

Different generations, different face? A discursive approach to naturally occurring compliment responses in Chinese

YUN HE

Abstract

Adopting a discursive approach to politeness (see, for example, Mills 2011), this paper explores spontaneous naturally occurring compliment responses (CRs) in Chinese from a cross-generational perspective. It aims to extend our understanding of the dynamic nature of face and/or politeness in contemporary Chinese. 16 multiparty conversations among two generations of the Chinese in China's mainland were audio-recorded. Based on evidence provided by the participants in the follow-up interviews, my data analysis yielded two major results: (a) compliments, CRs and CR strategies are not as easily identifiable as previous studies claim; (b) considerable generational variation emerges in the use of CR strategies, viz. the older generation participants were more than twice as likely as the younger to reject a compliment while those in the younger group tended to use Acceptance much more readily. In the discussion, I show how, by using a methodology which emphasizes the interactants' perceptions obtained through interviews, my study brings to light evidence that intention is not self-evident in performing compliments and CRs. Finding (a) indicates that my emic approach to data analysis provides a useful perspective on the complexity of the notion of intention in studies on speech acts (and perhaps beyond). Finding (b) appears to indicate that the two generations of the Chinese have diverged in their conceptualization of face and/or politeness perhaps due to differences in their early socialization before and after the launch of China's reform. I also demonstrate how my methodology enables me to seek this generational variation.

Keywords: Compliment response, naturally occurring, Chinese, discursive approach, intention, interview, face

1. Introduction

The Chinese have long been perceived by many Westerners as inscrutable: “mysterious, unfathomable, [and] inexplicable” (Young 1994: 1), and they are stereotypically seen as either “traditionally polite” or “direct and pragmatic” (Kádár and Pan 2011: 125). Nevertheless, some literature shows that these apparent paradoxical perceptions may well be just an indication of the diversity of politeness norms in Chinese and the heterogeneity of Chinese society (see, for example, Young 1994; Lan 1999). Moreover, Feng’s (2002) study shows that the generation of the Chinese who were brought up in the reform era starting in the late 1970s, known as *dushengzini* 独生子女 (‘one child’), differ from the older generation in many aspects, for example in their value systems, beliefs, and behavioural patterns. On the much-researched collectivism-individualism dimension, for instance, Feng’s (2002) findings show that the younger generation have become more individualism-oriented while the older remain more collectivistic. In terms of politeness, Qu and Chen observe that:

The younger generation’s view of politeness has considerably deviated from the traditional norm, with a trend to incorporate the traditional and Western politeness principles. This clearly indicates a change of the new generation’s perception of self-image.

[Author’s translation from Chinese] (1999: 41)

This observation is supported by circumstantial evidence from some studies based on data collected using the discourse completion task (DCT) (e. g., Lee-Wong 2000). To illustrate, in their quasi-longitudinal survey “study” of CRs in China’s mainland, Chen and Yang (2010) found that the majority of informants in 2008 said they would accept a compliment, whereas the overwhelming number of respondents in 1991 claimed they would reject a compliment. The authors explained that “the subjects [in two studies] happen to have grown up in two very different times, hence representing two very different generations” (2010: 1959). And they attributed this difference to “the societal changes that have taken place in the region” (2010: 1959).

However, findings of this “type” do not necessarily mean that the politeness behaviour of the generations concerned would exhibit a similar pattern in real-life interaction. This is because as a data collection method the DCT has been found inadequate to investigate what informants actually say in naturally occurring interactions (e. g., Yuan

2001). Golato (2005: 13), for example, argues that “DCTs are in a crucial sense metapragmatic in that they explicitly require participants not to conversationally interact, but to articulate what they believe would be situationally-appropriate responses within possible, yet imaginary, interactional settings”. By contrast, Golato’s (2005) and Yuan’s (2001) studies on CRs both show that to capture people’s actual behaviour, audio/video-recording of natural conversations is a suitable instrument of data collection. Therefore, using audio-recording as the alternative tool, my paper aims to explore Chinese CR behaviour in natural conversations. It addresses two research questions: (a) how do the two generations of the Chinese brought up before and after the launch of China’s reform respond to compliments in spontaneous naturally occurring conversations? And (b) are there any differences in the politeness strategies they use to respond to compliments?

This study is framed within a discursive approach to politeness that has recently come into prominence (see, for example, Mills 2003, 2011; Watts 2003, 2005; Locher 2006; Christie 2007; Haugh 2007). Adopting a postmodern paradigm, politeness theorists taking this approach, as Haugh notes, are united in their determination to emphasize “‘the need to pay closer attention to how participants in social interaction perceive politeness’ (Watts 2005: xix)” (Haugh 2007: 296). Further, Mills (2011: 47) notes that:

Discursive theorists tend to analyze longer stretches of talk to see how politeness and impoliteness are interpreted over time, because of their belief that politeness and impoliteness are not instantiated in individual utterances but are played out over discourse level units.

These theorists foreground the heterogeneity of society and question the assumption that interactants share a set of norms, values and beliefs (see, for example, Mills 2003). For them, it is not self-evident that a particular utterance is polite for different individuals. In Locher’s words, it would be “a mistake to equate certain linguistic strategies (e. g., mitigation) with politeness from the outset” (2006: 252). Thus empirical studies carried out within this approach emphasize nuanced analysis of how interactants make im/politeness evaluations or judgments in interaction.

2. Research procedure

Two types of data were collected: audio-recorded spontaneous naturally occurring conversations and follow-up interviews. The recorded

conversations allow me to focus on actual utterances embedded in stretches of conversation. In the light of the discursive approach to politeness, I did not assume that compliments and CRs are readily recognizable. Thus I used interview data to verify whether these utterances function as compliments and CRs. Moreover, in line with the approach just outlined, I interviewed the compliment recipients to elicit their classification of the response strategies they used.

2.1. Audio-recording conversations

16 intra-generational multiparty conversations were audio-recorded in China's mainland from October 2008 to January 2009. The number of parties was equally distributed among the generations brought up before and after the launch of China's reform. In this paper the older generation is referred to as the pre-One-Child-Policy generation (pre-OCPG) and the younger as the post-One-Child-Policy generation (post-OCPG). Drawing on Milroy's (1987 [1980]) method of locating subjects, I started by enlisting 8 friends from the pre-OCPG and another 8 from the post-OCPG in my social networks. I asked them to invite 4 to 9 friends from their generational group and organize dinner parties in restaurants. To keep the gender variable constant, I asked the organizers to try to ensure that males and females were represented as equally as possible at each party.

