

An Analysis of the Characteristics of Chinese Female College Students' English Conversation

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Abstract—This article analyzed the characteristics of Chinese female college students' English conversation from the perspective of second language acquisition by using some theories of sociolinguistics and discourse analysis. After analysis, it was found that female students used hedges and intensifiers extensively in second language conversations. Additionally, the participants consciously maintained the face of their peers and made the conversation take place in an atmosphere of equality and solidarity. Through the use of deixis, the conversation was well organized and carried out smoothly. The participants changed their roles, gave and took the floors, and offered new information to prolong the conversation. Although female language had many characteristics, it cannot be fully reflected in this sample conducted in a second language.

Index Terms—female language, English conversation, conversation analysis

I. INTRODUCTION

Female's language has some different characteristics compared to men's because of their physiology and social division of labour. In the last century, many linguists had conducted in-depth research on this. For example, the book *Language and Women's Place* written by Robin Lakoff (1975) is considered a landmark work which systematically describes the characteristics of women's language and the social reasons for the formation. Mulac (1981, 1982, 1985, 1986) and his co-researchers published a series of articles that analyzed "gender-linked language differences" in a quantitative study approach which provided more substantial evidence. Coates (2013) deeply researched the differences between men and women's language. In her work *Women, Men and Language*, she elaborated on the six characteristics of women's language: vocabulary, swearing and taboo language, grammar, literacy, pronunciation and verbosity.

However, most linguists carried out their research from the perspective of mother tongue use, and there were not many studies conducted from the perspective of second language, because the environment and learning purpose of second language were considerably different from those of mother tongue acquisition. Four Chinese female college students (Ting, Yan, Lang & Yi) participated in this study, whose characteristics of English conversation were analyzed with the theories of sociolinguistics and discourse analysis. This study attempted to generalize some characteristics of female conversations in second language, such as the features of using hedges and intensifiers, the organization of conversations through deixis, the change of roles and face-saving strategies.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

A. Hedges and Intensifiers

The term "hedge" was first proposed by George Lakoff (1973) and defined as a class of words that could make statements "fuzzier or less fuzzy" or reduce the degree of certainty. Hyland (1998) gave hedge a more formal definition which he considered to be linguistic means used to indicate "a lack of complete commitment to the truth value of an accompanying proposition" or "a desire not to express that commitment categorically" (p. 1). There were later different classifications for hedges, but no consensus was reached. For example, Namasaraev (1997) divided the lexical hedges into nine categories as following:

- a) modal auxiliary verb (e.g. will, must, might);
- b) lexical verb (e.g. believe, assume, tend, suggest);
- c) probability adjective (e.g. possible, likely, unlikely);
- d) noun (e.g. assumption, claim, probability);
- e) adverb (e.g. practically, presumably, clearly, probably, maybe);
- f) adverb of frequency (e.g. often, occasionally, generally, usually);
- g) "if" clause;
- h) compound hedges (e.g. seems reasonable, looks probable);
- i) fillers (e.g. you know, you see, by the way, em, uhh).

Similar to the definition of hedge, linguists also differ on the definition of intensifier. The intensifier is also called as

“amplifier” or “booster”. According to Key (1972), females liked to use intensifiers to show their strong emotions. The narrow sense of intensifiers refers to items “whose function is to scale the qualities conveyed by gradable adjectives” (Méndez-Naya, 2003). However, in a broad sense, intensifiers have more forms. Méndez-Naya (2003) listed five kinds of intensifiers:

- a) verb modifier (e.g. I greatly admire his paintings.);
- b) noun modifier (e.g. The play was a terrible success.);
- c) adjective modifier (e.g. The article was extremely interesting.);
- d) adverb modifier (e.g. He was driving very quickly.);
- e) preposition phrase modifier (e.g. He is much in favour of the US attack on Afghanistan.).

