Taiwanese Politeness Phenomenon of Junior High Boys in Tainan, 2000s

Tainan Jiansing Junior High School Enlish Teacher ◎May Hsin-mei Huang
Department of Foreign Languages and Literature,
National Cheng Kung University Professor ◎Shelley Ching-yu Hsieh

ABSTRACT

This is a cultural pragmatic study on the refusal strategy of Taiwanese teenage boy students. Based on the researches of Gu (1990) and Liao and Bresnahan (1996) on politeness, the present study invites high school boy students in Tainan as the participants to look into their politeness in refusal. Three scenarios of requests are the medium that this paper applies to analyze what teenagers say when they would rather refuse. By observing junior high boy students’ refusal strategies in qualitative and quantitative analysis, we discover that there is a new trend of politeness; people's linguistic utterances in refusal have somehow changed during the decades. Our three main findings are: (1). A high percentage (54.05%) application of the address form indicates that the address form remains as the symbol of respectfulness. (2). Interestingly, 39.29% of the subjects utter ke3yi3ma/kc3bu4ke3yi3 ‘Can I’ and 17.86% of bai4tuo1 ‘please’ to show respect to the ones of high status inside their family, especially to their parents. (3). Taiwanese, thought to be collectivism-oriented, has the tendency to build up their own individualism in the new millennium. In a word, though the Taiwanese teenagers express their true feelings with a direct refusal strategy, we can see that the respect to the ones of high-status still remains its significant value in Taiwanese society.

Keywords: politeness, refusal strategy, the address form, collectivism

I. Introduction

Refusal is a social interaction which engages in a negotiation of face relation (Felix-Brasdefer, 2006). Since people are face-saving, refusals which challenge the hearer’s face in essence are “Face Threatening Acts” (Brown and Levinson, 1987). This paper focuses on the refusal strategies of Taiwanese teenage boys because Taiwanese people are thought to be a people of peace-loving which is strongly implied by the popular Chinese proverb yi3 he2 wei2 gue4 以和為貴 ‘harmony is precious’. As a result, Taiwanese are supposed to have a tendency of “protecting the others' self-image and feeling” (Ho & Crookall, 1995, p.237). Moreover, it is assumed that Taiwanese society is collectivism oriented. Therefore, they are thought to be “reluctant to resist compliance” (Liao and Bresnahan, 1996, p.704). That
is to say, people would be more willing to give up their own interests than to disappoint the demands of others. Thus, when refusing, in order to maintain the harmony and the public accomplishment, Taiwanese people tend to apply the strategy of dian-dao-wei-zhi 點到為止, as Liao and Bresnahan (1996) pointed out, which literally means “marginal touching the point” with euphemistic refusal strategies instead of direct refusing.

Liao and Bresnahan (1996) investigated the refusal strategies of undergraduates. Huang and Hsieh (2008) examined how Taiwanese female adolescents respond to compliments. Further, Huang and Hsieh (2007) focused on how female and male high school students respond to compliments. Researchers argued that teachers’ compliments are often used to encourage the behavior of the address and/or by those who can hear the compliment (e.g., Golato, 2003). However, few studies touched refusal strategies. The present study aims to compare with the study of Liao and Bresnahan (1996). By observing teenage boys’ refusal strategies, we attempt to explore the politeness phenomenon of the contemporary society in Taiwan in two aspects: to verify whether the new generation in Taiwan has any new tendency of politeness markers, and to see whether there is still a general assumption that Taiwanese are collectivism oriented. In order to answer these two research questions, this study is organized as follows: (1) Introduction, (2) the studies conducted on Taiwanese politeness, (3) methodology, (4) results, (5) discussion, and (6) conclusion.

II. Literature Review

Refusal strategies are conditioned by the sociocultural norms of a particular society (Felix-Brasdefer, 2006, p.2159). The studies of Gu (1990) and Liao and Bresnahan (1996), which focus on Mandarin politeness phenomenon and Taiwanese refusal strategies, shed lights to the present study.