Altogether, 119 participants took part in the conversations, varying considerably in age (18–65), occupations and majors of study, education, and places of origin. The numbers and gender of the pre- and post-OCPG participants were nearly balanced: of all the 61 participants in the 8 pre-OCPG dinner conversations, 30 were males and 31 females. Similarly, of all the 58 participants at the 8 post-OCPG parties, 29 were males and 29 females. The overwhelming majority were friends though intimates such as married couples were involved on some occasions. Consequently, I reaped approximately 30 hours of recordings. Conversations recorded among the two generations are nearly equal in length, with each conversation running from about 50 minutes to 3 hours.

2.2. Coding Compliment Responses

I transcribed the first four conversations, two among the pre-OCPG and the other two among the post-OCPG. I then identified the potential compliment, termed an “analyst's compliment” (AC) by applying Holmes' definition of a compliment:

a speech act which explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed, for

some 'good' (possession, characteristic, skill etc.) which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer. (Holmes 1988: 446)

I and another native speaker of Chinese independently coded ACs embedded in these conversations. To ensure that we used the same criteria for coding, we started by examining Holmes' definition together. The interrater agreement coefficients were 91%. Drawing on insights from previous studies (e. g., Achiba 2003) on speech acts, we discussed those items that were not agreed upon until we came to a full agreement. Building on this, I transcribed and coded all the remaining 12 conversations.

My coding of CRs was based on Yuan's definition of a CR as "anything that follows a compliment, verbal or non-verbal" (2002: 194). Specifically, I located as a potential CR the first utterance, if any, made by the potential complimentee after an AC. In cases where no utterance was produced by the addressee, a potential non-verbal response was assumed. A potential CR subsumed under either of these types was referred to as an "analyst's CR" (ACR).

2.3. *Follow-up interviews*

I conducted and audio-recorded structured interviews to verify ACs and ACRs and to elicit the potential complimentees' categorization of CR strategies because, as Grindsted notes, this type of interview is useful "to verify people's behaviour, opinions, beliefs, values, etc., at any given moment" (2005: 1015). In spite of this, I am fully aware of the analytical complexity of interpreting interviewees' accounts of intentions (see, for example, Haugh 2008). In order to verify an AC, I interviewed the speakers and recipients about their intentions and perceptions of the utterance under focus. ACs verified by complimentees were then termed "verified compliments" (VCs). On this basis, I further asked the recipients to verify whether they produced the ACR as their response to the VC. Specifically I started by reading out the extract in which the VC is embedded. I then asked the question "Did you respond to Y [the VC] when you said Z [the ACR]?" or "What did you respond to when you said Z [the ACR]?" If the potential complimentees did not agree that the ACR actually was a response to the VC, I then proceeded to ask them to identify which utterance did function as their response or to check whether they gave any response. In cases where a non-verbal ACR was assumed, I asked the interviewees to identify whether they had given a response to the VC by replaying the related segment of recording.

3. Analysis

3.1. Verifying compliment responses based on participants' interview accounts

Having described the research procedure, this section illustrates the verification of CRs I developed in my study. In accordance with the discursive approach to politeness, I maintain that it is the complimentee's judgement that provides the most appropriate basis for categorizing an utterance as a CR.

Extract 1 (post-OCPG)

Context: The 6 participants are university students from different provinces of China: A, B, C and F: female; D and E: male.

- 1 A: 嗯, 这样, 我们说 方言 听得懂 吗?
(particle) this we speak dialect hear understand (particle)
'Uh, well, can you understand us if we speak our dialect?'
- 2 B: 听得懂。
hear understand
'(I) understand.'
- 3 C: 听得懂。
hear understand
'Me, too.'
- 4 A: D, 说话。
D speak
'Speak, D.'
- 5 D: 嗯, 说 方言?
(particle) speak dialect
'Um, speak (my) dialect?'
- 6 A: 可以, 说 方言 都可以。
OK speak dialect all right
'Yeah, it's OK if you speak your dialect.'
- 7 D: 我的方言 标准得很, 我是讲 普通话。
my dialect standard very I be speak *Putonghua*
'My dialect is very standard. I speak *Putonghua*.'
- 8 A: 哎, 这个 ((D)) 很有 绅士 风度的。
(particle) this one very have gentleman demeanour
'Oh, ^{AC} he's ((D's)) quite of a gentleman.'
- 9 E: ((递饮料给D)) 来, 交给你, 长得 最好看的 一个。
come hand you grow best-looking one
'((passes the drink to D)) There you go, ^{AC} the most handsome one.'
- 10 A and F: (((laugh)))
- 11 D: [好, 谢谢, 谢谢, 谢谢。
OK thank thank thank
'^{ACR} OK, thanks, thanks, thanks.'

- 12 E: 哎, 开了 6个小时了。 什么会! 这
 (particle) have (tense marker) 6 hour (particle) what meeting this
 简直...
 utterly
 ‘Phew, the meeting lasted 6 hours. What a meeting! It utterly ...’

In this segment of conversation, I first identified E’s utterance ‘the most handsome one’ in line 9 as fitting Holmes’ definition of a compliment and hence as an AC. I then located D’s response ‘OK, thanks, thanks, thanks’ in line 11 as the ACR. However, a closer examination of the context shows that D’s utterance is also interpretable as thanking for E’s non-verbal behaviour of passing the drink. To pin down exactly what the complimentee meant by saying ‘OK, thanks, thanks, thanks’, I interviewed the participants about their perceptions of this ACR. Transcripts of the interviews with D and E are both reproduced below as my justification for VCs and “verified CRs” (VCRs).

Interview recipient D

Researcher: What did you think was his intention when E said ‘the most handsome one’?

D: I felt I was being praised.

Researcher: What did you respond to when you said ‘OK, thanks, thanks, thanks’?

D: *He complimented me, that day, pointing to me. I then said ‘Thank you for your praise. Thank you for your praise’.* He passed me the drink. I then said ‘OK’ to mean that I was happy to serve them drinks.

Interview speaker E

Researcher: What was your intention when you said ‘the most handsome one’?

E: D’s really good-looking (particle), so I asked him to serve the drink.

Researcher: What did you think D responded to when he said ‘OK, thanks, thanks, thanks’?

