4). repeatedly stresses the importance of context. Second, regarding methodology, this approach: 1). advocates a discursive, data-driven, bottom-up approach; 2). stresses the importance of assessment of the participants regarding (im)politeness and (in)appropriateness in given contexts and; 3). favours qualitative analysis rather than the quantitative approach.

The main limitation of this approach concerns the analytical framework. In terms of data analysis, Locher and Watts (2005) propose the framework of 'relational work'. This refers to the work that "individuals invest in negotiating relationships with others" (2005: 10). This framework is established on the 'markedness' of behaviours: being either negatively marked, unmarked, or positively marked. 'Markedness' is related to the notion of 'appropriateness' (behaving in accordance with social norms), which is also an index of categorisation: inappropriate behaviours are negatively marked, and appropriate behaviours are positively marked or unmarked (often go unnoticed).

Evidently, relational work deconstructs the polite-impolite dichotomy and establishes a continuum that allows a full range of behaviours to be located. However it is the corresponding (im/non-)polite results that are questioned due to the highly dynamic nature of context. For instance, Wang (2008) examines naturally occurring conversations among females in Taiwan, and concludes

that the negatively marked behaviours (i.e. inappropriate behaviours) may not be evaluated as impolite by specific addressees in given situations. In other words, it is likely that negatively marked behaviours may be interpreted as non-polite or polite, whereas positively marked behaviours may be interpreted as non-polite or impolite.

This dilemma reveals the hidden methodological issue regarding discursiveness. As this approach views politeness as context-sensitive and meaning dynamic and emergent, its corresponding methodological design requires detailed understanding of interactants, which crucially functions to shape their perceptions. Therefore, it should at least include the particular given situations of the on-going interactions and interactants' special cognitive contexts activated interactionally. This information cannot be obtained without researchers' high-degree familiarity with their participants. In other words, without thorough ethnographic work, researchers are confined to study their close relatives and friends in order to reach a validate conclusion; and thus, large amount of potentially worthy data can be undervalued.

2.2. Frame-based approach and its limitation

The emphasis of a discursive approach on context and addressee's perception is closely related to the cognition of individuals. In this regard, the notion of frame is invoked to account for the cognitive manifestation of politeness (Terkourafi, 2001, 2002; Watts, 2003; Locher and Watts, 2005). Here, frame refers to a cognitive notion constituted by the knowledge that connects certain linguistic expressions and certain contexts; and by repeatedly experiencing the regulative co-occurrence of certain expressions and contexts, individuals obtain the knowledge of how to behave in certain contexts and acquire the anticipated default behaviours (Terkourafi, 2001, 2002). Central to this notion is that the context and its co-occurring expression remain unchallenged. In other words, when the on-going context remains unchallenged and consistent with the context experienced by the addresses with the co-occurring expressions, addresses would draw on previous experience to interpret the on-going expressions (similar to Locher and Watts' use of Bourdieu's 'habitus', 2003).

Based on this concept, it is argued that politeness is recognised through this process (Terkourafi, 2005: 251). Firstly, by repeatedly experiencing the co-occurrence of expression x and context x which positions this expression as polite, an individual would establish a generalised implicature for expression x in this context as polite; and then, assuming that this context remains unchallenged for this person, when expression x is uttered in a similar context, he or she is likely to draw on previous experience and conclude this expression to be polite without inferring the intent of the speaker.

However, the focus on the 'unchallenged' context of frame-based studies suggests that this approach emphasises the stable aspect of cognitive manifestation of politeness. As Terkourafi (ibid.) argues, at the heart of all inferential politeness based on particularised implicatures is still the generalised implicature. However, as the current study argues, in real-life communication, context should not be assumed as always stable and unchallenged; hence the question of whether an implicature is recognised as generalised or particularised should be delicately addressed.