The equivalent term of politeness in Mandarin is lǐ3mao4 礼貌 ‘polite appearance’ or good manners. *Li3mao4* derived from 禮 lǐ, which was formulated by Confucius as “the social hierarchy”. At this time, people whose utterances in his social life conform to his/her social status are thought to be polite. Later, lǐ3 in the book *Li Ji* 礼記 changed its original meaning to “denigrating self and respecting others”, which is the modern perception of *lǐ3mao4* as politeness. Though *lǐ* has changed its meaning, it is seeable the “social hierarchy lǐ3” gives rise to the “politeness lǐ3”, which turns back to maintain the “hierarchy lǐ3” (Gu, 1990, p.238-239).

Politeness refers to the behaviors which are appropriate to the expectations in the society. Gu (1990) proposes four Maxims of politeness: Self-denigration Maxim, the Address Maxim, the Tact Maxim and the Generosity Maxim. Being a society which highlights “vertical relations” (Neustupny, 1968), Taiwanese abide more by the Self-denigration Maxim and the Address Maxim. The Self-denigration Maxim is to denigrate self and elevate others, which is assumed to be polite and respectful in social interaction. Politeness in Taiwanese society is to see the one with lower status denigrates himself to show respect to the one with high status. For instance, a father is elevated to be da4 大 ‘great’ in fu4qin1da4ren2 父親大人 ‘father great man’ and a son is denigrated to be xiao3 小 ‘small’ in xiao3er 小兒 ‘small son’.

The Address Maxim is the politeness marker to “address the interlocutor with an appropriate address term”, which involves the recognition and definition of the social relations. Adhering to the Self-
denigration Maxim, the use of the address form is a means of showing respect, especially when it involves an unequal encounter. It is assumed to be polite for the inferior to initiate his/her talk by addressing the superior. For instance, it is a common act for students in Taiwanese culture to address lao3shi 老师 ‘teacher’ first when talking to their teachers. All above indicate that the way to show respectfulness has Taiwanese specific cultural values.

Liao and Bresnahan (1996) investigated Taiwanese undergraduate students’ refusal strategies in which a ‘would-rather-be’ negative response to all the scenarios are required. That is to say, instead of complying with the requests, the participants would rather give a negative answer to reject. For instance, ‘my car was broken. So, I can not lend it to you.’ The three significant findings are as follows. First, the address form for Taiwanese people is a symbol of showing respect to the ones of higher status. Therefore, when they refuse the requests of their teachers, they tend to have the address form. Second, they found that Taiwanese culture is collectivism oriented. That is to say, Taiwanese are more willing to give up their interests for the accomplishment of the group. Therefore, they are unable to reject a family member. Even though they refuse the persons outside of the family, they stick to an extrinsic reason rather than expressing their true feelings. Third, Taiwanese people abide by the politeness theory of dian-dao-wei-zhi 點到為止 ‘marginally touching the point’ so that the direct No is omitted in Taiwanese society.

So far, it has been suggested that people in Taiwan are influenced by their social norms. Their language preferences in refusals are very likely to be euphemistically sticking to an extrinsic reason by using the address form and omitting the direct No refusal strategy. This is what we expect to observe in the present study.

III. Methodology

The present research is carried out in 2006. A questionnaire is designed with target questions to find out the linguistic utterance of the new generation. The materials, participants and procedure will be presented in this section.

i. Materials

Paralleling the methodology of Liao and Bresnahan (1996) on refusal strategies, a questionnaire is designed in which the “would-rather-be” negative responses to all the three scenarios of requests are made. Among the three scenarios, the first one is to refuse the request of their teacher that represents the one of high-status outside the family, another is to refuse a classmate or a best friend of equal status, and the other one is to refuse their parents of high-status inside their family. The three scenarios are described as follows. First, your teacher asks you to come to school to help prepare a reception. But you would like to stay home and prepare for the final exam. What would you say? Second, your best friend asks you for your bike since he or she has to attend an outdoor activity. However, you would really prefer not to lend your bike to anyone else. What would you say? Third, your classmate asks you out while your parents ask you to stay home and take care of the house since they have to go out. However, you would much prefer hanging out with your friends. What would you say?

ii. Participants & Procedure

This paper aims to discover the linguistic phenomenon of the new generation, focusing on boy students’ refusal strategies. We invite one class in a boy school Jiandsing Junior High School, Tainan as the participants. They are 35 seventh-grade boys at the
age between 12 and 13.

All the participants are asked to fill in the questionnaire individually under the guidance of their home room teacher. They have to write down everything they would like to say in response to the three scenarios proposed by their teacher, friend, and parents.