E: (I) *gave him an opportunity* to serve the drink, so he said ‘Thanks’.

The above two interviews thus show that speaker E and recipient D both judged the AC in line 9 as a compliment. However, they had different perceptions of the ACR in the arrowed line. D answered with certainty that by saying ‘thanks, thanks, thanks’ he meant to extend his gratitude for E’s compliment. Unexpectedly, E did not perceive the response as thanking for what D took as a compliment. Rather, E considered D’s response as thanking for the ‘opportunity to serve the drink’ he ‘gave’ to D. Given that in the Chinese cultural context, it is normally a good-looking young woman or man who serves drinks on social occasions like conferences or parties, E’s words seem to suggest that D’s face was enhanced when D was asked to serve drinks. In this spirit, E’s explanation sounds reasonable. Nevertheless, I subscribe to the view that it is the utterer’s intention or perception that determines

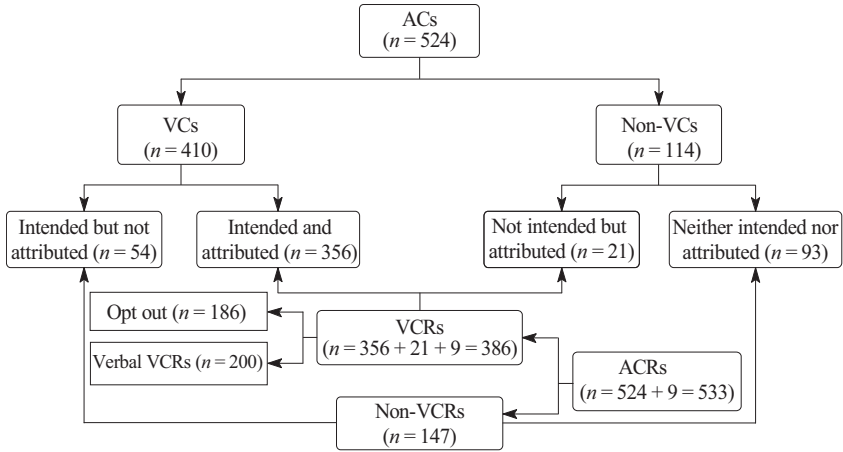


Figure 1. Relationship between ACs, ACRs, VCs and VCRs.

the speech act category of his utterance. Precisely, in locating a CR the complimentee's perspective is paramount. Therefore, the utterance under scrutiny was verified as a CR. This illustration shows clearly that without the support of the interview data provided by the complimentee himself, the utterance in question could not have been finalized as a CR. It also provides empirical evidence that, *inter alia*, the complimentee's intention is not self-evident, to the analyst and complimenter alike.

Adopting the same procedure as illustrated above, I collected evidence of the speaker's and hearer's perceptions in regard to all the ACs and ACRs. Put differently, the ACs and ACRs were all verified by the complimenters and complimentees themselves. As shown in figure 1 (above), there exists a complex relationship between ACs, ACRs, VCs and VCRs.

Figure 1 shows that in verifying 524 ACs a complex relationship emerges between the analyst's assigned intention (AAI), speaker's intention (SI) and hearer's attributed intention (HAI). First, as shown in the left branch of the figure, in 356 of the ACs the AAI overlaps with the SIs and HAIs (see box "Intended and attributed"); and in 54 of the cases the AAI overlaps with the SIs but differs from the HAIs (see box "Intended but not attributed"). Second, in the right branch of the figure we can see that the AAI differs from the SIs but overlaps with the HAIs in 21 of the ACs (see box "Not intended but attributed") while the AAI differs from both the SIs and HAIs in 93 of the cases (see box "Neither intended nor attributed").

Moreover, shown in the lower right-hand corner are 533 ACRs identified as opposed to 524 ACs. The gap between these two numbers results from the finding that in 9 of the ACs a same compliment paid to two participants received two ACRs. VCs ($n = 410$) include the two types of ACs which were intended by the speakers but not perceived by the hearers as compliments ($n = 54$) and those which were both intended and perceived as compliments ($n = 356$); VCRs ($n = 386$) include the ACRs to ACs which were both intended and perceived as compliments ($n = 356$) and those ACRs to ACs which were not intended but attributed as compliments ($n = 21$). In addition, 186 out of the total 386 VCRs were verified by the complimentees as Opt out. In this paper, I only focus on the verbal behaviour. The 200 verbal VCRs are thus analyzed in the remainder of this section.

3.2. Compliment response strategies from participants' perspective

This section presents my findings on the generational variation in CR strategies. Drawing on the discursive theorists' argument that the actual intention behind an utterance cannot be easily accessed by merely examining the linguistic form (see, for example, Mills 2003), I adopted an integrated method of assigning strategies. The method incorporates features pertaining to the communicative event, such as the syntactic and semantic shape of the utterance, the discourse context, and particularly the compliment recipients' accounts of their communicative intention.

Adapted from previous studies (e. g., Pomerantz 1978; Holmes 1988), a threefold taxonomy of CR strategies was used in my paper, viz. CRs were categorized into Acceptance, Rejection and Amended Acceptance. Yet, while many scholars (e. g., Herbert 1989; Ye 1995) seem to assume that the complimentee's intention underlying a response is easily accessible from the form and content of the utterance, I show that in order to decide whether a response is intended in any of these strategies, new sources of evidence such as follow-up interviews are critical. Below these three CR strategies are illustrated in turn.

3.2.1. Acceptance

A CR is categorized as an Acceptance strategy when it was used by the complimentees to express their acceptance of the complimenter's positive assessment. In my data this strategy is realized in a range of forms. For example, a complimentee may give an acceptance response by agreeing with, appreciating, upgrading, or returning a compliment. Illustrated below is an example showing the complimentee's full agreement with the prior assessment.

Extract 2 (post-OCPG)

Context: The participants are talking about a photo of C's mother which seems to be glamorous. The participants are friends from several universities; A and B: male; C: female.

