

# On the universality of face: evidence from chinese compliment response behavior

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## Abstract

The aim of this study is to examine cross-cultural politeness behavior. Politeness appears to be a prevalent concept in human interaction, and to date, many models of politeness have been put forward in the literature. The focal point of this paper is Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) formulation of politeness behavior, for compared with other models of politeness, theirs is the one that most clearly maintains its pancultural validity, thus evidently claiming its application as a basis for cross-cultural comparison (O'Driscoll, 1996). In this study, the compliment response behavior of native Chinese speakers, who are typically regarded as having rules of speaking and social norms very different from those of Westerners, is compared closely with that of native American English speakers to see if it can provide evidence to support Brown and Levinson's universal thesis. The results show that while there are indeed some general concepts and dimensions of politeness that are shared by Chinese and English speakers, the different strategies they use indicate the important role culture plays in its speakers' speech act performance. This important role should never be treated lightly when we explore the issue of speech act universality.

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## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Politeness appears to be a prevalent concept in human interaction. It can be expressed verbally and non-verbally, but in this study, only *linguistic* politeness is discussed; that is, the ways people express politeness verbally through their use of language. As regards its definition, it is often considered socioculturally appropriate behavior and is characterized as a matter of abiding by the expectations of society. To learn how to behave according to the culturally conditioned expectations of politeness norms is often an indispensable socialization goal in a given society—a fact amply evidenced in general advice to the public and in etiquette books. By contrast, politeness is also often deemed considerate behavior. For example, Holmes (1995), whose ideas of politeness are mainly derived from Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) work, employs this term to refer to "behavior which actively expresses positive concern for others, as well as non-imposing distancing behavior" (p. 5). Obviously, there exists a clear difference in these two lines of perspectives about politeness. It is precisely this contrast that my study will elaborate on by comparing what politeness actually means in Chinese and Western culture.

In spite of the fact that politeness bears much real-life significance and that there are some heuristic early studies (e.g. Shils, 1968; Lakoff, 1973), it was not until the late 1970s that politeness became an important issue in pragmatic studies (Kasper, 1990). To date there have been many models of politeness put forward in the literature (e.g., Lakoff, 1973, 1975; Brown & Levinson, 1978, 1987; Leech, 1983; Fraser & Nolen, 1981; Green, 1989; Fraser, 1990). The focal point of this paper is Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) formulation. There are two reasons for this focus, both following from the basic aim of this study, which is to examine cross-cultural politeness behavior. First, Brown & Levinson's framework can be regarded as one of the most influential theories for investigating politeness phenomenon in human interaction, for it has generated a wealth of theoretical and empirical research in a wide variety of disciplines, such as anthropology, developmental psychology, education, and applied linguistics (Kasper, 1990). Second, compared with other models of politeness, theirs is the one that most clearly maintains its pancultural validity and thus evidently claims to be applicable as a basis for cross-cultural comparison (O'Driscoll, 1996).

Brown and Levinson's framework essentially presupposes the Gricean (1975) formulations of conversational maxims and implicatures as an appropriate and correct analytic model, thereby assuming that the nature of talk is based on a rational and efficient foundation so that a maximal exchange of information is achieved. However, we can frequently find in spoken exchanges that everyday linguistic behavior deviates from Grice's proposals. Brown and Levinson (1978) believe that such deviations from model situations more often than not are driven by a motivation of politeness, which could offer a seemingly rational explanation for the speaker's

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<sup>1</sup> I am very grateful to one anonymous reviewer, whose comments have helped me a great deal in my revisions. I, of course, am solely responsible for all the errors that may remain.

obvious inefficiency and irrationality. They thus intend to prove that “superficial diversities can emerge from underlying universal principles and are satisfactorily accounted for only in relation to them” (p. 61), and they argue for a universal theory of politeness as a sociolinguistic principle that guides any given speaker’s language use in real-life discourse.

When it comes to linguistic behavior like speech acts, the issue of universality versus culture-specificity has been of great interest to pragmaticists. Some scholars claim that speech acts in effect operate by universal principles of pragmatics (e.g., Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969, 1975, 1979), according to which communicative interaction between speaker and addressee is governed by some general mechanisms such as principles of cooperation (Grice, 1975) or of politeness (e.g., Brown & Levinson, 1978, 1987; Leech, 1983). Furthermore, it is suggested that the strategies for realizing specific linguistic behavior are essentially identical across different cultures and languages, though the appropriate use of any given strategies may not be exactly the same across speech communities (Fraser, 1985). By contrast, other theorists maintain that speech acts actually vary in both conceptualization and realization across languages and cultures, and that their modes of performance are mainly motivated by differences in deep-seated cultural conventions and assumptions (e.g., Green, 1975; Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989; Yu, 1999a, 1999b).

The issue of universality versus culture-specificity in speech act studies is still hotly debated. Typical of this debate are the opposing views of Searle (e.g., 1975) and Wierzbicka (e.g., 1991). For example, Searle (1975), agreeing with Austin’s (1962) claim that speech acts are semantic universals and hence not culture-bound, maintains that across languages and cultures, there are general norms for realizing speech acts and conducting politeness behavior, and that while the forms embodying these norms may vary from one language to another, the cross-cultural differences are not that important. However, Wierzbicka (1991), by providing examples from Polish and Japanese, objects to this universalistic stand and contends that choosing circumstances for performing certain speech acts is based on cultural norms and values rather than on certain general mechanisms. She even argues that any existing claims to universality in speech act behavior are necessarily subjective and ethnocentric. Given the fact that only a few speech acts and languages have been studied in the literature, existing claims for universality are severely called into question by studies such as Wierzbicka’s (Yu, 1999b).

In the present study, the compliment response—a commonly used speech act behavior—of native Chinese speakers will be closely compared with that of native American English speakers. By focusing on a relatively understudied speaker group such as the Chinese, typically regarded as having rules of speaking and social norms very different from those of Westerners’, the paper aims at possibly providing evidence for Brown and Levinson’s universal thesis. Since the latter regard the notion of ‘face’ as the foundation of all politeness phenomena, the following discussion on the universality of politeness is mainly based on this notion, explored from the viewpoint of Chinese language and culture. In this way, it is hoped that some light can be shed on the issue of universality versus culture-specificity in speech act studies.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. *Western and Chinese concepts of face and politeness*

#### 2.1.1. *Brown and Levinson's concepts of face and politeness*

As mentioned above, much inefficient and irrational human behavior (that is, behavior that departs from Gricean norms, e.g., indirect speech) has been contended by Brown and Levinson to be primarily politeness-motivated. Central to their politeness framework is the concept of face. One of the main goals in social interaction is to maintain and even enhance 'face' during conversation. Goffman (1967), a pioneering Western theorist, who introduced the concept of face to illuminate patterns of behavior, defines face as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact" (p. 5). He believes that though face itself, the phenomenon, is inherently attributable to individuals, its exact configuration is in fact not inherent and can only be bestowed on a person by others in interaction. In other words, its precise configuration is not a private property inherent in individuals, but a public image that individuals have to earn from society. To secure this image, they need to perform "facework" (p. 12), that is, action that appears to signal two points of views: a defensive orientation toward saving their own face and a protective orientation toward saving others' face. In doing so, individuals gain control of the impression that others receive of them. However, if their action ever loses support from others' judgments, the obtained face will be withdrawn from them.