In addition, it is the constantly challenged and shifting on-going nature that causes theoretical dilemma and consequently, methodological problems. Although this approach provides foundational explanation on the cognitive mechanism of stably realised politeness, it does not deal with the dynamic aspect of real-life interactions. Therefore, in terms of a highly complicated interaction,

this approach can only be applied to analyse politeness manifestation of 'habitus' nature, such as certain culture norm occurred in its appropriate situation without incurring any different perception. For example, saying 'cheers' to a kind stranger who just hold the door for you in the UK. However, many real-life interactions are highly complicated. In these cases, only analysing the shaping process of framing of such kind is likely to be insufficient, as 'cheers' or 'thank you' used in a particularised situation are possible to stimulate negative emotions.

Moreover, it is likely that framing based on culture norms is often intertwined with particularised individual perceptions. In this case, researchers need to carefully examine the cultural environments in which interactions take place, interactants' specialised cognitive contexts, as well as their interactional intents. In other words, focusing only on framing can result in overlooking individual cognition, which in turn, can lead to a wrong direction in data analysis. In this sense, detailed ethnographic data is likely to remedy such situation in that long-term fieldwork helps obtaining certain seemingly irrelevant information. At a later stage of research, it may be proven as crucial in analysis; following case study is a typical example of such kind.

3. Case analysis and discussion

The current study closely examines one naturally occurring family dinnertime interaction as a typical case to demonstrate the crucial role of in-depth ethnographic data. In order to do so, data analysis is divided into two sections: section 3.1 examines the language features in this interaction based on basic demographic information obtained though short-term ethnography; whereas section 3.2 analyses the same features based on in-depth ethnographic data obtained through long-term field work. Moreover, both types of analysis are conducted under the analytical framework of Spencer-Oatey's (2002, 2005) 'rapport-management model'. In this way, the difference in analytical conclusions evidently shows the importance of in-depth ethnography.

3.1. Analysis on the stable manifestation of (im)politeness

The interviews I conducted for this study took place in J city, a county-level city of Sichuan province in southeast China with a roughly average population of around 900,000. For the purpose of participants' anonymity and readers' convenience, participants are referred by their family relational identity; such as, the mother-in-law is referred as 'M', the daughter-in-law as 'D', and their son/husband as 'HS'

3.1.1 Initial field notes: A general overview

By interviewing members of the participating family, I was able to obtain basic information on the participant demographics, including details such as age, education, job status, marital status, their usual style of living, as well as their self-evaluation and commentary on their relationships.

3.1.1.1 Demographic features

M in this family is 55 years old; she used to run a small business before retirement, and now receives a monthly income from her tenants. M's husband passed away 7 years ago, and her son has been living here both before and after her marriage. M did not receive an official school education, but she is able to read. D is 29 years old and used to work as a sales person in a supermarket, but quit her job after pregnancy to fully focus on educating and caring for her child. Now her son is

three years old and has been attending a local kindergarten since September, 2012. As for the HS in this family, he is 30 years old and works as a driver for government cadres. Both D and HS acquired a diploma from a vocational school (equivalent to high school). In taking care of the child, D is responsible for his education (such as teaching him how to read), whereas M has the responsibility of cooking for the whole family; though both share responsibilities with the housework.

3.1.1.2 Evaluations

During the group interview, M and D appeared to evaluate their relationship positively: D described it as "generally harmonious" and that they "don't have problems", whereas M indirectly answered that "It's just ordinary life, nothing special". When asked how they manage to maintain a peaceful relationship, M hesitated with a brief smile and then said: "She's (D) doing fine". As D seemed to be reluctant to answer this question, I repeated the question from a different angle by asking: "what do you think about your mother-in-law?". She first laughed and then answered in jokingly: "Well, she does take care of the child. She cooks. But you know, there is somewhat of a gap; probably an age issue. After all, you can't expect us to fully understand each other". When I asked exactly what the issues were where they had difficulty in understanding one another, she smiled in silence for a few seconds, and then offered the vague answer of: "All little things really; it is just part of the trivia of daily life." After these responses, as she began to seem increasingly unwilling to discuss the issue, I ceased pressing her with further questions.