- 1 A: 她 ((C)) 妈 真呢 不错 啊 ((laugh)) 这样评价
her mum really not bad particle this comment
对不对?
correct-not-correct
^{AC} Her ((C's)) mum is really great ((laugh)) How about this comment?'
- 2 B: 你 不 可能 两个 ((C和C的妈妈)) 都 喜欢上 嘛。
you not may two both like (particle)
'You can't be interested in both of them ((C and C's mum)).'
- 3 A: 不会, 不会。
no no
'No, no.'
- 4 C: 那个身材, 是不是?
that figure yes-not-yes
^{ACR} That figure, isn't it?'
- 5 A: 对 啊, 你 看 这个 线条, 大腿 到 小腿=
yes (particle) you look this curve thigh to shank
'Yeah, ^{AC} look, the leg, from the thigh to the shank=
- 6 B: 哦, [观察 仔细 啊。
(particle) observation careful (particle)
'Wow, [(your) observation is careful.'
- 7 A: = [完全 象 撇过来。
completely like curved
= [is really curved.'
- 8 C: 还 带 有点 S 型。
even with little S shape
^{ACR} Kind of S-shaped.'
- 9 A: 你 再 近 一步 看看, 哇塞, 真 受 不 了,
you again near a step look (interjection) really bear not (particle)
你家妈!
your mum
^{AC} You take a closer look. Wow, really attractive, your mum!'
- 10 C: 开 玩笑, 嗯。
crack joke (particle)
^{ACR} (You're) joking, um.'
- 11 A: 吃饭 了, 我的 胃口 又 回 来 了。
eat rice (particle) my appetite again back come (particle)
'Dishes, I feel like eating again.'
- 12 C: 我照呢 那张 相片 肯定 着 我...
I take that photo certainly (voice marker) I
'The snap of mine must have been ...'

In this extract, participant A issued three compliments on the attractiveness of C's mother: the first one occurs in line 1; the second spreads across lines 5 and 7; and the last is found in line 9. According to the existing compliment literature, the arrowed response in line 10 would be assigned to Rejection. For instance, in Yu's study "You've got to be joking" is coded by the analyst as Diverge under Non-acceptance strategy (2003: 1707). Similarly, "You must be joking" is classified as Challenge sincerity under Reject by Holmes (1995: 142) (see also Tang and Zhang 2009: 330). Likewise, in Wang and Tsai's study "You must be joking" is coded as Disagreement, by which, the authors claim, "[t]he addressee directly disagrees with addresser's assertion" (2003: 139–140).

However, as I claimed earlier, the task of coding a CR strategy cannot be performed merely on the basis of the linguistic formula. Interviews with the participants provided an empirically grounded window into their understandings of the compliment and CR. The recipient said explicitly in the interview that her response *kaiwanxiao* 开玩笑 ('[You're] joking') is the same as *na dangran la* 那当然啦 ('Of course'). And the interviewee added that she wanted to express total agreement with her friend's positive assessment on her mum's figure. Further, the follow-up interview shows that the utterance *kaiwanxiao* 开玩笑 ('[You're] joking') was perceived by the complimenter himself as C's agreeing with his earlier praise: "C's utterance meant 'her mum is really sexy and very pretty'".

Moreover, some textual and prosodic evidence lends support to C's and A's accounts. The question tag *shibushi* 是不是 ('yes-not-yes') in line 4 is particularly indicative. It is said in a falling tone and we may well understand it as a rhetorical question, to which no answer is expected. This utterance thus can be taken as contextual evidence of the complimentee oriented towards accepting the subsequent compliment. According to Chen and He, the tag *duibudui* 对不对 ('correct-not-correct') is normally "used as a basic [pragmatic] marker to reinforce the illocutionary force of the sentence proposition it is tagged to" (2001: 1441). Furthermore, they maintain *shibushi* can be a variant of *duibudui*. Thus it seems plausible to interpret the tag as reinforcing the complimentee's prior assertion, i. e., her mother's figure is praiseworthy. In the light of all such evidence, the CR strategy in this extract was finally coded as Acceptance.

3.2.2. Rejection

As opposed to Acceptance, Rejection falls somewhere near the other end of the continuum of strategies. It is used by complimentees to convey their intention of disagreement with the prior assessment about themselves or something associated with them. In the following exam-

ple I first show that a CR is interpretable as accepting or rejecting a compliment if we only have access to the CR and the CR's preceding and ensuing utterances. I then demonstrate that information about the complimentee's intention, as seen in the following interview, plays a critical role in assigning CR strategies.

Extract 3 (post-OCPG)

Context: The 3 participants are all male postgraduates studying on different programmes at different universities.

- 1 A: 光学这套理论 没什么发展, 从 爱因斯坦以后
optical this theory little development since Einstein after
没什么发展。
little development
'There has been little advance in the optical theory, since Einstein.'
- 2 B: 太 难 了。
too difficult (particle)
'(The field of study is) really formidable.'
- 3 A: 嗯, 这个光 看来 挺简单, 里面 关系 太多
(particle) this light appear very simple inside relationship too many
了。
(particle)
'Uh, light appears very simple, but it's actually extremely complex.'
- 4 C: [(laugh)]
- 5 A: [它很多 特性 现在 都搞不清楚... 因斯坦 说 是 粒子性,
its many property now all unknown Einstein say be particle
- 6 波尔 说 是 量子性, 光电 效应 现象 出来 了,
Boyer say be quantum photoelectric effect phenomenon appear (particle)
- 7 谁 知道 怎么样, 反正 就这样, 他们俩 说的 都对。
who know how anyway like this they both say all correct
'[Many of its ((light's)) properties still remain unknown ... Einstein said
it's composed of particles while Boyer believed it's composed of quanta.
The photoelectric effect phenomenon was discovered, and nobody knows
what it really is. That's all. They are both right.'
- 8 B: ((laugh)) 牛啊! 你 知道的 这些东西 我们都
superb (particle) you know these stuff we all
不知道 ((laugh))
not know
'((laugh)) ^{AC} Superb! It's all Greek to us ((laugh))'
- 9 A: 高中 物理, 高中 物理 学的, 这是。
senior high school physics senior high school physics learn this
'^{ACR} In senior high school, we learned it in physics.'
- 10 C: 物理 忘得 差不多了 ((laugh))
physics forget almost (particle)
'(We) nearly forgot all that we learned about physics ((laugh))'

Here participant B paid a compliment in line 8 after A talked about the complexity of the optical theory. Then A gave the response 'In senior high school, we learned it in physics'. This utterance seems to function as an explanation for the acquisition of the complimentee's knowledge about the optical theory. If this is the case, the response could be made as either accepting or rejecting the compliment (cf. Yuan 2002: 210). Still we do not seem to have reasons to rule out the possibility that the complimentee intended to signal an ambiguous stance. In other words, without further information any inference we make about the complimentee's intention would turn out to be rather unwarranted. Nevertheless, the complimentee's response to my interview question proves illuminating. Complimentee A said: 'By saying that, I meant what B commented on was not superb at all, because I've already learned it in senior high school. It was not difficult. (It was) just because they haven't learned that bit before.' Here the recipient gives a clear reason as to why he did not think his knowledge was worth complimenting. Further, complimenter B perceived A's response as 'a way of showing modesty'. With this evidence the CR strategy was finalized as Rejection.