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), one source of their formulation of face is derived from Goffman's face theory (the other is from "the English folk term", p. 61). In addition, they are heavily influenced by Durkheim (1915), inasmuch as they base their distinction between negative and positive face/politeness on his distinction between negative and positive rites (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 43). Thus, they characterize face as "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself" (p. 61) and argue that the speaker comes into any conversation with two seemingly conflicting "face wants" (p. 13): a "negative face" (p. 61) want, which is the desire to act unimpeded by other people; and a "positive face" want, which is the desire to be liked by others. Ideally, it is in everyone's best interests to conduct oneself so as to honor others' needs; however, practically, satisfying one's individual desires frequently leads one to perform acts that inevitably threaten both one's own and others' face needs (Yu, 1997, 1999b). For example, requests may affect both participants' face wants in obviously different ways. On the one hand, the speaker's face may be threatened by fear of causing the hearer's loss of face, or showing the speaker's own need; on the other, the hearer's face may be threatened by viewing a request as the speaker's display of power, or as an impingement on the hearer's freedom of action. Brown and Levinson (1987) maintain that such acts are intrinsically face-threatening, thereby defining politeness as a "redressive action" (p. 25) taken to counteract the disruptive effects of these "face-threatening acts" (FTAs).

Brown and Levinson further outline five main strategies that a given speaker can employ to avoid or minimize the effects from carrying out FTAs. The first three are on-record strategies, in which “there is only one unambiguously attributable intention” (p. 69) on which both participants agree. The first is to do the FTA directly without any redressive action (e.g., for a request, one says ‘*Give me that remote*’). By redressive action, Brown and Levinson refer to action that gives face to the hearer. In other words, this kind of action is to attempt to “counteract the potential face damage of the FTA” (p. 69). The second and the third on-record strategies are: (2) to perform the FTA with redressive action that attends to the hearer’s positive face by including him/her in the group (i.e., *positive politeness*) and (3) to do the FTA with redressive action that satisfies the addressee’s negative face by not interfering with his/her freedom of action (i.e., *negative politeness*). In practice, action without redress is often associated with *directness*, negative politeness with “conventionalized indirectness” (p. 70). For example, many negative-politeness indirect requests in English like ‘*Could you pass the salt?*’ have been fully conventionalized so that they are read as requests by interactants. Put another way, in honoring the addressee’s negative face wants, the speaker often takes pains to phrase his/her FTAs in a conventionally indirect way.

The fourth strategy is to go off record in doing the FTA. Thus, “there is more than one unambiguously attributable intention” (p. 69) to which the addressee can react. In reality, linguistic realizations of this strategy include irony, tautologies, understatements, rhetorical questions, all kinds of hints, and so forth. Since what a speaker means to communicate by using this kind of strategy is not expressed directly, its intended illocutionary force is to some extent negotiable. The last strategy, (5), is to avoid FTAs by not doing them at all. According to Brown and Levinson, these strategies along with their specific realizations are potentially “available to persons in any culture as rational means of dealing with the face of others” (p. 244). Generally speaking, the more a given act threatens the speaker’s or the addressee’s face needs, the more the speaker will want to employ a higher-order strategy. In other words, higher-number strategies are presumed to be more polite.

Judging from the above strategy formulations, we can see that it is positive face and negative face which play a crucial role in determining the speaker’s use of positive and negative politeness, respectively; they are the core components of Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory. In fact, it is these two kinds of face desires upon which they build their universalistic thesis.

To determine the level of politeness that the speaker employs to the hearer in doing an FTA, Brown and Levinson further argue that in many (and perhaps all) cultures, there are three indispensable sociological variables involved in the assessment of the seriousness of an FTA: (a) the ‘social distance’ between the speaker and the hearer; (b) the relative ‘power’ of the hearer over the speaker; (c) the absolute ranking of impositions in a given culture (p. 74). More importantly, they ultimately consolidate their theses by putting forward a universal theory of politeness, proposing that although the content of face may differ in different cultures and societies as regards the exact limit to personal territories, both the interactants’ mutual knowledge of face and the social necessity to orient themselves to face in spoken

interaction are universal. Basically, their claims to universality amount to the following three points (p. 244):

- (i) The universality of face, which is describable as two kinds of basic wants.
- (ii) The potential universality of a set of strategic resources from which individual cultures choose, and of certain principles and their rational deployment.
- (iii) The universality of the interlocutors' mutual knowledge of (i) and (ii).

Brown and Levinson's formulations of face have been criticized by some researchers (e.g., Aston, 1988; Mao, 1994) as being different from Goffman's (cf. also Bargiela, 2003, this issue). For example, Mao (1994) contends that for Goffman, the precise configuration of face is a public property that the individual can only obtain through interactional behavior, whereas for Brown and Levinson, the face bestowed on a person becomes a private property that every competent adult member of society possesses. Hence, Mao argues, "the public characteristic that is essential to Goffman's analysis of face seems to become an 'external' modifier or adjunct for, rather than an 'intrinsic' constituent of" (p. 454), Brown and Levinson's notion of face.

### 2.1.2. Chinese concepts of face and politeness

Like in the Western culture referred to above, departures from Gricean norms by Chinese people are also driven by politeness concerns and thus serve as face-redressive strategies (Zhang, 1995). Hu (1944) contends that there exist two aspects of face in Chinese culture. One, '面子 *miànzi*,<sup>2</sup>' refers to "prestige or reputation, which is either achieved through getting on in life" (Mao, 1994: 457), or "ascribed (even imagined) by other members of one's own community"; the other, '臉 *liǎn*', refers to "the respect of the group for a man with a good moral standard" (Hu, 1944: 45), and therefore indicates "the confidence of society in the integrity of ego's moral character". The main difference between the two is that basically, '面子 *miànzi*' has to do with an individual's dignity or prestige, whereas '臉 *liǎn*' has to do with a recognition by community for an individual's socially acceptable, moral behavior or judgment. Nevertheless, both components involve respectable and reputable images that one can claim for oneself from the community in which one interacts or to which one belongs (Ho, 1975; Mao, 1994). Put another way, they both revolve around "a recognition by others of one's desire for social prestige, reputation, or sanction" (Hu, 1944: 47). Seen in this light, the dynamics of Chinese facework can be thought of as involving "an interactional orientation on the part of the individual speaker toward establishing connectedness to, and seeking interpersonal harmony with, one's own community" (Mao, 1994: 459). Thus, to be polite in Chinese discourse is "to know how to attend to each other's '面子 *miànzi*' and '臉 *liǎn*' and to enact speech acts appropriate to and worthy of such an image" (p. 463).

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this paper, all Chinese characters are transliterated following the '拼音 *pīnyīn*' system, which is the official transcription system used in the PRC, and is widely adopted in scholarly writings on Chinese in the West. In addition, to help readers better understand the examples in Appendix, a line (that is a morphemic, word-for-word) translation is included for all the Chinese examples.