From this conversation, both parties were clearly reluctant to discuss topics related to the MIL-DIL relationship in detail, and intentionally shifted the conversations to other topics. When child education/caring was mentioned in one interaction, M began talking about her grandson and his daily routines, interests, and current reading capabilities. Additionally, when a neighbour came to ask M whether she would like to play Mah-jong, D immediately stopped answering the MIL-DIL related questions, and shifted the conversation to describing the relationship between M and their neighbours, which carried the conversation over to the family's current living conditions.

3.1.1.3 Additional information

The members of this family live with their tenants in a house they built on a plot of land that was once close to the countryside. However, now that the city is expanding, this land is now directly on the verge of city centre and is considered by the local authorities to undermine the city's construction plans. Because of this, the government is set to demolish the property in a few months. As compensation for the family, the government has offered them an apartment in a new building near where this land is located or a similar apartment within the city. However, M is reluctant to move into either of these apartments as she considers that 'relationships with neighbours in large buildings are not very close" and prefers the companionship with her current tenants in the current house as well as well as her old friends as this means that she "would not feel lonely". Furthermore, as HS insists on living with his widowed mother, this also means that the family currently still lives in the old house. Additionally, despite their financial difficulty, D displayed enthusiasm towards having a daughter and discussed this with HS. However, M appeared hesitant with this idea as she was "already tired enough of taking care of this one (grandson)".

3.1.1.4 Observations

As I entered their house, the young couple were sitting on the main sofa and M was sitting on the

chair behind. During the interview, M served me hot water and fruits as the conversation unfolded between the couple and myself. Although she joined the conversation later, when compared to D and HS who did most the talking, she appeared to be the quietest during the interview. When she did talk, she was interrupted on several occasions. As the interview came to an end, she left the house to play Mah-jong with the neighbours.

3.1.2 Data analysis

3.1.2.1 Extract from audio recording of family dinnertime talk

1. M: **feeling bad** recently

2. D: huh? **what happened**?

3. M: all the: er (.) all old problems;

4.   (1.0) (hhh) there're **problems all over my body**.

5.   (0.4)

6. D: **which part do you feel uncomfortable**?

7. M: this **dizziness** in my head all the time.

8.   getting old is **depressing**; (.) **useless**=

9. D: =DO:N'T say <<all> useless.

10. **I'll take you to the hospital to [check someday>]**

11. M: [I just went] to the hospital recently_

12. D: **you should NOT (.) not think about these all the time**;

13. **implying yourself something_**(1.0)

14.   people reaching certain age (.) **all have little problems**;

15.   if your problem is really big(.) you would have be hospitalised already_

16. M: **SERIOUSLY**. (1.0)

17. EVERY time they say cerebral thrombosis and high blood pressure

18. (1.5) just poor body (.hhh) nothing to do about it.

19. (8.6)

20. D1 **mom, you're already VERY well**.

21. **that health of m:y mom's truly bad** (.) she wouldn't even go to hospital to check;

22. er: terribly annoying;=

23. M: =**your mom is in perfect condition!**

24.   we often say your mom is blessed(.)

25.   regularly exercised (.) and often goes tra[velling]

26.   D: [**N:O**]

27.   she's just going around while still can walk.

28.   **in fact her problem is bad**!

29.   her heart disease (-) who knows if she needs operation in future=

30.   HS: =you two were just talking (.) not eating.

31.   (3.7)

32.   D: I mean it (.)

33.   she's just like this (1.5) worrying (.) **worrying too much** (.) non-stopping.