IV. Results

The results are analyzed and discussed in the following sequence: frequency of the refusal, the use of direct No strategy, the politeness markers of respectfulness (including the use of the address form, the use of bai4tu01 and ke3yi3ma or ke3bu4ke3yi3).

The data are analyzed when the above linguistic facts are recognized. For example, wo3bu4xing2jie4ni3 我不行借你 ‘I can't lend it to you’ is to refuse the request and also a direct No strategy. Ba4ma, wo3ke3yi3gen1tong2xue2chu1q u4wan2ma, bai4tu01 爸媽，我可以跟同學出去嗎，拜託 ‘Can I go out with my classmates, Dad/ Mom. Please’ is another example, in which both the politeness markers bai4tu01 and ke3yi3ma are recognized.

i. The frequency of the refusal

The raw data of each participant's responses to the requests proposed by their teachers, classmates and parents is presented in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants (N=35)</th>
<th>Refusing the requests</th>
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*The reason for the amount of the junior high boys is as follows. Statistically speaking, researchers point out constraints that can burden a study. For example, Cohen (1988: 55) pointed out that "even when large sample sizes can be attained, they are probably inefficient, given the nature of statistical inference and the sociology of science". Though an increased sample size often leads to a more reliable result, the same increase in reliability can be achieved in other ways and can even strain studies (DeVellis, 2003; McNabb, 2004).
Table 1 shows that among the 35 participants, participant 1, for example, rejects his teacher and parents but complies with his classmate’s request. In total, 20 of the participants refuse their teachers, 17 of them reject their classmates, and 28 participants refuse their parents.

![Figure 1. The percentage of refusal](image1)

From Figure 1, we see that 57.14% of the students refuse their teachers; 48.57% of them refuse their classmates; and 80% of them refuse their parents. A great amount of students insist in their interests and reject the requests of others. More interestingly, the participants refuse the requests of their parents and teachers of high status over those of their equivalent classmates. This result is contradictory to the general assumption proposed by Liao and Bresnahan (1996) and Gu (1990), in which Liao and Bresnahan (1996) note that Taiwanese people tend to comply with others because of the influence of collectivism and Gu (1990) states that people tend to show respect to the ones of high status.

ii. The use of direct No strategy

There are different ways to refuse. A direct No is one of them. As Figure 2 indicates, 40% of the participants utter a direct No to their teachers, 35.29% do so to their classmates, and 7.14% of them employ a direct No to refuse their parents. Interestingly, a large number of students (i.e. about 40.54%) tend to utter a direct No to refuse the ones outside their family. The result presented here is against the general assumption that Taiwanese people are influence by the politeness theory of dian-dao-wei-zhi (Liao and Bresnahan, 1996), since this study presents a pretty high percentage of the participants who employ a direct No strategy.

![Figure 2. Direct No vs. other refusal forms](image2)

iii. The politeness markers of respectfulness

Taiwanese society which highlights hierarchy is supposed to abide more by the Self-denigration Maxim and the Address Maxim. To examine whether the new generation adheres to the maxims, we investigate the percentage of the use of the address form and of the use of bai4tu0 拜託 ‘please’ and ke3yi3ma 可以嗎 ‘can I’ and ke3bu4ke3yi3 可不可以 ‘can I’.

A. The use of the address form

Forty-five percent of the students use the address form to their teachers (see Figure 3), 39.29% of the students to refuse their parents, and none of them to refuse their classmates. In average, about 54.05% of the students utter the address form to refuse the ones of high status: their teacher and parents.

According to Gu (1990), the use of the address form is a means of showing respect, especially when it involves an unequal encounter. In the present study, we found that the participants as the inferior have the habit to initiate a conversation by addressing the superior lao3shi1 老師 ‘teacher’ or ba4ma 爸爸 ‘Dad/ Mom’.

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Based on the analysis above, the address form is assumed to be the politeness marker of refusing since the expression is preserved only for the ones of the high-status, teachers and parents in other words.

![Figure 3. The use of the address form](image)

**Figure 3. The use of the address form**

**B. The use of bai4tuo1 and ke3yi3ma/ke3bu4ke3yi3**

Besides the address form, this study discovers that the participants have another preference when refusing the high-status. That is the use of ke3yi3ma 可以嘅 ‘Can I’, ke3bu4ke3yi3 可不可以 ‘Can I’ and bai4tuo1 拜託 ‘please’.