### 2.1.3. Differences between Brown and Levinson's and the Chinese conceptions of facework

2.1.3.1. *The locus of face.* Having examined the essence of Brown and Levinson's and the Chinese conception of facework, we now will look at the difference between these two formulations. At first glance, it seems obvious that Brown and Levinson center their theses on the individual aspect of face: face is an image that intrinsically belongs to the 'self'. This self-image primarily concerns the individual's desires, and only to the extent that the self depends on others' face being maintained does this image become public. Consequently, to protect and enhance one's face is to act in full compliance with the anticipated expectations of personal desires, which are considered rational assumptions that all members in a given society are presumed to abide by (Mao, 1994; Yu, 1997, 1999b).

In contrast, it is the harmony of individual behavior with the judgment of the community, rather than the accommodation of individual desires, that Chinese face emphasizes (Mao, 1994; Yu, 1997, 1999b). Specifically, in the Chinese culture, on the one hand, one is presumed not to be motivated by a desire for freedom (negative face), but instead to seek the respect of the group (面子 *miànzi*) (in other words, Chinese '面子 *miànzi*', compared with negative face, concentrates not so much on freedom of action as on respect or prestige of the community). On the other hand, even when motivated by a desire to be liked by others (positive face), one is generally presumed to avoid condemnation by society through meeting the socially endorsed requirements of conduct (臉 *liǎn*) (in other words, Chinese '臉 *liǎn*', compared with positive face, goes beyond personal desires in that it has a distinctive moral overtone). Simply put, the kind of face a Chinese gets can be considered a public image that not only depends on but also is determined by the participation of others (Mao, 1994).

This characteristic of Chinese face basically converges with Goffman's (1967, 1971) conception regarding the kind of face a person gets as a 'public property', on loan to the individual from society. In other words, one is not endowed with this property naturally, but has to earn it in interaction, as the precise configuration of face belongs to the self only to the extent that one acts in accordance with the expectations of communal norms (Hu, 1944; Mao, 1994). Furthermore, unlike Brown and Levinson's framework, that places special emphasis on speakers taking redressive measures to address hearers' face wants, the dynamics of facework in Chinese is "positively reciprocal with both parties engaged in mutually shared orientation to negotiate, elevate, and attend to each other's face" (Zhang, 1995: 85). This balance of face plays a crucial role in Chinese discourse, because giving face to others at the same time helps one earn the recognition of the group, thereby not only protecting but also enhancing one's own face. That is to say, while Brown and Levinson's face can be deemed an individualistic, self-oriented image, Chinese face is communal, interpersonal (Zhang, 1995; Yu, 1997, 1999b).

The above discussion, hence, seems to suggest that Brown and Levinson's overall conceptualization of face is different from that of the Chinese. However, as far as the goals of polite facework are concerned, the difference between the two conceptions is perhaps not that radical. Brown and Levinson's emphasis on rationality, by

which people act in specific ways to achieve specific ends, may be said to hold true for the Chinese conception as well, in the sense that the Chinese attempt to establish connectedness and/or achieve interpersonal harmony may also be considered a rational end. Conversely, in order to accommodate one's desires (cf. Brown and Levinson's formulation), it is usually necessary to make sure that one's behavior is in harmony with the judgment of the community (cf. the Chinese formulation). Seen in this light, in either source, polite facework circumscribes actions whose goal is the "interpersonal harmony" that Mao (1994) claims. We see how Brown and Levinson assume (as do the Chinese) that paying face to others will certainly do no harm at all to one's own face: both put special emphasis on the inherent reciprocity of facework.

Accordingly, the Chinese and the Brown and Levinsonian conceptions of facework appear to have very similar end-points; the differences between them discussed earlier seem to lie in their starting points. As we have seen, Brown and Levinson's face is regarded as individualistic simply because they consider politeness to be something addressed to the desires/expectations of individual alters, whereas the Chinese, being communal, simply think of politeness as addressed to the expectations of society at large. Nevertheless, owing to the fact that individual alters, at least to some degree, derive their desires/expectations from societal norms, a behavior that does not live up to the expectations of society will oftentimes not live up to those of individual alters either; the latter are very likely to form a negative opinion of the offender. As a result, the difference between both conceptions can be viewed as one of scale rather than of kind.

*2.1.3.2. The status of concepts.* However, a much more obvious difference exists between the Chinese and Brown and Levinson's formulations. Watts, Ide, and Ehlich (1992) argue that a distinction has to be made between first-order and second-order politeness. First-order politeness corresponds to "the various ways in which polite behavior is perceived and talked about by members of sociocultural groups. It encompasses, in other words, commonsense notions of politeness" (p. 3). By contrast, second-order politeness refers to "a theoretical construct, a term within a theory of social behavior and language usage". The Chinese conception of politeness as characterized in this paper may be thought of as a first-order concept because it is a notion that is not only highly salient to the society at large, but discussed and evaluated by people in general, if not everyday, vocabulary. On the other hand, though Brown and Levinson allude to folk notions and maintain the mutual knowledge between interactants, their formulation is a theoretical one, a construct itself derived mainly from two other theoretical constructs—Goffman's (1967) face and Durkheim's (1915) positive and negative rites. As to notions of face in English, they seem to be of Chinese origin (Mao, 1994). According to the Oxford English Dictionary (1987 ed.), the English word 'face' was initially employed among the English-speaking community in China, meaning 'one's credit, good name, reputation', and referring to the ways in which Chinese people generally behaved to avoid incurring shame or disgrace. In modern everyday English, the term is employed in only a small number of frozen expressions, such as 'to save face', 'to lose face', and 'to put on a good face'. It may be employed in other syntactic frames by politeness



researchers, but terms such as ‘positive face’ and ‘negative face’, unlike the Chinese ‘面子 *miànzi*’ and ‘臉 *liǎn*’, are certainly not in general, let alone everyday, usage. It thus appears obvious that Brown and Levinson’s face concept is a second-order one.<sup>3</sup>

Chinese face pertains to a whole culture, Brown and Levinson’s to a relatively small community of academic researchers. In Chinese culture, both politeness and face are salient, while in the West only politeness is salient in society at large. Thus, the connection between these two concepts is much more prominent in Chinese culture than in the West and it seems eminently possible for the Chinese people to characterize their polite behavior with reference to face. Nevertheless, since the above discussion has shown that the end-points of facework appear similar between the Chinese and Brown and Levinson’s formulations, it seems reasonable to presume that the Western (first-order) concept of politeness (as opposed to second-order face) may be at least similar to the Chinese concept in one important aspect, viz.: both cultures behave according to socially approved norms. No current research has specifically focused on this issue, and many more studies are needed to confirm this hypothesis.

Empirical research to date has clearly shown the intricate and complex ways in which many aspects of human linguistic behavior, such as speech act performance, are informed by, and interwoven with, the concern for interactants’ face and its preservation (e.g., Brown & Levinson, 1978, 1987; Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989). This appears to support the assumption that much human behavior is to some degree motivated by politeness. However, since the conceptualizations of face and politeness in both the Chinese and the Brown and Levinsonian formulations, though similar in some respects, seem to be different in others, it will be interesting to see if speech act behavior functions differently as a face-redressive strategy for politeness concerns for native Chinese and English speakers. The present paper addresses this issue.