3.2.3. *Amended Acceptance*

As suggested above, Amended Acceptance is a strategy that comes halfway between Acceptance and Rejection on the strategy continuum. I labelled this strategy as such because, as in the studies of Knapp et al. (1984) and Ye (1995), my data shows that by using this strategy the complimentees accept compliments with some sort of qualification. This strategy can be illustrated by the following example.

Extract 4 (pre-OCPG)

Context: The 3 participants are all female teachers; A is in her mid-thirties; B and C in their early forties.

- 1 A: 敬 姐姐 ((B)) 一口, 哦, 你呢 都没得?
propose elder sister a sip (particle) you(r) all no
'A toast to elder sister ((B)). Oh, you haven't any (drink left)?'
- 2 B: 有 呢。
have (particle)
'I have.'
- 3 C: 么, 当真是。
(particle) really be
'Oh, really.'
- 4 A: 我们小小呢 就记得=
we young remember
'We remembered since our childhood=

- 5 B: [嗯。
(particle)
'[Um.]
- 6 A: =[姐姐 是 随时都多 开朗。
elder sister be always very extrovert
=[^{AC} elder sister has always been really extrovert.]
- 7 B: ^{ACR} ((laugh))
- 8 C: 勤快。
diligent
'^{AC} And (she's) diligent as well.'
- 9 A: 嗯, 勤快, 真呢 是。
(particle) diligent really be
'^{AC} Yeah, diligent, really.'
- 10 B: 哎哟, 夸奖, 好, 喝。
(particle) compliment well drink
'^{ACR} Oh, you're flattering me. Well, cheers.'
- 11 C: 我都 忘记, 忘记 倒 点。
I even forget, forgot pour some
'I even forgot, forgot to serve you some more (drink).'
- 12 B: 还有 呢, ((C继续给B倒饮料)) 可以 可以 啊。
still have (particle) enough enough (particle)
'I still have (drink in my glass). ((C keeps pouring drink into B's glass))
OK, that's enough, enough.'

In this extract participant A first paid a compliment on B's character, i. e., being extrovert (line 6), which is generally valued in Chinese culture. Then C offered another on B's attribute of diligence (line 8) and it was further reinforced by A's agreement (line 9). In my interviews about the response *aiyo, kuajiang* 哎哟, 夸奖 ('Oh, [you're] flattering [me]'), complimenter C said that 'she (B) slightly agreed with my comment and showed modesty'. Interestingly in my interview with C, her husband, also a participant of the party at which this compliment was issued, overheard C's foregoing accounts and commented that B meant to say *xiexie nimende kuajiang* 谢谢你们的夸奖 ('Thank you for your praise'). Their disagreement on B's strategy indicates that the utterance *aiyo, kuajiang* 哎哟, 夸奖 was interpreted differently by different hearers. This is evidence that the pragmatic meaning of the utterance is not self-evident.

When I interviewed recipient B, she remarked that she meant to show modesty, and accepted the compliment with modesty. She added that she wanted to say *kuajiang, guojiang* 夸奖, 过奖 ('[You're] flattering me'). The complimenter and complimentee thus share a similar view about the strategy categorization of this CR, while the opinion of C's

husband is quite different. This example shows that coding CR strategies is really much more complex than it would appear. I maintain that it is the complimentee's judgement that provides the most appropriate basis for coding a CR strategy. Therefore, it is crucial that we take into account the complimentee's own perceptions in assigning CR strategies.

Aiyo, kuajiang 哎哟, 夸奖 bears a striking resemblance to *aiyo, guojiang* 哎哟, 过奖 ('Oh, [you're] flattering [me]'). *Guojiang* 过奖 is interpreted by Chen and Yang as "What I did does not deserve your good words" (2010: 1957) and is categorized under Rejection, whereas it is classified as Shift credit under Evade in Tang and Zhang's study (2009: 336). However, unlike these studies' interpretation, my interview data shows that when saying *aiyo, kuajiang* 哎哟, 夸奖 the complimentee accepted the compliment while showing modesty. For this reason, this CR strategy was coded as Amended Acceptance.

Based on the participants' interpretations and intentions, accessed by examining evidence from the recorded conversations and interviews, all the CRs were assigned to three mutually exclusive strategies: Acceptance, Rejection and Amended Acceptance. The result shows that of the 200 VCRs produced in the 16 dinner party conversations, 147 and 53 were respectively generated by the pre- and post-OCPG participants. Further, Acceptance, Rejection and Amended Acceptance respectively account for 48.98 % ($n = 72$), 42.18 % ($n = 62$) and 8.84 % ($n = 13$) of the total CRs produced by the older generation. And in a similar order of preference, the three strategies respectively make up 66.04 % ($n = 35$), 20.75 % ($n = 11$) and 13.21 % ($n = 7$) of the total collected among the younger participants. These findings are further analyzed immediately below.

3.3. "Generational variation in compliment response strategies"

To facilitate comparison of CRs between the two generational groups, the aforementioned findings of CR strategies are presented in contrast in Figure 2 (below).

Figure 2 demonstrates both similarities and differences in the use of CR strategies by the pre- and post-OCPG participants. To begin with, a similar pattern of strategy preference can be observed. Among the three strategies, Acceptance is most preferred by both generations while Amended Acceptance is least favoured. And for both generations the traditional strategy of Rejection still counts in responding to a compliment between friends in spontaneous natural conversations.