B. Face Saving

When the conversation cannot be continued for some reasons and the speaker’s face was threatened, such as one party had nothing to say, or did not want to answer the questions, or cannot find a suitable word to express himself, then other participants may try to save the speaker’s face. Brown & Levinson (1987, p.61) proposed their famous “face theory” and argued that there were positive face and negative face in communication. With positive face, participants got the approval of others. Whereas with negative face, participants would not be imposed by others, and their autonomy was kept. Politeness strategies were used to save face. Brown and Levinson put forward three politeness strategies: positive politeness strategy, negative politeness strategy and indirect politeness strategy. Holmes (2013) thought that politeness was “expressing positive concern for others” and it was a “non-imposing distancing behaviour” (p.5). Generally speaking, women were more polite than men (ibid. p.1).

C. Deixis

The use of deixis in the language is ubiquitous. Through the switch of deixis, the conversation is going on with turn-takings and all the participants offer or get new information. Deixis means “a word or phrase which directly relates an utterance to a time, place, or person (Richards & Schmidt, 2010, p. 147)”. Similarly, Wortham (1996) defined deixis as “forms like *we*, *here*, *this* and *now*” and they had “referents fixed” in the conversation. There are different ways to classify deixis, for example, Levinson (1983) classified deixis into five categories: person deixis, place deixis, time deixis, discourse deixis and social deixis (pp. 68-94). Among them, person deixis, spatial deixis (place deixis) and temporal deixis (time deixis) were thought to be three major categories (Anderson & Keenan, 1985). The following were some examples:

- a) person deixis (such as I, you, he, she, me, him, them);
- b) place deixis (such as here, there, where, yonder);
- c) time deixis (such as now, then, soon, tomorrow).

D. Roles in Conversation

Richards and Schmidt (2010, p. 501) defined the roles in the conversation as “the relationship which people have to each other in an act of communication and which influences the way they speak to each other.” In different situations, one person may take on different roles, superior or inferior, because he may have “a stronger personality (ibid.)” In the conversation, the roles of participants changed constantly, but there was always someone in control of the progress of the conversation.

III. METHOD

A. Participants

The participants were four senior female students majoring in English, aged about 21, who had studied English for 14 years. They were good friends and often talked about their studies and life together. They all had good academic performances and would continue their graduate courses after graduation. Therefore, it can be said that they were typical representatives of Chinese college students. They were at the stage of graduating at that time, all of them were very busy, and some of them just returned to school from other cities. They had not seen each other for some time. After half a semester of internship, they had a deeper understanding of society and were full of hope for their future studies. Ting hosted the conversation for she was more talkative and had more leadership skills. Before recording, they knew the conversation would be used for discourse analysis.

B. Recording and Transcription

The conversation was recorded by a cell phone in a dormitory of a regular university in southern China. It was a casual conversation with general and trivial topics. From the analysis, we would know more about Chinese female college students’ life and their talking styles. The recording lasted about 17 minutes, and the voices of all participants in the recording were clear. There was some background noise in the recording, but it did not affect the transcription. Jeffersonian Transcription Notation (see Appendix) was used to mark the conversation and notations would be kept in all examples.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The four participants in the conversation were classmates and knew each other very well. There were no complicated relationships or social hierarchies among them. They carried out this conversation in English. Although their English proficiency limited their expressions, there were still many features worth analyzing from different aspects of the language.

A. *Hedges*

As we had mentioned in the previous part, women were more likely to use hedges. Let us take Ting for example. She led the conversation and added some comments from time to time. Using hedges made her language milder in the mood. Examples 1 to 4 were from Ting's speech:

Examples 1-4

1. **Ting:** [Maybe it is a good idea.]
2. **Ting:** May maybe we don't know how to hunt for a [job].
3. **Ting:** Maybe we need to learn how to cooperate with others [and] we need to learn the skills (.) of communicating with others.
4. **Ting:** That's maybe in the future we need to contact with each other frequently, um.