## 2.2. Compliment response strategies

‘Compliment responses’ are worthy of study because they are ubiquitous, yet frequently problematic speech acts. The fact that compliments are easily heard in everyday conversations indicates that responding to compliments is a common feature of discursal activities. However, due to the fact that compliments can be threatening to the addressee’s face as they, like criticisms, are an act of judgment on another person, people may feel uneasy, defensive, or even cynical with regard to the compliments they receive, and thus may have trouble responding to such compliments appropriately (Knapp, Hopper, & Bell, 1984).

Based primarily on previous research by, e.g., Pomerantz, 1978; Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk, 1989; Herbert, 1989; Lee, 1990; Ye, 1995, this study identifies six mutually exclusive main strategies, viz. *Acceptance*, *Amendment*, *Non-Acceptance*, *Face Relationship Related Response*, *Combination*, and *No Acknowledgment*, for

<sup>3</sup> It has been suggested that it may be a dangerous undertaking to directly compare two such radically different types of concepts (Eelen, 2001).

situations where responding to compliments could be considered socioculturally appropriate (Yu, 1999a). Below these strategies will be briefly outlined.<sup>4</sup>

1. Acceptance strategies: Utterances that recognize the status of a preceding remark as a compliment, such as *'Thank you!'*, *'Yeah, I think it went well, too'*, and *'I am glad you liked it'*.
2. Amendment strategies: Cases where, while recognizing the preceding remark as a compliment, the speaker tries to amend its complimentary force by uttering e.g. *'You played very well, too'*, *'Just so-so'*, or *'I put lot of work into it last night'*.
3. Non-acceptance strategies: Utterances that deny, question, or joke about the content of the compliment or avoid responding directly to the praise, such as *'No'*, *'Well, actually I think it sort of dragged out'*, and *'Stop making fun of me'*.
4. Face relationship related response strategies: Utterances that do not appear to accept, amend, or reject the compliment given. In essence, this kind of metacommunicative response does not address the propositional content of the compliment; rather, it deals with the occurrence of the compliment within the interaction, such as *'I'm embarrassed'*.
5. Combination strategies: The case in which the addressee's response combines two or more of the four strategies described above, such as *'Thank you! Did you really think it's good?'* (Acceptance + Amendment).
6. No acknowledgment: The case in which the speaker chooses not to respond to the compliment.

### 3. Universality of face

To understand the speaker's possible intention when performing a given speech act, Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) propose a general framework to account, from both the speaker's and the hearer's perspectives, for behavior that departs from the Gricean norms (which, in their view, comprises politeness) in spoken interaction across languages and cultures. Moreover, they examine the issue of cross-cultural differences within their universal construct.

According to Brown and Levinson, responding to compliments is indeed a face-threatening act. They take the acceptance of a compliment as an example to illustrate how the complimentee's positive and/or negative face wants could be directly damaged: When the addressee accepts a given compliment, s/he may feel constrained to denigrate the object complimented on, thereby damaging his/her own positive face desire to be liked by others. In addition, the complimentee may feel constrained to return the compliment, thus damaging his/her own negative face needs to act unimpededly (1987: 68).

<sup>4</sup> See Appendix for a complete description and more examples of these six mutually exclusive main strategies for compliment response behavior.

### 3.1. Brown & Levinson's universal framework applied

#### 3.1.1. The six main strategies

In what follows, Brown and Levinson's universal politeness framework will be examined with respect to the six main strategies introduced above. These strategies will be discussed in terms of what strategy the speaker uses in doing an FTA.

#### Acceptance strategies

As described before, acceptance responses like *'Thank you! I like it, too'* can be considered on-record strategies because there is only one unambiguously attributable intention with which both interactants concur, i.e., accepting the compliment. In other words, the complementee unambiguously expresses the intention of agreeing with the complimenter. However, in Brown and Levinson's taxonomy, on-record strategies can be performed in two main ways, i.e., (i) baldly, without redress; (ii) with redress—positive politeness and negative politeness. Hence, we need to further determine to what on-record category the acceptance response may belong by examining if there is any redress inherent in this type of response. If there is, we also need to examine what kind of redress it is in order to determine whether the politeness is positive or negative. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), while the scope of relevant redress in negative politeness is "restricted to the imposition itself", in positive politeness, it is "widened to the appreciation of alter's wants in general or to the expression of similarity between ego's and alter's wants" (p. 101).

Suppose the addressee, in responding to a compliment, expresses rejection, disagreement, criticism, or disapproval, thereby rejecting one or more of the complimenter's "wants, acts, personal characteristics, goods, beliefs or values" (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 66), and damaging the complimenter's positive face (desire of approval). In order not to cause such damage, the complementee may then be forced to accept the compliment, or even express his/her gratitude for it, even though knowing that doing so may damage his/her own face. In other words, s/he may notice and attend to the complimenter's positive face desire by choosing to sacrifice his/her own. Seen in this light, the complementee appears to take a redressive action showing an appreciation of the complimenter's wants in general. Therefore, based on Brown and Levinson's formulation, acceptance responses are in practice positive politeness strategies.

#### Non-acceptance strategies

In general, there are two types of utterances that can be considered non-acceptance strategies: rejection (e.g., a *'disagreement'* substrategy like *'No, I don't think so'*) and self-humbling/self-abasement (e.g., a *'qualification'* substrategy like *'I think I did a poor job'/'It isn't as good as yours'*). In rejection responses, the recipient of the compliment appears to show disagreement in a direct, clear, and unambiguous way, and thus damage the positive face needs of the complimenter. In other words, s/he goes on record as doing an FTA without redressive action. Consequently, these responses can be seen as bald on-record strategies that bear no redress. According to

Brown and Levinson (1987), usually an FTA will be performed in this way only when the speaker does not worry about retribution from the addressee, and when his/her other concerns, such as that for maximum efficiency, override the desire to satisfy the hearer's face needs. Brown and Levinson further claim that there are two classes of circumstances where bald-on-record usage may be observed: (i) "those where the face threat is not minimized, where face is ignored or is irrelevant" (p. 95), e.g., saying '*watch out!*' in cases of emergency, and (ii) "those where in doing the FTA baldly on record, (the speaker) minimizes face threats by implication", e.g., saying '*go*' in cases of farewells.

While acknowledging that there are many kinds of bald-on-record usage in different circumstances, Brown and Levinson do not really touch on the issue of rejection expressions shown in compliment responses; rather, they concentrate on direct imperatives because they believe that this kind of utterance stands out as an obvious example of bald-on-record usage. However, rejection responses seem to occur in the first type of the above-noted situations. That is to say, in rejecting a given compliment, the complimentee does not care about maintaining the complimenter's face or creating a bad impression, since s/he may want to perform the FTA with a particular concern, such as avoiding self-praise (as suggested by Pomerantz, 1978), rather than satisfying the complimenter's face needs.