34.   told her don't be like this (.) **she wouldn't even listen!**

35.   so [bothering]

36.   M: [asking] your sister-in-law to help her!

37.   <<all>it's indeed too much for one person to do all the housework. >

38.   (2.0)

39.   D: she's busy all day (.) working and taking care of child;

3.1.2.2 Analysis A: Self-evaluation

After M opened the topic about her health condition in line 1, she showed an overtly negative attitude, which is manifested in depreciative evaluations not only in descriptive ways (line 2, "old problems"; line 7, "this dizziness in my head"; line 17, "they say cerebral thrombosis and high blood pressure"), but also in an exaggerated manner (line 4, "there're problems all over my body"; line 8, "getting old is depressing; useless"; line 18, "just poor body. nothing to do about it.").

In the context of China, this kind of self-denigration is linked to modesty. As Spencer-Oatey et al. (2008: 109–110) point out, the two components of modesty, minimisation of praise of self and maximisation of self-dispraise, are not evaluated and perceived in the same way in different cultures: for instance, while "the vast majority of the British respondents did not associate the self-denigration…with modesty at all", "the vast majority of the Mainland and HK Chinese respondents linked the two" (ibid.). In this sense, M's self-denigrative utterances are culturally identifiable as a display of modesty.

Therefore, in this interaction, as M's self-denigrative evaluations are culturally linked to modesty in Chinese, she managed to uphold one of the SIPs (the socio-pragmatic principle of modesty) which in turn appears to be polite and help maintain rapport.

3.1.2.2 Analysis B: Compliment and self-evaluation (reciprocal responses)

In line with Leech's (2005: 16) argument that the kind of gratuitous self-deprecation, such as M's way of showing modesty, will often be followed by an (implied) denial and an (implied) compliment, D responded with a direct compliment in line 20 ("mom, you're already VERY well."), which is the favoured response (ibid.) as paying appropriate compliment is seen as a typical speech act to "place a high value" on addressee's qualities in pursuing politeness (Leech, 2005: 15). Moreover, in relation to rapport-management theory, D's compliment ascribes M with the positive attribute of physical strength, and consequently supports M's quality face.

This compliment in line 20 was further enhanced by D's following denigrative evaluations of her own mother's health condition in line 21–22 ("that health of my mom's truly bad, she wouldn't even go to hospital to check; terribly annoying"), which implies M's advantageous condition by comparison. This comparison stresses M1's better health condition, thus enhances D's compliment in line 20 and reinforces the boosting of M's quality face.

Furthermore, D's negative evaluations on her mother in line 21–22 also exhibited modesty in the context of Chinese culture. As Gu (1990, 246–247) points out, in Chinese "the concept of 'self' and 'other'…have wide extensions" in that the self or other's physical conditions; mental states; properties; values; attitudes; writing; spouse; family; relative, etc., all fall inside the sphere of self or other, and consequently the Self-denigration Maxim applies to them." This, for instance, is exemplified by the lexicalisation of some denigrative address terms: in order to show modesty, one is likely to refer his wife as "domestic helper" ("内助") and his school as "humble school" ("敝校") (ibid.). In other words, modesty can be achieved not only through making denigrative evaluations on attributes of speaker him/herself, but also on attributes of people whose relationships to the speaker are close enough to be seen as certain a "extension" of the speaker. In this sense, although D's derogative evaluations were made on her mother instead of herself, in Chinese context it is still considered as a display of modesty, thus is considered as upholding socio-pragmatic principle.

As a response, D's compliment was followed by M1 indirect denial in the form of returning a compliment (on the health condition of D' mother, line 23-25). As Leech (2005: 16) points out, four main types of responses to the compliment favour maintaining modesty: in paying a compliment in return, disbelief, expressing gratitude, and deflecting a compliment. Regarding the context of Chinese, studies (for instance, Ye, 1995; Spencer-Oatey et al., 2008) show that there are different cultural preferences in responding to a compliment, in the sense that "in contrast to English, the 'best' response to compliments in Chinese is traditionally thought to be a rejection or denial" (Spencer-Oatey et al., 2008: 99). Leech (2005: 16) also points out that in Chinese, "traditionally a hearer will disagree with a compliment".