We can find the word "maybe" in every example. In example 1, Ting was just not so sure that if the idea was good. In example 2, Ting assumed that all of them did not know how to find a job. In example 3 and 4, Ting used "maybe" to add uncertainty to her opinions. These "maybes" also showed a kind of modesty and humbleness. On the other hand, by saying "maybe", the addressee can retort the addresser if she/he has different opinions. Hedges consequently prevent the speaker from being attacked for its uncertainty. More examples were from Yan and Lang:

Examples 5-7

5. **Yi:** <If you>, if you three have (.) some opportunity↑, please tell me↓. ((*laugh*))
6. **Yan:** So I think, um, to some degree, I think I am really satisfied with my, my college life. How do you, do you, think of your college life?
7. **Lang:** Ok, um, I want to talk about two aspects about my college life. Um, um. The first aspect is my major life, my major, English, um, because it is different from the high school li, high school life. Um, we learnt English from the FOUR parts respectively, the reading, listening, writing and (.) speaking. So I can learn it more comprehensively and professional. Um, <but, I think> my English knowledge is so narrow, not broad, abroad, so, um. The second aspect I want to talk about is, is about my life, um, in the four years. In this four years, I think, the most, the most pitiful is my ability to manage my emotion, because, um, sometimes, I will, I will not be so careful, to, um, pay attention to my, to my ability to communicate with others, so I will, um, from time to time to hurt somebody. Um, so, <THIS IS what I (.) feel pitiful. Yes. That's all.>

In example 5, Yan used a conditional adverbial clause introducing by "if" which weakened her request. In example 6, Yan used the hedges like "I think" and "to some degree" to show her indecisiveness. In example 7, Lang used "um" many times to gain time and "I think" to emphasize what she said was her personal opinion. From those examples, it was found that the girl students were tending to use hedges to show their tender and softness. They wanted to show that they did not impose their views on others or to be dominant in the conversation.

B. *Intensifiers*

Intensifiers are used to strengthen the emotion or feeling. Commonly speaking, girls were more sensitive, as these four girls were going to graduate soon, they would go to different universities to continue their postgraduate studies and separate from each other. Their love for friends and college life was strong, which can be identified by the following examples:

Examples 8-14

8. **Lang:** We miss you so much.
9. **Yi:** I miss you very very much.
10. **Yan:** [We are so busy.]
11. **Lang:** [Me too], I real, I real real like it.
12. **Yan:** It's, it's really meaningful. Yes.
13. **Lang:** I think my college life is so valuable.
14. **Lang:** I think, um, this ability for me is s::o weak.

Intensifiers can be found in these examples like: "so much", "very very much", "so busy", "real real like[sic]", "really meaningful", "really so valuable" and "so weak". They also strengthened the effect of intensifiers by using intensifiers repeatedly, such as in example 9 and 11 or prolonging the pronunciation, such as in example 14, Lang prolonged the pronunciation of "so" into "s::o". In addition to expressing strong feelings, these intensifiers also reinforced their agreement with the topics being discussed.

C. *A Talk with Team Spirit*

The four girls were a group of "equality and solidarity". As mentioned before, these four girls were from the same

class, with similar ages and educational background. This conversation was a free talk without any pressure, and they offered suggestions or asked for help freely without feeling being superior or inferior. In this conversation, there was no sentence having a strong imperative tone. They were equal and solidary, and this can be shown in the following examples.

The first evidence was at the beginning of the conversation. It went like this:

Example 15

Ting: *Hey*↓, guys↑, *how* are you these days?

Yan: [Um, fine.]

Yi: [Um, fine.]

Lang: [Me too.]

Ting: Wow, we haven't seen for each other for a long *time*.

Before the talk, the four girls came together as usual. They had not seen each other for a long time. In China, most senior students had no class in the 8th semester. They just wrote their graduation essays and did some part-time jobs as interns. In the beginning, Ting asked the other three girls about their life recently, Yan, Yi and Lang all answered her question nearly at the same time. With the informal words like “hey” and “guy”, Ting created a casual atmosphere. The word “guy” and their answers at the same time to some degree indicated their equality and solidarity.