As to self-humbling/self-abasement responses, Brown and Levinson appear to regard these as realizing deference. In paying deference to the addressee, the speaker "humbles and abases" (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 178) him/herself, hence conveys a message that the addressee is of higher social status. As a result, deference can minimize or avoid the potential face threat by "indicating that the addressee's rights to relative immunity from imposition are recognized". Thus, to Brown & Levinson, deference is a negative politeness strategy (1987: 131—but see [Section 3.3](#) below) and within their theoretical construct, self-humbling/self-abasement response may be thought of as a negative politeness strategy.

The above discussion indicates that Brown and Levinson's politeness formulation seems to regard rejection as a bald-on-record strategy, whereas self-humbling/self-abasement is regarded as negative politeness. But then, in the case of a non-acceptance response containing both rejection and self-abasement elements, such as '*No, I don't think so* (rejection). *I obfuscated my points with extraneous information* (self-abasement)' (a substrategy of '*association*'), how can we account for the seeming contradiction that the addressee first threatens the complimenter's positive face desires and then decides to attend to his/her negative face needs? Such responses may be regarded as off-record strategies that could invite conversational implicatures (Grice, 1975; see below for a detailed discussion). Specifically, by violating Grice's Quality Maxim (making two statements that seemingly contradict each other), the speaker may force the addressee to reach an interpretation that could reconcile the two contradictory propositions. In the above example, the complimentee may signal to the complimenter that '*some concern of mine overrides my concern for saving your face, but I recognize that my doing so is impolite. So after meeting my needs, I attempt to make up for my rudeness by saying something that pays attention to your face desires*'.

### Amendment, combination, face relationship related strategies

As we have seen, in accepting a compliment, the complementee may have to damage his/her own positive face in order to save the complimenter's. This fact may help explain the occurrence of other types of main strategies; the amendment, combination, and face relationship related main strategies can be seen as off-record strategies in that, as mentioned earlier on, there is more than one clear communicative intention that could be attributed to the act of responding to compliments. Put another way, the illocutionary force of these strategies is to some extent implicit and ambiguous so that the speaker cannot be held to have committed him/herself to only one particular intention. Basically, we can regard these three strategies as being performed in an indirect manner. In fact, their indirect use by the complementee violates Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle in some way, thereby inviting the complimenter to draw a conversational implicature. That is, the meaning that the complementee intends to convey may be interpreted in different ways depending on the context; generally, the complimenter is given some hint as to the complementee's true intention. In what follows, the possible conversational implications of these three main strategies are discussed respectively.

### Amendment strategies

#### • *Return and Transfer*<sup>5</sup>

'Return' responses, such as '*You played very well, too*', and 'Transfer' responses like '*I will be glad to help you with yours*' are similar in terms of their conversational implicatures. In employing these substrategies, the complementee seems to imply that s/he agrees with the complimenter and accepts credit for the positive valuation. In addition, by redirecting the compliment back to the complimenter, the recipient appears to suggest that s/he is not that unique, so that the complimenter is worthy of equivalent compliment as well (in cases of 'return'), or is able to achieve the object of the compliment (in cases of 'transfer'). This way, the recipient humbles him/herself by diminishing the complimentary force of the original praise. Also, these kinds of responses may signal that the complementee feels indebted by the compliment, and is obliged to repay the complimenter in some way.

#### • *Downgrade and Upgrade*<sup>5</sup>

But how is a complimenter invited to make inferences about conversational implicatures? Consider a 'downgrade' response like '*Oh, just so-so*', contrasting it with an 'upgrade' response such as '*I always make everything look good*'. While a 'downgrade' substrategy plays down the value of the object praised, thereby suggesting only a partial agreement with the complimenter, an 'upgrade' substrategy, by contrast, enhances such value, thus implying a complete agreement. Also, 'downgrade' utterances signal the complementee's need to avoid self-praise, whereas 'upgrade' utterances strengthen his/her desire to show agreement.

<sup>5</sup> These strategies are the substrategies of the Amendment main strategy. See Appendix for their respective definitions and examples.

In addition, ‘*upgrade*’ responses are typically performed in a joking or playful manner (Herbert, 1989). These responses thus seem to presuppose solidarity and intimacy between the parties: in using an ‘*upgrade*’, the complimentee appears to imply that the relationship with the complimenter is such that the latter will not be offended by the complimentee’s remark. Hence, though these utterances seemingly violate the need to avoid self-praise, their exaggerated and humorous features may offset the impact of self-praise that they literally suggest.

- *Comment*<sup>5</sup>

Next, I will consider the conversational implicatures of ‘*comment*’ responses like ‘*I got it from a friend*’. This kind of responses may indicate to the complimenter that the complimentee agrees with the praiseworthiness of the object of the compliment; yet at the same time, s/he tries to avoid self-praise by shifting the credit from him/herself to some other-than-self referent, such as another person or an object. In fact, this substrategy has been claimed to offer a nice solution to the conflict between the speaker’s support of the prior compliment and his/her sensitivity to self-praise avoidance (e.g., Pomerantz, 1978; Holmes, 1988; Herbert, 1989).

- *Question*<sup>5</sup>

In comparison with other substrategies above, ‘*question*’ responses like ‘*You really think so?*’ seem to invite the complimenter to draw additional conversational implicatures. On the one hand, these utterances certainly could be interpreted as a scenario in which the complimentee shows agreement with the prior compliment but, in order to avoid self-praise, plays down this agreement, using a question, thus suggesting actual surprise at hearing the complimenter consider the object of the compliment praiseworthy. On the other hand, this kind of utterance may imply that the complimentee in fact wants to accept the praise, but pretends to disagree with the complimenter in order to show modesty; alternatively, the complimentee may try to avoid self-praise by not accepting the compliment right away, only agreeing with the complimenter on condition that the latter reassert the praise. Generally speaking, what the complimentee in effect intends to convey by this substrategy is more ambiguous than what was implied by the earlier mentioned strategies.

#### Face relationship related strategy

Compared with amendment utterances, the illocutionary force of responses like ‘*I’m embarrassed*’ is more indirect and ambiguous. Basically, this main strategy does not accept, amend, or reject the compliment given. That is, it does not address the propositional content of the compliment; rather, it deals with the impact of the compliment within the interaction. In addition, by using this kind of metacommunicative utterance, the complimentee essentially goes off record with an FTA by being vague as to what his/her real intention is. Therefore, the complimenter, when taking other contextual clues into consideration, such as the complimentee’s tone and/or facial expressions, may be invited to make conversational implicatures concerning the complimentee’s acceptance, rejection, or amendment of the praise, as against avoidance of signs of acceptance or non-acceptance.

### Combination strategies

The various combination strategies, such as acceptance/non-acceptance responses like *'I'm glad to hear that, but I really think it sucked'* or acceptance/amendment responses like *'Thank you! Yours is excellent, too'*, invite the complimenter to make inferences about why the complimentee is responding with an utterance that bears a definite connotation. Take for example the amendment/non-acceptance response *'It was pure luck! I'm really messed up usually'*. This may suggest that the complimentee first tries to display positive politeness by agreeing with the complimenter, while avoiding self-praise through credit shifting; subsequently, the complimentee may feel that s/he needs to avoid self-praise more clearly or pay more politeness to the complimenter and so will employ the negative politeness strategy of self-denigration.

### No acknowledgment strategy

Failure to respond to a compliment can also, on the face of it, be described as Brown and Levinson's fifth possible strategy for performing an FTA—that of not doing it at all.