More interestingly, the figure shows considerable generational differences in the use of politeness strategies in responding to compliments. First, the most striking difference emerges from the preference the par-

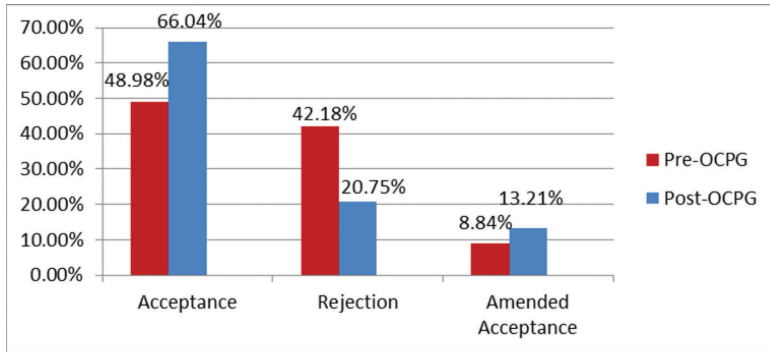


Figure 2. Comparison between CR strategies by two generations.

ticipants gave to the strategy of Rejection. The older generation participants were more than twice as likely as the younger to reject a compliment. Second those in the older group were much less likely than the younger to accept a compliment. Finally, the older generation did not show a strong preference for either Acceptance or Rejection while the younger showed a strong preference for Acceptance.

To sum up briefly, I presented two major findings in this section. First, coding a compliment and a CR, and categorizing a CR strategy are far more complex than they would appear. Second, evidence shows that there is considerable generational variation in CR strategies in Chinese. These findings, as discussed in the subsequent section, seem to indicate that the two generations have diverged in their conceptualization of face and/or politeness and in the way they do facework in performing CR behaviour.

4. Discussion

My aim here is to show how (a) the evidence that speaker intention is not self-evident in compliments, CRs and CR strategies (see Sections 3.1 and 3.2), and (b) the evidence of variation in CR strategies across generations (see Section 3.3), bring into view issues that are not yet adequately addressed in the previous scholarship. I indicate how my findings have the potential to shed light on the current debate over intention in studies on compliments and CRs and perhaps beyond. Moreover, I argue that the generational differences in the use of CR strategies seem to indicate that the two generations of the Chinese have diverged in their conceptualization of face and/or politeness perhaps due to their early socialization in different cultural contexts. I also demonstrate how my methodology enables me to seek this generational variation.

As a major finding of my study, Figure 1 raises the issue of the degree to which intention is identifiable. As the figure indicates, there emerged a significant divergence between the analyst's compliments and verified compliments and also a fairly considerable mismatch between the speakers' intentions and the recipients' attributed intentions. Among the utterances I initially coded as analyst's compliment responses (ACRs, $n = 533$), less than three quarters ($n = 386$) of them were verified by the complimentees as CRs. All the remaining ($n = 147$) were categorized as Non-VCRs. These findings provide empirical evidence that a compliment and a CR are not as easily recognizable as some previous scholars like Herbert (1989) and Ye (1995) claim. For example, Manes and Wolfson (1981) maintain that a compliment is by its very nature formulaic in its syntactic and semantic composition. It is thus "readily identifiable in any context" (Manes and Wolfson 1981: 125). In a recent study, Ye also asserts that "[t]he findings concerning compliment formulas indicate that compliments are readily recognizable items of discourse" (1995: 212; see also Herbert 1989: 5). As regards CRs, Herbert and Straight make the claim that "[c]ompliment-responses on the other hand pose no identifiability problems, whether within or between speech communities: They can be identified simply as anything that follows an identifiable compliment" (1989: 38). Clearly without the discursive approach that enables me to capture the perceptions of participants, the issue of intention in compliments and CRs would not have come into view. More importantly, being able to categorize and analyze data according to the participants' perspectives allows me to draw out differences and similarities in the two generations' CR behaviour.

As indicated in Section 3.2, I carried out interviews to obtain the participants' classification of their own CR strategies. I then made a comparison between CR strategies generated by the two generations. As Locher and Watts note, under a discursive approach to politeness, "[w]e consider it important to take native speaker assessments of politeness seriously and to make them the basis of a discursive, data-driven, bottom-up approach to politeness ... there may be a great deal of variation in these assessments." (2005: 16). Within this approach, I analyzed my data in a bottom-up fashion. Precisely, it is the participants' own interpretation I collected through interviews that allows me to explore variation in CR strategies across generations. Below I show, by way of comparison, how my methodology, which foregrounds the heterogeneity of society, makes visible the generational variation in CR strategies.

Figure 3 demonstrates some interesting differences and similarities in CR strategies between the four groups of informants in the three

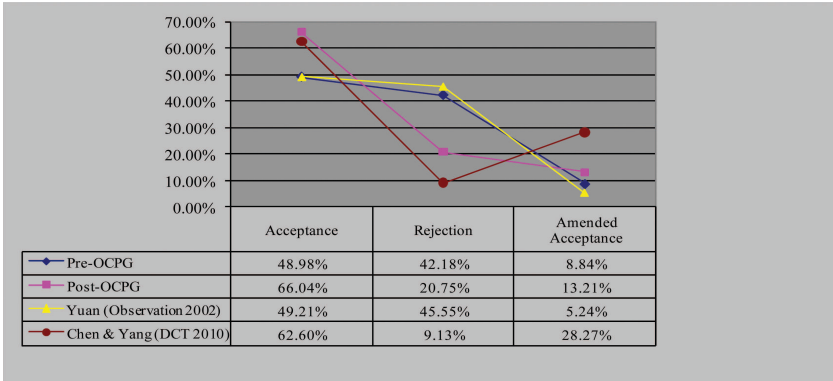


Figure 3¹. Comparison of CR strategies between present study and two recent studies.

studies. Most notably, the overall strategy preference pattern of Yuan's population group is similar to that of the pre-OCPG while it differs sharply from that of the post-OCPG. Conversely, the general preference pattern of Chen and Yang's informants bears a very close similarity to that of the post-OCPG, but it differs significantly from that of the pre-OCPG. These differences may have important methodological significance. This is because, while the data in both Yuan's and Chen and Yang's studies was collected in China's mainland, Yuan's study is one of the few that examine CR strategies in Chinese collected through participant observation and Chen and Yang's work is the most recent inquiry based on DCT data.

Although different in their instruments of data collection, these studies both implicitly assume homogeneity of the speakers of Chinese or dialect at the place where their data was collected. Yuan notes that "the term 'Chinese' embraces numerous dialects and speech communities both within and outside China. Differences among these dialects and speech communities are bound to exist" (2002: 186). Yet, throughout her paper "speakers of Kunming Chinese" are referred to as though they are a homogeneous group. For example, this can be discerned from the research questions the study addresses such as "How do speakers of Kunming Chinese respond to compliments" (Yuan 2002: 186). Similarly, Chen and Yang observed regional variation in previous findings concerning CR strategies in Chinese (see 2010: 1954). Nevertheless, in making claims like "Xi'an Chinese are now found to overwhelmingly accept compliments" (2010: 1951), the authors, perhaps unconsciously, assume that their findings could be extrapolated to other generational groups.