In this interaction, in M's reaction to D's compliment, a (implied) denial was made by returning a compliment. Although M did not directly deny D's compliment in line 20 ("mom, you're already VERY well."), she denied D's negative evaluation on her mother (and hence denied the comparison between M and D's mother) through paying compliment on D's mother in line 23–25: line 23 ("your mom is in perfect condition!"). And this compliment is enhanced by an intensified tone and the following supportive moves in line 24 ("we often say your mom is blessed") and line 25 ("regularly exercised and often goes travelling"). In this way, M ascribed the positive attribute of healthy with D's mother that in turn boots D's quality face. As D's negative evaluations on her mother were made as supportive moves to enhance compliment, M's denial on these evaluations functions as an

indirect rejection in respond to D's compliment. As Ye (1995) points out, in Chinese, the rejecting attitude to a compliment is considered as a routinised response, which is associated with modesty: minimisation of praise of self and maximisation of self-dispraise (Spencer-Oatey et al., 2008: 109). In this way, M's compliment/rejection not only supports D's quality face (through praising her mother), but also shows modesty, a value-laden SIP in Chinese.

In the same way, in respond to M's compliments in line 23–25, D also displayed a denying attitude in line 26–29 in a more direct, intensified manner. As the head act, the prolonged and stressed "No" in line 26 directly denies M's compliment on D' mother. And line 27 ("she's just going around while still can walk."), as a supportive move, further denies M's implied connection between the health condition of D's mother and M's compliment of "often goes travelling" (line 25). Line 28–29 ("in fact her problem is bad! Her heart disease, who knows if she needs operation in future") give details about her mother's health condition, which reinforce her previous negative evaluations in this regard. Line 32-35 further enhance this negativity ("I mean it", "worrying too much", "won't even listen", "so annoying"). Similar to M, D's denial of compliment is in accordance with the culturally routinised way of displaying modesty, thus upholds sociopragmatic principle. Moreover, her denial also functions to confirm her previous compliment on M's physical condition and the comparison between M and D's mother, therefore indirectly supports M's quality face.

Consequently, according to Spencer-Oatey (2008), both upholding socio-pragmatic principles and boosting addressee's quality face will appear to be polite and help maintaining the interactional rapport in this interaction.

3.2. Analysis based on in-depth ethnography: the dynamic realisation of (im)politeness

The in-depth ethnographic data is obtained through close socialising, observation, and conducting self-report session for over six-month. It reveals information that participants were reluctant to tell me initially: M and S had previous relational discords regarding housework distribution. D was especially angry regarding M's lack of care-giving during D's pregnancy, and that D's own mother had to come to take care of her during her pregnancy. This information was revealed to me in great details, which is incorporated in the following analysis.

Although the main language features initially appear to be polite and rapport-maintaining considering external variables such as sociocultural norms, M and D's shared cognitive context (their previous discords, and consequentially their shared sensitivity on M's health, D's mother, dietary habits), however, functions to redirect the meanings to be perceived as face-threatening and infringing sociality rights and obligations and thus rapport-challenging.

3.2.1 Analysis A: Self-evaluation

M's self-denigrative evaluations on her health condition are previously identified as acts of upholding the SIP of modesty in Chinese and thus are rapport-maintaining. However, based on their unpleasant experience regarding housework distribution, which D described as "unfair" (especially the pregnancy-related issue), she developed the opinion that M's claiming of physical weakness was to imply a justification for her "laziness" and "escaping responsibility".

In relation to rapport-management theory, the notion of 'equality right' (in sociality rights and

obligations management) is central to clarifying the link between D's interpretation of M's self-denigration as justification and her perceived impoliteness. As Spencer-Oatey (2000: 14) points out in explaining equality right, "we have fundamental belief that we are entitled to personal consideration from others, so that we are treated fairly", which consists of two components: the notion of cost-benefit, and the related issue of autonomy-imposition. Actions that cause addressees' feelings of being unduly imposed upon, being unfairly ordered about, and being taken advantage of or exploited (ibid.) infringe their equality rights, and thus impair the interpersonal rapport.