To summarize, the above discussion suggests that the various possible types of compliment response can fit well into Brown and Levinson's scheme, their five strategies appearing to be able to account for all the main strategy types outlined above: (i) acceptance responses are *positive politeness* strategies (strategy 2), (ii) non-acceptance responses are either *bald-on-record* strategies (strategy 1 for rejection utterances) or *negative politeness* strategies (strategy 3 for self-humbling/self-abasement utterances), (iii) amendment, combination, and face relationship related responses are *off-record* strategies (strategy 4), and (iv) no acknowledgment responses are *don't-do-the-FTA* strategies (strategy 5). However, the value of such a 'dovetailing' of the two schemata can be questioned (see [Section 3.3](#) below).

#### 3.1.2. Cross-cultural differences

Brown and Levinson's politeness theory certainly leaves room for cross-cultural variation—the issue here is what is considered to be universal and what is considered to be culturally specific. One important feature of their theory is that in order not to have a cultural (i.e., emic) explanation of cross-cultural differences supersede the explanation in terms of universal (i.e., etic) social dimensions, such as power and distance, they do not account for such differences from the perspective of an extrinsic weighting of face desires. In other words, in explaining a given society's a preference for positive politeness, they do not posit a greater desire for positive face satisfaction than for negative face satisfaction in that society. Rather, their model relies on a hypothesis requiring interaction between contextual variables and face needs in a society.

Essentially, the apparatus that Brown and Levinson use to describe cross-cultural variations consists of four basic dimensions:

- (i) The general level of the weightiness of FTAs, as determined by the sum of power, distance, and rating of imposition.
- (ii) The extent to which all acts are FTAs, and the particular kinds of acts that are FTAs in a culture.

- (iii) The cultural composition of the seriousness of FTAs.
- (iv) Different ways in which positive face desires are distributed over an ego's social network (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 244–249).

When it comes to responding to compliments, studies have indicated that there seem to be substantial differences between native Chinese and American English speakers. Specifically, Chinese speakers were generally found to produce non-acceptance responses more often than English speakers did, whereas the latter more often employed acceptance strategies (c.f., Knapp, Hopper, & Bell, 1984; Holmes, 1988; Herbert, 1989, 1990; Chen, 1993; Ye, 1995; Yu, 1999a). Based on Brown and Levinson's above-mentioned four dimensions for illuminating cross-cultural variations, the following four possible corresponding explanations can be posited for the reported differences in compliment response behavior between these two speaker groups:

- (i) In American culture generally, impositions appear to be seen as small, social distance as an easily surmountable boundary to everyday interactions, and relative power as not great. By contrast, Chinese culture, which traditionally honors feudalistic virtues and legitimizes a vertical social class structure, seems to be more or less the opposite of American culture in these respects. As a result, the general level of seriousness of FTAs tends to be low in American culture (especially in the Western U.S.A.), whereas it tends to be high in Chinese culture. In Brown and Levinson's schema, the warmer, friendlier, more back-slapping US culture is seen as one of positive politeness, while the more standoffish culture of China is seen as one of negative politeness. Such a formulation may account for the differences reported in the literature between native speakers of (American) English, using acceptance strategies (i.e., positive politeness) more often than do Chinese speakers, with the latter more often employing self-humbling/self-abasement responses (i.e., negative politeness).
- (ii) In Western culture, certain speech acts tend to be considered FTAs because the asymmetric power relations in conversational dyads often are not recognized; thus, requests or commands are seen as very face-threatening, and particular techniques for redressing potential face damage are highly favored in Western societies. By contrast, in Chinese culture, there appears to be no such lack of recognition of relative power, so that face redress may not be that much of a concern. It thus seems reasonable that native American English speakers use many more face redressive strategies (e.g., acceptance) while Chinese speakers employ more face-damaging utterances (e.g. rejection).
- (iii) (This dimension to some extent overlaps with the previous one). In specific societies, certain contextual variables may override others. In North American culture, for example, the power factor is generally insignificant relative to social distance, whereas in Chinese culture it is not. Thus, as suggested above, face redress may have more far-reaching ramifications in strategy preference for Americans than it has for Chinese speakers. In addition, Brown and



Levinson believe that “cultures may differ in the degree to which wants other than face wants ... are allowed to supersede face wants” (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 249). Accordingly, we may argue that there may be some norms in Chinese society that make rejection expressions less of an FTA than they are in societies like North America, where wants other than face are not considered as legitimate as they are in Chinese culture.

- (iv) In American culture, there seems to be a more even spread of positive face wants across persons; thus, the speaker usually tends to perform exaggerated positive politeness in certain respects. By contrast, there is no such even spread in Chinese society; thus it appears to be rare for the Chinese people to attend excessively to positive face desires when responding to compliments. This argument would also account for the differences in the use of acceptance strategies between American English and Chinese speakers.

### 3.2. *Chinese face re-examined*

In the preceding, I have attempted to fit the differences in compliment response behavior between speakers of American English and Chinese into Brown and Levinson’s politeness framework. It seemed at first glance that their five strategies were indeed available to these two speaker groups as rational means of dealing with the face concerns of others, and that cross-cultural variations could be accounted for satisfactorily in terms of the interaction of contextual factors with face desires; this, again, would appear to lend strong support to Brown and Levinson’s universalistic formulations regarding both the concept of face itself and speakers’ rational action with regard to, and mutual knowledge of, face. Nevertheless, since speech act theory has long been criticized for its possible ethnocentric prejudice (e.g., Wierzbicka, 1991), we cannot help wondering if the above explanations really represent a true picture of native Chinese speakers’ compliment response behavior, even if such accounts seem to illustrate English speakers’ behavior well.

To address this question, we need to go back to the notion of face, the indispensable premise upon which Brown and Levinson construct their universal model and cross-cultural applications. Even though they argue that the core contents of face-positive face and negative face desires—are manifested across languages and cultures, they also acknowledge that these two kinds of wants are subject to cultural specifications of many sorts, such as “what kinds of acts threaten face” (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 13) and “what sorts of persons have special rights to face protection”. Therefore, the fact that for Americans, the act of inviting is generally seen as threatening to the addressee’s negative face (Brown & Levinson, 1978, 1987), while this is not the case for Chinese (Gu, 1990; Mao, 1994) does not appear to undermine the validity of Brown and Levinson’s universal formulations. If, however, the Chinese concept of face cannot be subsumed under Brown and Levinson’s notions of positive and negative face, their claims to universality may end up being greatly challenged. In fact, as suggested earlier on, certain particularities in the Chinese conceptualizations of face do indeed pose a serious problem for Brown and Levinson’s universal model.