However, as shown in Figure 3, the post-OCPG differ markedly from Yuan's informants and the pre-OCPG diverge widely from Chen and

Yang's subjects. These differences are evidence that the Chinese are heterogeneous rather than homogeneous as the aforementioned studies assume. They indicate that on the basis of previous studies, it would be impossible to predict such variation across generations. However, the discursive approach which argues that it is "essential that we recognize variation within cultural groups" (Mills 2003: 146) leads me to look for generational variation. Moreover, as discussed in the remaining part of this section, the generational variation in CR strategies provides evidence that face and/or politeness "is not something we are born with, but something we have to learn and be socialized into" (Watts 2003: 9).

The notions of face and/or politeness in Chinese have long been seen as intimately associated with modesty. According to Ji (2010), since ancient times *manzhaosun*, *qianshouyi* 满招损,谦受益 ('conceit leads to loss while modesty brings benefit') has been valued as *tiandao* 天道 ('a heavenly law') of Chinese social interaction. Modesty is further theorized by Gu (1990) as an essential element of *limao* ('politeness') in modern Chinese. Empirically, Chen's study shows that the overwhelming majority of his informants reported that they would reject compliments because, according to the author, "[t]he norm of Chinese society...is to be modest" (1993: 67). Thus as Chen and Yang note, since the subjects in Chen's (1993) study lived in a place which was relatively closed to the outside world, they "probably represented the traditional social values such as modesty" (2010: 1959).

In this light, the pre-OCPG's higher frequency of rejecting a compliment may well indicate that their early socialization in an era when Chinese tradition remained relatively intact has a great impact on their politeness behaviour. Presumably, in so doing, both self-face (i. e., the complimentee's face) and other-face (the complimenter's face) are maintained or enhanced (cf. Ruhi 2006). At the same time, within a discursive approach to politeness, things like social norms and cultural values are conceptualized as dynamic constructs rather than static entities (see, for example, Mills 2003; Watts 2003). The finding that the post-OCPG are much more likely to accept a compliment is an indication that their norms of politeness have deviated from those observed by the older generation. And it seems to indicate that, perhaps due to the dual influence of Western cultural values (cf. Chen and Yang 2010) and China's emphasis on individual aspirations and attainments under the reform policies, the younger generation have become more concerned about presenting a new self-image and identity by displaying self-confidence and individualism through accepting compliments. By using a research methodology informed by the discursive approach which argues politeness is "historically constituted ... the values it rep-

resents and the functions it plays in discursive practices will be in a continual state of flux and change” (Watts 2003: 144), my study makes visible the fact that face and/or politeness in contemporary Chinese vary synchronically.

5. Conclusion

Within a discursive approach to politeness which focuses on “participants’ situated and dynamic evaluations of politeness, not shared conventionalized politeness forms or strategies” (Culpeper 2011: 122), my paper explored spontaneous naturally occurring CRs in Chinese from a cross-generational perspective. The data on which this paper is based was derived from 16 dinner party conversations among friends audio-recorded in China’s mainland.

Adopting a bottom-up manner of data analysis, I constructed a corpus of 200 verbal VCRs using an elaborated procedure for data coding and verification. My findings show that a compliment and a CR are not as readily identifiable as many previous studies claim (e. g., Manes and Wolfson 1981; Herbert and Straight 1989; Ye 1995). Similarly, a CR strategy cannot always be assigned easily without complimentees’ perceptions collected through interviews. Regarding the use of CR strategies, Acceptance is the most preferred by the two generations. This means that Chinese society has changed sufficiently for even the older generational cohort (pre-OCPG) to have taken on new norms and values. Nevertheless, clear evidence shows that the younger generation (post-OCPG) have diverged from the older in their use of CR strategies. The difference in their preference for Rejection is particularly significant, viz. the pre-OCPG were more than twice as likely as the post-OCPG to reject a compliment.

I demonstrated that by adopting the discursive approach to politeness which “advocates a greater focus on the evaluations made by participants through interaction” (Haugh 2007: 302), my study brings into view the issue of intention in compliments and CRs and the generational variation in using CR strategies. The categorical differences in the way the two generations responded to compliments, appear to indicate that the two generations of the Chinese have diverged in their conceptualization of face and/or politeness. The older generation tend to maintain or enhance their own and co-participants’ face by observing conventional cultural norms and values such as modesty. The younger, by contrast, seem to be more concerned about presenting a new self-image and identity by displaying such personal traits as confidence and individualism.

Acknowledgements

I am greatly indebted to my supervisor Dr Chris Christie for her insightful and detailed comments on earlier drafts of this article. I am grateful to the participants who provided the data. The study was funded by an Overseas Research Studentship Award (Higher Education Funding Council for England), a Research Studentship in the Department of English and Drama at Loughborough University, UK and Great Britain-China Educational Trust: Chinese Student Awards. I am also grateful for the invaluable comments and suggestions of the anonymous reviewers. I would like to thank Wendy Patterson for her work on improving this article. I also thank Yuling Pan and Dániel Z. Kádár for their dedication to this special issue. All the remaining errors are certainly mine.

Appendix: Transcription conventions

[Simultaneous speech
...	Intervening utterances which have been omitted
=	The break and subsequent continuation of a single utterance
((laugh))	Transcriber's annotations
(text)	Text is inserted to make translation more comprehensible
→	Utterances under discussion

Bionotes

Yun He is engaged in research towards a PhD. in the Department of English and Drama at Loughborough University, UK. She was a visiting researcher at this University in 2004. Her research interests include linguistic politeness, pragmatics and identity. She has published work on sociolinguistics, intercultural communication and translation. Her current research investigates politeness in contemporary Chinese from a discursive approach.