In their previous discord, D's demand of 'fair' housework distribution between her and M may cause M's feeling of being unduly imposed. Although I was not able to closely socialise with M, as according to HS both D and M chose to complain to him instead of disputing with each other directly, HS's opinion of "I can only say that it was not her duty to do it, she can choose to do, if she doesn't, there is nothing I can do" (from interview data) implies M's possible feeling of being unduly imposed and consequently equality right impaired. It is then conceivable that M may choose certain ways to defend her previously impaired equality rights, which in this interaction is manifested as ascribing herself with attribute of physical weakness. It is noted that this is not to deny or confirm the authenticity of her claim on her health condition, but to argue for the experience-shaped predisposition for D to perceive M's self-denigration as justification.

As D considered M's lack of participation in doing housework resulted in an "unfair" situation, it is natural for D to feel being "taken advantage of or exploited" (ibid.) and thus her equality right infringed. And as D perceived M's self-denigrative acts as justification for M1's previous infringing of D's equality right, this justification evidently reinforced the impolite effect of the M's impairing of D's equality right, and in turn harms the interpersonal rapport.

Consequently, in respond to M's justification, D's utterances in line 12-13, although seemed to be comforting M on the surface, implied that M's claimed health issues were result of her over-thinking and self-implication rather than medically diagnosed facts. In this sense, D impaired 's quality face through ascribing M1 with negative attributes such as "drama queen" and "trouble-making" (as described by D herself), as well as through denying M's contextually desired attribute of physical weakness. Moreover, her utterances in line 14-15 suggested that even assuming M's uncomfortableness were authentic, these issues were only "little problems". In this sense, D denied the severity of M's negative health condition, and thus produced threats to M's quality face through associating her with attributes such as "over exaggerating", "pretending to be weak and fragile", etc.

3.2.2 Analysis B: Compliment and self-evaluation

As analysed before, M1's self-denigration elicited D's direct compliment and indirect compliment (self-evaluation), which was responded to by M's act of returning a compliment/denial that in turn evoked D's direct denial. Although these speech acts are identifiable as polite and rapport-maintaining in context1, they are intrinsically impolite and rapport-challenging considering their interactional sensitivities.

3.2.2.1 D's compliments

When quality face was impaired by D in line 12-15, M responded with a denial in a strongly stressed tone (line 16, "SERIOUSLY") that reinforced her physical weakness. This effect was further reinforced by the details on her diseases provided in line 17-18. As D perceived M's self-

ascribing of physical weakness as a false justification, D thereby made a stressed compliment in line 20 ("mom, you're already VERY well.") which functioned as a direct denial to this justification. On the one hand, as for M1 this justification defended her previously impaired equality right (in the sense that she was physically too weak to be imposed with D's desired load of housework), D's denial on this justification thereby maintained her previous demand for 'fair' housework distribution (in the sense that M was healthy enough to fulfill fair amount of domestic duty), which then may cause M' feeling of being imposed and equality right infringed. On the other hand, as D considered the attribute of physical weakness as situationally and individually desired by M, denying M's self-ascribed, desired attribute, therefore, was to harm her quality face (in a contextually specific way).