### 3.2.1. ‘面子 miànzi’

Here, let us take a closer look at these particularities. The Chinese concept of face consists of two distinct components—‘面子 *miànzi*’ and ‘臉 *liǎn*’; it encodes respectable and reputable images that the individual can earn for him/herself when interacting with others in a given community (Ho, 1975). ‘面子 *miànzi*’ refers to an individual’s desire to achieve public recognition of his/her reputation or prestige, while ‘臉 *liǎn*’ stands for respect of the group for the individual who can meet both social and an internalized standards of moral behavior (Hu, 1944; Mao, 1994). In practice, these two aspects of Chinese face have very little to do with an individual’s need for unhindered freedom of action or attention (cf. Brown and Levinson’s definition of negative face). While this kind of face desire may be involved in the Chinese interactional context, when an individual tailors his/her behavior to ‘面子 *miànzi*’ (i.e., in seeking for, or giving others, public acknowledgment, one may willingly or unwillingly have one’s own or others’ freedom impeded), such involvement does not by itself support Brown and Levinson’s model (Mao, 1994). Even though in their theory, negative face desires appear to be a driving force behind some of the speaker’s behavior (e.g., when using conventionally indirect strategies to make requests), it is at best a ‘by-product’ of ‘面子 *miànzi*’ in Chinese discursual activities.

In other words, the apparent role played by negative face in the Chinese case is due to a desire for ‘面子 *miànzi*’; it is the latter that motivates the Chinese people in their interactional behavior. Here, the act of inviting can again be taken as an example. Under Chinese sociocultural norms,<sup>6</sup> the invitee usually tries not to accept a given invitation immediately, but instead employs some formulaic rejection expressions; the inviter is generally able to tell from such responses that the invitee’s declining is only ritual. Thus, the inviter will continue the inviting several times even though the addressee may have already explicitly declined. That is to say, the invitee’s utterances actually give the inviter a clue telling him/her to persist in the act of inviting and signaling that the invitee does not have any desire to be left alone. Thus, while it appears that the addressee’s needs to act unimpededly are impaired in this case, his/her negative face is in effect not threatened. Nevertheless, this kind of Chinese inviting act is surely very face-threatening under Brown and Levinson’s construct of face. By contrast, the Chinese people generally believe that this act of the speaker’s is not imposing at all, and that the way s/he performs it indicates that the speaker is intrinsically polite because his/her persistence in trying to obtain the addressee’s acceptance is considered strong evidence of sincerity (Gu, 1990).

<sup>6</sup> For Chinese invitational activity, it has been maintained that the inviter and the invitee are customarily expected to affirm and strengthen a sense of harmony and togetherness through appropriate verbal exchanges, i.e., before an invitation is accepted, generally multiple turns of not accepting from the invitee and of inviting from the inviter are expected (Gu, 1990; Mao, 1994). Hence, accepting a given invitation right away could be regarded as having accepted it too lightly. Such an act can in effect suggest that the invitee lacks a sense of humbleness and has no clear and present intention to seek public acknowledgment, thereby damaging his/her own ‘面子 *miànzi*’. Moreover, an immediate acceptance signals that the invitee denies the inviter’s chance to obtain respect and reputation through performing the socially expected rite of repeated invitation. As a result, the inviter’s ‘面子 *miànzi*’ is also jeopardized. In brief, in a Chinese sociocultural context, generally accepting an invitation too quickly may have both interactants’ ‘面子 *miànzi*’ damaged.

In the above instance, for a Chinese, an individual's face is threatened only when s/he fails to abide by the cultural norms, in this case telling the inviter to keep inviting several times, following the invitee's initial rejection, and not to accept a rejection by the invitee right away. Suppose the latter did indeed happen, then the speaker would not be able to achieve public recognition of his/her reputation or prestige, thus having his/her '面子 *miànzi*' damaged. Put another way, the seeming threat to Brown and Levinson's negative face is due by the inviter's and invitee's needs to maintain '面子 *miànzi*'; neither interactant is motivated by any concerns about negative face desires.

This example clearly shows that cross-cultural variation is a complex issue. It appears at first glance that the fact that for the Chinese, the act of inviting is not a threat to the invitee's negative face does not invalidate Brown and Levinson's universal theory, for they do recognize that the nature of FTAs is subject to cultural elaboration. However, a deeper analysis of one of the constituents of Chinese face, '面子 *miànzi*', shows that this fact indeed challenges their universality claim of face, because the Chinese inviting act cannot be accounted for in a satisfactory manner within their framework. We have seen from the above discussion that the speaker's negative face desires are usually negligible or even irrelevant in Chinese sociocultural contexts, where basically to be respected means to be included as a reputable member of a given community, rather than being left alone (Mao, 1994). Therefore, though it is indeed true, as Brown and Levinson claim, that the same underlying norm could produce observed differences, we cannot ignore the fact that it is equally true that observed similarity may result from different underlying norms. The Chinese act of inviting discussed above is a clear case in point. In addition, compliment responses, which are the focus of this paper, also present irrefutable evidence against Brown and Levinson's universalizing formulations of face, something which will be expounded in greater detail below, [Section 3.3](#).

Accordingly, the universality of negative face want does not appear to be substantiated, and even less so its mutual knowledge. In addition, as negative face plays a minor role in the Chinese conception of face, Brown and Levinson's thesis that Chinese society, due to its generally higher weighting of FTAs, is a negative politeness culture seems to be problematic. As we have seen, face, in one of its constitutive aspects, plays a crucial role in the cross-cultural validation of Brown and Levinson's claims. Next, the other aspect of Chinese face, '脸 *liǎn*', will be discussed to see whether it, too, challenges their universalistic ground.

### 3.2.2. '脸 *liǎn*'

Unlike '面子 *miànzi*', which obviously stands apart from negative face, '脸 *liǎn*' appears to bear some resemblance to positive face. Generally, just like positive face, '脸 *liǎn*' connotes a person's desire to be approved of, or liked by others. There is, however, a conspicuous difference between the two: while '脸 *liǎn*' encodes a moral overtone regarding the speaker's everyday behavior, positive face does not. In other words, '脸 *liǎn*' "embodies the 'imprimatur' of the society as a whole rather than the 'goodwill' of another individual" (Mao, 1994: 462); hence it seems to be more socially situated than positive face, something which makes its realization very

different from that of positive face. For the Chinese, ‘臉 *liǎn*’ is perceived as an image that is ‘on loan’ to them by society, whereas for Brown and Levinson, positive face appears to be regarded as an inalienable desire of an individual. Notwithstanding this difference, the desire to be liked or approved of plays an important role in Chinese spoken interactions and thus the similarity between ‘臉 *liǎn*’ and positive face may lend support to Brown and Levinson’s postulate of the universality of positive face desires. And they may account for the distinctive feature of ‘臉 *liǎn*’ by simply pointing out that the content of face is culturally specific and subject to cultural elaboration.

Generally, the culture-specific connotations of Chinese face can be traced back to the most influential school of thought in the Chinese intellectual tradition, Confucianism. This school basically embraces the idea that members of a given community should try their best to subordinate themselves to the group or the society at large in order to cultivate a sense of homogeneity. Thus, an individual is presumed to associate him/herself with others, rather than to have his/her personal desires satisfied. Under this circumstance, Western notions such as ‘freedom’ and ‘individual’<sup>7</sup> are usually greatly de-emphasized or even suppressed. In essence, it is this kind of presumption that underlies the connotative meanings of the Chinese concept of face, which involve the respectable and reputable images that a person can claim for him/herself from the community to which s/he belongs (Ho, 1975; Mao, 1994).