E-mail: Y.He3@lboro.ac.uk

Notes

1. The figures in the third row are adapted from Yuan's (2002) study. For details, see Yuan (2002: 210).

References

- Achiba, Machiko. 2003. *Learning to request in a second language: A study of child interlanguage pragmatics*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Chen, Rong. 1993. Responding to compliments: A contrastive study of politeness strategies between American English and Chinese speakers. *Journal of Pragmatics* 20 (1). 49–75.
- Chen, Rong & Dafu Yang. 2010. Responding to compliments in Chinese: Has it changed? *Journal of Pragmatics* 42 (7). 1951–1963.
- Chen, Yiya & Agnes Weiyun He. 2001. *Dui bu dui* as a pragmatic marker: Evidence from Chinese classroom discourse. *Journal of Pragmatics* 33 (9). 1441–1465.
- Christie, Chris. 2007. Relevance theory and politeness. *Journal of Politeness Research* 3 (2). 269–294.
- Culpeper, Jonathan. 2011. *Impoliteness: Using language to cause offence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Feng, Xiaotian 风笑天. 2002. *Zhongguo Dushengziniu Yanjiu: Huigu yu Qianzhan* 中国独生子女研究: 回顾与前瞻 [One child studies in China: Retrospect and prospect]. *Jianghai Academic Journal* 江海学刊 (5). 90–99, 207.
- Golato, Andrea. 2005. *Compliments and compliment responses: Grammatical structure and sequential organisation*. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Grindsted, Annette. 2005. Interactive resources used in semi-structured research interviewing. *Journal of Pragmatics* 37 (7). 1015–1035.
- Gu, Yueguo. 1990. Politeness phenomena in modern Chinese. *Journal of Pragmatics* 14 (2). 237–257.
- Haug, Michael. 2007. The discursive challenge to politeness research: An interactional alternative. *Journal of Politeness Research* 3 (2). 295–317.
- Haug, Michael. 2008. Intention in pragmatics. *Intercultural Pragmatics* 5 (2). 99–110.
- Herbert, Robert K. 1989. The ethnography of English compliments and compliment responses: A contrastive sketch. In Wieslaw Oleksy (ed.), *Contrastive pragmatics*, 3–35. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Herbert, Robert K. & Stephen H. Straight. 1989. Compliment-rejection versus compliment-avoidance: Listener-based versus speaker-based pragmatic strategies. *Language & Communication* 9 (1). 35–47.
- Holmes, Janet. 1988. Paying compliments: A sex-preferential politeness strategy. *Journal of Pragmatics* 12 (4). 445–465.
- Holmes, Janet. 1995. *Women, men and politeness*. London & New York: Longman.
- Ji, Xianlin 季羨林. 2010. *Qianxu yu Xuwei* 谦虚与虚伪 [Modesty and vanity]. *Guoxue* 国学 4 (7). 75.
- Kádár, Dániel Z. & Yuling Pan. 2011. Politeness in China. In Dániel Z. Kádár & Sara Mills (eds.), *Politeness in East Asia*, 125–146. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Knapp, Mark L., Robert Hopper & Robert A. Bell. 1984. Compliments: A descriptive taxonomy. *Journal of Communication* 34 (4). 12–31.
- Lan, Jiufu 兰久富. 1999. *Shehui Zhuanxing Shiqi de Jiazhi Guannian* 社会转型时期的价值观念 [Values and beliefs in a society in transition]. Beijing: Beijing shifan daxue chubanshe.
- Lee-Wong, Song Mei. 2000. *Politeness and face in Chinese culture*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- Locher, Miriam A. 2006. Polite behaviour within relational work: The discursive approach to politeness. *Multilingua* 25 (3). 249–267.
- Locher, Miriam A. & Richard J. Watts. 2005. Politeness theory and relational work. *Journal of Politeness Research* 1 (1). 9–33.

- Manes, Joan & Nessa Wolfson. 1981. The compliment formula. In Florian Coulmas (ed.), *Conversational routine: Explorations in standardised communication situations and prepatterned speech*, 115–132. The Hague: Mouton.
- Mills, Sara. 2003. *Gender and politeness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mills, Sara. 2011. Discursive approaches to politeness and impoliteness. In Linguistic Politeness Research Group (eds.), *Discursive approaches to politeness*, 19–56. Berlin & New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Milroy, Lesley. 1987 [1980]. *Language and social networks*, 2nd edn. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Pomerantz, Anita. 1978. Compliment responses: Notes on the co-operation of multiple constraints. In Jim Schenkein (ed.), *Studies in the organisation of conversational interaction*, 79–112. New York: Academic Press.
- Qu, Weiguo 曲卫国 & Chen Liufang 陈流芳. 1999. *Lun Chuantong de Zhongguo Li-mao Yuanze* 论传统的中国礼貌原则 [On traditional Chinese politeness principles] *Academic Monthly* 学术月刊 (7). 33–41.
- Ruhi, Şükriye. 2006. Politeness in compliment responses: A perspective from naturally occurring exchanges in Turkish. *Pragmatics* 16 (1). 43–101.
- Tang, Chen-Hsin & Grace Qiao Zhang. 2009. A contrastive study of compliment responses among Australian English and Mandarin Chinese speakers. *Journal of Pragmatics* 41 (2). 325–345.
- Wang, Yu-Fang & Pi-Hua Tsai. 2003. An empirical study on compliments and compliment responses in Taiwan Mandarin conversation. *Concentric: Studies in English Literature and Linguistics* 29 (2). 118–156.
- Watts, Richard J. 2003. *Politeness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Watts, Richard J. 2005. Linguistic politeness research: *Quo vadis?* In Richard J. Watts, Sachiko Ide & Konrad Ehlich (eds.), *Politeness in language: Studies in its history, theory and practice*, 2nd edn., xi–xlvii. Berlin & New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Ye, Lei. 1995. Complimenting in Mandarin Chinese. In Gabriele Kasper (ed.), *Pragmatics of Chinese as native and target language*, 207–295. Honolulu & Hawaii: University of Hawaii.
- Young, Linda Wai Ling. 1994. *Crosstalk and culture in Sino-American communication*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Yu, Ming-chung. 2003. On the universality of face: Evidence from Chinese compliment response behaviour. *Journal of Pragmatics* 35 (10–11). 1679–1710.
- Yuan, Yi. 2001. An inquiry into empirical pragmatics data-gathering methods: Written DCTs, oral DCTs, field notes, and natural conversations. *Journal of Pragmatics* 33 (2). 271–292.
- Yuan, Yi. 2002. Compliments and compliment responses in Kunming Chinese. *Pragmatics* 12 (2). 183–226.