From Figure 4, we see that 35.71% of the participants utter ke3yi3ma/ke3bu4ke3yi3 to refuse their parents, only 5% of them utter them to their teachers, and none of them utter them to their classmates. In average, 39.29% of the participants utter ke3yi3ma/ke3bu4ke3yi3 to refuse the elders.

Shown in Figure 5, none of the students utter bai4tuo1 as the refusal strategy to refuse their teachers and classmates, whereas there are 17.86% of the students uttering bai4tuo1 to refuse their parents. As shown in Figures 4-5, ke3yi3ma/ke3bu4ke3yi3 and bai4tuo1 are uttered only for the ones of high status. Therefore, we can assume that they are the politeness markers that are employed to show their respectfulness.

In line with Liao and Bresnahan's findings (1996), the present study discovers that politeness markers are still employed in the Taiwanese society even for the youth. In addition to the address form, the new generation uses ke3yi3ma/ke3bu4ke3yi3 and bai4tuo1 to euphemistically refuse the requests of the ones of high-status.

![Figure 4. The use of ke3yi3ma/ke3bu4ke3yi3 in refusing](image)

**Figure 4. The use of ke3yi3ma/ke3bu4ke3yi3 in refusing**

![Figure 5. The use of bai4tuo1 in refusing](image)

**Figure 5. The use of bai4tuo1 in refusing**

### V. Discussion

The results presented above suggest a direct No is employed as a refusal strategy, contradictory to the general assumptions about Taiwanese culture of being dian-dao-wei-zhi 點到為止 ‘marginally touching the point’ and moreover explore the new generation boys’ preference of politeness markers. In the following, we discuss the new generation's politeness behaviors and the reason that lead to the change.

1. **The contradictory to the general assumptions about Taiwanese culture**

Chinese people prefer to use Deflection/Evasion or Rejection strategy rather than Acceptance strategy (Yu, 2004), supporting dian-dao-wei-zhi 點到為止 ‘marginally touching the point’ as a common refusal strategy. However, the present study presents teenage boys’ tendency to express their true wills even when they have to deal with the refusal with the ones of a
high status. It is attributed to two factors: the influence of globalization and that of the education revolution.

First, because of globalization, Taiwan has undergone the significantly deep influences of western cultures, which highlight individualism. Therefore, expressing personal feelings is recommended. Second, during the decades of years, Taiwan has carried out a revolution in education called Grade 1st to 9th Curriculum. The first goal is to encourage the students to self-understanding and then to put their potentials into full play. Obviously, this program is student-centered (Yang, 2006). Students are motivated and encouraged to express themselves. Under such an influence, students get more reasons to speak for themselves.

Suggested by the above, the teenage boys in Taiwan are more and more individualism oriented and not that deeply influenced by the theory of dian-dao-wei-zhi. Under these circumstances, it is understandable that teenagers feel encouraged to express themselves so that refusal occurs very often and they do not hesitate to refuse the ones outside their family or of the high-status.

ii. Teenage boys’ preference of politeness markers

Our analysis indicates that the address form, ke3yi3ma/ke3bu4ke3yi3 and bai4tu01 are the politeness markers that the teenage boys prefer to use in rejecting the high-status.

A. The remaining of the address form as a symbol of respect

According to Liao and Bresnahan (1996), when Taiwanese undergraduates talk to someone of a high status, they have the address form since it is one common mode of politeness to express refusals. Supported by the Address Maxim of Gu (1990, p.248-51), to address the interlocutor with an appropriate address term conforms to the notions of respectfulness. Furthermore, Felix-Brasdefer (2006) has the same claim that “the person in the position of lower status employs the forms of titles to show respect”. In line with the earlier researches, the present study shows that teenagers still remain the virtue since the new generation’s frequent use of the address form has remained unchanged as a symbol of politeness.

B. Ke3yi3ma/ke3bu4ke3yi3 and bai4tu01 as the new markers of respectfulness

The question markers ke3yi3ma/ke3bu4ke3yi3 and bai4tu01 have the politeness status because they are spared especially for those of high status inside their family. When students utter ke3yi3ma/ke3bu4ke3yi3 and bai4tu01, they reverse the roles in the conversation, putting themselves as the hearers instead of the speakers, and leaving the decision-making to the ones of the high-status who are originally asking for help. By doing so, the new generation denigrates self and elevates others, which accords to the Self-denigration Maxim (Gu, 1990).