D also indirectly complimented M through making self-deprecative evaluations on her mother in line 21-22, of which the implied comparison between her mother and M reinforced the positivity of M's health condition. Firstly, confirming the positivity of M's health condition functions both to evidence D's previous demand for fair housework distribution which then may impair M's equality right (through causing M's feeling of being imposed), as well as to deny her self-ascribed attribute of physical weakness that consequently infringes her quality face. Secondly, as described above, due to the sensitivity of topic related to D's mother, D's self-deprecative evaluations on her mother were in fact act of "bringing up sensitive topic" (Spencer-Oatey, 2008), which may cause addressee's uncomfortable feelings. In this case, this sensitivity was produced by their previous discord during D's pregnancy when D's mother fulfilled duties that D considered as M's. In this sense, D's mentioning of her mother conveyed an intention to index her mother's contribution in doing M's work, which implies M's unfulfilling of her duties. In this way, it suggests the association between M and negative attributes of lazy, irresponsible, etc., and in turn harms M's quality face. In addition, D's negative evaluations on her mother's health condition produced a contrastive effect in relation to her mother's contribution (implied by the act of bringing up this sensitive topic), implying the contrast between M's positive health condition and unfulfilling of duties. This contrast further reinforced the harming of M's quality face.

3.2.2.2 M's returning of compliment

Responding to D's compliments of rapport-challenging nature, M chose paying compliment on the health condition of D' mother in return to express her denial (line 23–25). Those compliments denied D's negative evaluations on her mother and thus the implied comparison. As the comparison was made to stress M's positive health condition, therefore, the denial on this comparison in fact was to deny this positivity, which in turn indirectly asserted her previously self-ascribed attribute of physical weakness. As pointed out above, in this interaction M's asserting of physical weakness was perceived by D as justification on M's infringing of D's equality right (regarding D's feeling of being taken advantage of or exploited), thereby M's utterances again reinforced this effect of infringing D's equality right.

Furthermore, M's compliments ascribed D's mother with highly positive health condition, which mitigated the contrastive effect D made between her mother's negative health condition and her contribution. In this sense, her utterances implied a mitigation on D's mother's contribution, which harmed D's quality face in this regard. Moreover, the consequentially implied contrast between M's positive health condition and unfulfilling of duties was also thereby mitigated, resulting in lessening the face-threatening degree of D's utterances.

3.2.2.3 D's denial

In respond to M's compliments of rapport-challenging nature, D displayed a direct, intensified denial in line 26-29. Her utterances directly denied M's compliments, and thus denied M's indirectly self-ascribed attribute of physical weakness. Therefore, functioning in the same way as D's previous compliments, her denial to M's utterances rejected M's justification through self-ascribing attribute of physical weakness, and implied her insistence on demanding fair housework distribution. As this demand was likely to evoke M's feeling of being imposed, her utterances enhanced the previously occurred infringing of M's equality right.

Furthermore, in supporting this denial, D made more depreciative evaluations on her mother's health condition in line 28-29 and line 32-35. Similar to the evaluations of this kind she made in line 21–22, these evaluations also implied the positivity of M's health condition, which in turn functioned to deny M's situationally desired attribute of physical weakness that consequently infringe her quality face, to support D's demand for fair housework distribution that may harm M's equality right, as well as to strongly reinforce the negativity of her mother's health condition in order to stress her mother's contribution and M's unfulfilling of duty which in turn harms M's quality face.

4. Conclusion

The result of this data analysis reveals that in complicated interactions, it is essential to obtain data sufficient enough so that the researcher can comprehend dynamical nuances in utterances on-going interactions. In order to do so, it is important to conduct ethnographic fieldwork carefully over a long-term. This allows researchers to share interactants' cognitive context as much as possible, and consequently, provides more valid analytical foundation.

Furthermore, this approach is in-line with a recently developed tendency of combing linguistic analysis with ethnography, which has been defined as linguistic ethnography. These notably include Eisenhart, 2001; Creese, 2008; and Hammersely, 2007. Additionally, as highlighted by Creese (2008), the emphasis of this growing tendency in the literature is to benefit from the advantages of combining multiple analytical approaches rather than relying on one approach. Moreover, this approach enables researchers to examine data closely and locally, and is argued by Rampton et al. (2004: 4) to be "tying ethnography down and opening linguistics up" for a more effective analysis.

Author contributions

SQ conceived the idea, designed research, performed research, analysed data, and wrote the paper.

Conflict of interest

No conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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