The second evidence was that they helped and comforted each other when someone thought she was not good enough. This was shown in the following example:

Example 16

Yi: I, I thought my college life is wasted by me.

Ting: [Why?]

Yan: [Why?] Why do you °think °?

Ting: But, I think (.) you have done a *good* job.

Yi: Yeah.

Ting: Yes.

Yan: You have experience.

Yi: But, but, I didn't do a lot of ((*background noise*)), I, um, I didn't-.

Ting: You MEAN you have wasted *your* (.) *time*.

Yan: [Why?]

Yi: [Yeah] I, I, I ((*laugh*)) I think I have wasted a lot of my college (.) time. Because I didn't, I haven't found what I am interested in, *really*, um, um, interested in.

Yan: [Ok.] Um. You don't have your aims, your goal.

Yi: Yeah, so, I, I suggest, um, control, control our time schedule (.) in college life.

In Example 16, the four girls were talking about college life. Yi was leading the talk and felt that she had wasted her college life. Ting and Yan asked her for reasons. Simultaneously, Ting also comforted Yi, thinking that she had “done a good job”, while Yan thought that Yi had gained some “experience”. At this point, Yi suddenly was unable to find a suitable expression to describe the reason why she had wasted her college life. Yi stammered out two “but”s and six “I”s. At this moment, Yan offered her opinion and finally Yi expressed her thoughts: she didn't find anything she was interested in and had no goals. Yan agreed with her. Ting's and Yan's interposition gave Yi some time to buffer. By prompting each other, Yi's embarrassment in the conversation was avoided.

D. Well Organized Conversation

Participant role refers to the relation that persons have to each other with regards to their involvement in a speech event. In this conversation, everybody knew clearly about their participant roles by following the deixis. The conversation was carried on smoothly under Ting's guidance. The general structure of the conversation can be seen from six examples extracted from the conversation.

Example 17

The following sentences from Ting and Yan were excerpted from different parts of the conversation (in chronological order):

Ting: So how about, talking about (.) our college life?

Ting: (*speak to Yan*) What did you (.) learn during (.) college life↑?

Ting: (*speak to Yi*) Shirley, how about you?

Yan: (*speak to Lang*) How about you?

Ting: Ok, that sounds good, as for me, I love my *college* life ...

SO. <How *about* your feelings? ↓>

Ting: So↑, that's what, that our topic *today*↓.

In the beginning, Ting was not sure about the topic, so she began the conversation by suggesting talking about college life. After a while, Ting asked Yan “What did you learn during college life?” Thus the floor was given to Yan. Later, by asking “Shirley, how about you?” Ting gave the floor to Yi (Shirley). Differently, Lang got the floor from Yan instead of Ting. Perhaps Yan just wanted to help Ting to carry forward the conversation. In the end, Ting took back the floor by saying “as for me”. After everyone had finished, Ting summarized the discussion. The whole structure of

the dialogue was clear. The deixis here in the sentences, such as “our”, “what”, “you”, “me”, “my”, “your” and “our”, made all speakers easily keep their roles in the conversation. For listeners, it was also easy to follow the plot.

E. Face Saving

During the conversation, the four girls saved each other’s face by mutual encouragement. These four girls were very familiar with each other, so they tended to use the positive politeness strategy. In this strategy, the listeners may agree with the speaker and cooperated with the speaker to satisfy his wishes. Two examples were in the following:

Example 18

Ting: So I want to-, um, experience the social life and try my best to hunt for a job.

Yan: Yeah

Ting: And I learn- more- about the society. And how, what kind of abilities we need (.) in order to survive.

Yan: Yes, yes, it is our final goal.

In this example, Yan directly agreed with Ting’s ideas to “experience the social life”, “hunt for a job” and “learn more ability”, and believed that this was their “final goal”. Ting may feel relieved that Yan agreed with her. Ting gained some face from Yan’s positive politeness strategy. This strategy was also adopted in the following example:

Example 19

Yi: For example, I want to learn (.) swimming.

Ting: Yes.