Politeness is “a form of social interaction that is conditioned by the sociocultural norms of a particular society” (Felix-Brasdefer, 2006, p.2159). Though teenage boys are more and more individualized and are free to express themselves, their respect to the ones of high status, especially the ones inside their family, is still preserved.

All above present that Taiwanese people, even the young generation, accord to the social criteria of politeness. According to Whorf hypothesis, language determines a person’s way of thinking in which nothing is natural but cultural determined (Carroll, 2004, p.377-378). Moreover, Suszczynska (1999, p.1055) states that “aspects of cultural much
deeper than mere norms of politeness”, supporting that culture has its crucial role in forming a person’s politeness behaviors. Accordingly, even though the young generation is more direct or individualized as the evidence in a high percentage of refusing and in the use of direct No, the respect to the elders still remains as observed in their use of ke3yi3ma/ke3bu4ke3yi3 and bai4tu01.

VI. Conclusion

Two findings are discovered in the present study. First, contradictory to Liao and Bresnahan (1996), namely not being influenced by the collectivism and dian-dao-wei-zhi, the new generation affected by the western culture and the new education curriculum is encouraged to express their feelings. They not merely refuse frequently but employ the direct No refusal strategy especially for the members outside their family. Second, supported by “aspects of cultural much deeper than mere norms of politeness” (Suszczynska, 1999, p.1055), the teenage boys keep the virtue of Taiwanese culture values which highlight the respect to the elders. Thus, the young generation employs the politeness markers, the address form, ke3yi3ma/ke3bu4ke3yi3 and bai4tu01, to show their respect to the elders.

Politeness utterances encode the relationship between the speaker and us as an addressee (Grundy, 2000, p.146). Though western culture has influenced Taiwanese society, the social hierarchy is still deeply rooted in Taiwanese culture so that even the young generation surrenders to the social norms in which the respect to the high-status is highly recommended.

To sum up, Michael Foucault's notion well explains the present study that “there are no absolutely ‘true’ discourses, only more or less powerful ones” (Seldem, Widdowson and Brooker, 1997, p.187).

This research project focuses on politeness language use of junior high boys in Tainan. Further studies are recommended for the topics of, for example, understanding of the politeness behaviors in refusal as well as setting female students in wider areas as informants for a contrast with the present study result.

References


新時代台灣地區青少年語言中禮貌現象之探討：
以台南區國中男生為例
Taiwanese Politeness Phenomenon of Junior High Boys in Tainan, 2000s

台南市建興國中英語科 專任教師 ◎黃欣梅 May Hsin-mei Huang
國立成功大學外國語文學系所 專任教授 ◎謝菁玉 Shelley Ching-yu Hsieh

摘要

台灣人以和為貴，為了顧及大家的和氣，台灣人不常直接拒絕他人的要求，而是採用『點到為止』的策略。本研究以顏紹國 (1980) 及廖麗珍等 (1996) 兩個研究為本，藉由觀察國中男生在語言上的拒絕方式，了解其語言的模式及策略，來探討時下青少年在西方文化思潮的衝擊下所表現出的文化特質。

研究結果發現：1. 台灣時下的青少年受到西方文化及九十年代課程的影響，從他們的語言習慣中，可觀察出其個性主義的顯現。2. 青少年仍保有其文化中敬重長輩的固有特質，因而在拒絕時，他們慣用『稱謂』如：爸媽，老師來表達其敬重。3. 台灣人重親情倫理，因而，特別是在面對自己父母的要求時，青少年使用『可以嗎』、『可不可以』、『拜託』等禮貌語言標記。這三種標記顯示出青少年倒置了原先自己為決策者的角色，藉由將決定主導權移轉給父母的方式，隱性的表達自己拒絕的立場，簡而言之，雖然台灣的青少年越來越勇於表達個人意見，從比例上來看，他們偏向於使用直接拒絕的語言策略。然而，值得注意的是，深植於台灣文化中對長輩的尊敬觀念，特別對家中長輩的尊敬仍深深的影響著這一代的青少年的語言行為。

關鍵詞：禮貌，拒絕策略，稱謂，集體主義

*通訊作者：謝菁玉
701台南市東區大學路一號