Yi: But I failed, I didn’t do it.

Ting: Ok. So we still have a long way to go. We can learn more things. But. Yes. So we can (.) just keep, keep going and then try to learn more.

In example 19, Yi expressed the regret that she did not learn to swim in the college, Ting consequently comforted Yi by saying that it did not matter and they still had time as long as they kept going and studied hard. When Yi heard Ting’s comfort, she would feel that her failure can be forgiven. Thus, Yi’s face was saved and her regret of not learning to swim was weakened.

V. LIMITATION

This study had the following obvious limitations. First, the conversation was not natural enough. The four students knew that the recording would be used for analysis, so they may worry about the mistakes they made and their privacy may be leaked, which may make them feel nervous. The way to get a natural conversation was to establish a close relationship with the participants, but it needed a long time.

Second, the conversation was not complicated enough for it was carried out among four female students with common topics. Most of the time, they just agreed with each other and did not refute others; they just offered their ideas but seldom commented on other’s ideas. It was better to analyze a conversation between different genders with different positions, for example, boss and employee or teacher and students.

Finally, as we had mentioned before, Coates (2013) held the view that female language was different in vocabulary, swearing and taboo language, grammar, literacy, pronunciation and verbosity. However, these characteristics can only be fully reflected in the conversation of women who were proficient in their mother tongue. Among the second language learners, due to limited language proficiency, only the features of vocabulary and grammar were relatively easy to be identified. Therefore, the other features were not being discussed.

VI. CONCLUSION

The four Chinese college female students showed their conversational ability very well in this second language conversation despite many grammatical mistakes and disfluency. After analysis, it was found that some features of second language conversation of Chinese female college students were similar to those of native English speakers. Hedges and intensifiers were used extensively and the indecisiveness and sentiment of the female language were embodied. Chinese college female students also saved faces for others, built a close relationship and integrated themselves into the conversation. In addition, the use of deixis made the role changing and floor switching clear, which kept the conversation well organized. From the analysis of this study, it can be concluded that the conversation of the women who speak English as a second language has certain similarities with the conversation of the women whose mother tongue is English.

APPENDIX

The following is retrieved on Dec 20, 2019 from this website:

<http://pages.ucsd.edu/~johnson/COGS102B/JeffersonianNotation.doc>

JEFFERSONIAN TRANSCRIPTION NOTATION INCLUDES THE FOLLOWING SYMBOLS:

Symbol	Name	Use
[text]	Brackets	Indicates the start and end points of overlapping speech.
=	Equal Sign	Indicates the break and subsequent continuation of a single interrupted utterance.
(# of seconds)	Timed Pause	A number in parentheses indicates the time, in seconds, of a pause in speech.
(.)	Micropause	A brief pause, usually less than 0.2 seconds.
. or ↓	Period or Down Arrow	Indicates falling pitch.
? or ↑	Question Mark or Up Arrow	Indicates rising pitch.
,	Comma	Indicates a temporary rise or fall in intonation.
-	Hyphen	Indicates an abrupt halt or interruption in utterance.
>text<	Greater than / Less than symbols	Indicates that the enclosed speech was delivered more rapidly than usual for the speaker.
<text>	Less than / Greater than symbols	Indicates that the enclosed speech was delivered more slowly than usual for the speaker.
°	Degree symbol	Indicates whisper or reduced volume speech.
ALL CAPS	Capitalized text	Indicates shouted or increased volume speech.
underline	Underlined text	Indicates the speaker is emphasizing or stressing the speech.
:::	Colon(s)	Indicates prolongation of an utterance.
(hhh)		Audible exhalation
? or (.hhh)	High Dot	Audible inhalation
(text)	Parentheses	Speech which is unclear or in doubt in the transcript.
((italic text))	Double Parentheses	Annotation of non-verbal activity.

Jeffersonian Transcription Notation is described in G. Jefferson, "Transcription Notation," in J. Atkinson and J. Heritage (eds), *Structures of Social Action*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984.

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