### 3.3. *The universality claim revised*

The above discussion of the Chinese concept of face suggests that Brown and Levinson’s universalistic formulations are problematic in some respects. In fact, many recent studies focusing on non-English-speaking cultures have contested their claims (e.g., for Japanese: Hill, et al., 1986; Matsumoto, 1988, 1989; Ide, 1989; for Chinese: Gu, 1990; Mao, 1994; for Polish: Wierzbicka, 1991; for Igbo: Nwoye, 1992; for Greek and German: Pavlidou, 1994). In particular, studies of Chinese (e.g., Gu, 1990) and Japanese (e.g., Hill, et al., 1986; Matsumoto, 1988, 1989) face conceptions have argued that negative face desires, which attend to the interlocutor’s territorial concerns for privacy and autonomy, derive directly from the high value placed on individualism in Western culture, and that such face needs seem to be irrelevant or negligible in societies such as the Chinese and Japanese with their collective orientation, and that therefore face needs cannot account for politeness behavior in those societies. Such studies, by providing strong cross-cultural evidence, raise concerns about, or even objections to, the claimed universality of Brown and Levinson’s face dualism and its constituent elements (O’Driscoll, 1996: 3).

The growing concerns about the culturally specific inapplicability of Brown and Levinson’s model have given rise to the suggestion that their face theory actually embodies needs that are typical of English-speaking cultures, and that therefore, if it is taken as the basis for a universal theory of politeness, is likely to run the risk of

<sup>7</sup> In fact, these notions did not have any Chinese equivalents before recently, when terms were invented for their usage (Mao, 1994).

ethnocentricity (Watts, Ide, & Ehlich, 1992). Furthermore, it has been proposed that as far as future comparative, empirical politeness research is concerned, a helpful starting assumption is to try to regard Brown and Levinson's theory as one primarily anchored within the Western cultural context (Janney & Arndt, 1993). And even supposing that Brown and Levinson's claimed universality really is cross-culturally valid, still the objections that have been raised in other research need to be accommodated. O'Driscoll's (1996) study is one attempt in this direction. In defending the pan-cultural validity of Brown and Levinson's model, he argues that the etiological basis and nature of their positive-negative face distinction have to be elaborated on and revised. Moreover, he contends that we should adopt an approach that is the opposite of the empirical, an approach centering on a theoretically based notion that he believes various societies and cultures will not invest with varying connotations.<sup>8</sup>

Basically, O'Driscoll tries to uphold his universality claims by appealing to the existential characteristics of the human condition, because "since cultures are so manifestly divergent, there is a limit to the value of searching for universals by piecemeal identification of recurring patterns" (p. 5). He therefore redefines the constituents of positive and negative face as inherent in the human condition, such that they do not vary from one culture to another. In his theoretical construct, Brown and Levinson's positive face is regarded as an individual's need for some symbolic recognition of the desire for "association/belonging/merging" (p. 10) by others, while negative face is thought of as one's need for some symbolic recognition of the desire for "disassociation/independence/individuation" by others. In addition, he purports that there exists a culturally specific face that is determined on a cross-cultural level. With these three reflexes of face, he believes that all the objections to Brown and Levinson's universal theses can be accommodated.

Reconsider, for example, the Chinese act of inviting. To O'Driscoll, the Chinese people, like all human beings, certainly have positive and negative face desires, as defined above. As for culturally specific face, it is realized through the act of insisting. Thus, the Chinese inviting implies that the bond between culturally specific face and positive face needs is much more important than any personal negative face desires in other contexts. Though this line of argument seems to offer a likely explanation for the Chinese inviting act, whether or not O'Driscoll's revised version of Brown and Levinson's formulations is indeed universally valid is open to discussion. It goes without saying that before any conclusions can be drawn, many more cross-cultural data need to be examined carefully. However, no matter what conclusions are reached in future studies, the fact that O'Driscoll actually proposes a culturally specific face to fit his claimed universally valid framework indicates how vital a role culture plays in politeness research.

The above discussion of the two aspects of Chinese face, '面子 *miànzi*' and '臉 *liǎn*', has not really touched on the issue of Chinese politeness behavior. In the following,

<sup>8</sup> A detailed discussion of O'Driscoll's theoretical framework, upholding Brown and Levinson's universal theses, is beyond the scope and focus of the present study. The brief discussion here purports to illustrate the critical importance of culture-specificity in politeness research.

the relationship between these two aspects of face and politeness will be explored in more detail. Basically, to be polite in Chinese spoken interactions is to know how to pay attention to each other's '面子 *miànzi*' and '臉 *liǎn*',<sup>9</sup> and to "enact speech acts appropriate to and worthy of such an image" (Mao, 1994: 463). Therefore, an individual will be thought of as being polite if his/her speech act performance demonstrates his/her knowledge of '面子 *miànzi*' and '臉 *liǎn*'. The embodiment of these two kinds of face desires in politeness behavior is related to the Chinese tradition of feudal hierarchy and order: it can be characterized by a tendency to denigrate oneself as a way to show respect for others (Gu, 1990; Mao, 1994).

As far as compliment responses are concerned, this tendency appears to be substantiated by a norm of modesty (Yang, 1987; Chen, 1993). Under this norm, the complimenter usually does not expect an agreement from the complementee, but this does not mean that the Chinese people do not think positively of themselves. By not accepting the compliment given, they project humility. Behaving modestly is important for Chinese, because modesty is one of the most critical constituents of their self-image. Accordingly, in their eyes, lowering themselves helps to maintain or even enhance their image, and more importantly, doing so attends to others' face needs and in turn protects their own, so that their behavior may be regarded as polite (Gu, 1990; Mao, 1994; Pan, 1995; Gao, 1996). In fact, the norm of modesty will more often than not make the Chinese people withhold expressions of delight or gratitude, even when they do feel pleased at receiving a compliment (Yang, 1987). Seen in this light, it seems very normal for a Chinese hostess to respond to the guest's compliments on her cooking by saying something like 'No! I'm a lousy cook. The food is really no good at all. There is nothing to eat'.

By contrast, the norm for Americans appears to be to accept compliments. This is amply evidenced in socialization advice to children and in etiquette books (Herbert, 1990). By agreeing with the complimenter, the complementee not only maintains the former's face, but also enhances his/her own. Therefore, Americans, when complimented, frequently agree with the complimenter or at least avoid showing disagreement, even when they do disagree with the speaker (Leech, 1983; Wolfson, 1989; Chen, 1993). Since as far as compliment responses are concerned, the American norm is to accept the compliment given, the question arises how to account for the types of responses (other than acceptance) corresponding to the five main strategies discussed above. While Brown and Levinson's doing-the-FTA strategies appear to provide a plausible explanation for all the main responses used by native English speakers, a closer look at their formulations indicates that the seemingly perfect fit is in fact problematic in at least the following aspects:

First, concerning the no-acknowledgment strategy, Brown and Levinson consider compliment responses as threatening the speaker's positive and/or negative face desires; thus, failure to respond is accounted for by the fifth of the super-strategies they propose for doing the FTA, viz., the complementee may choose not to do the

<sup>9</sup> In addition to '面子 *miànzi*' and '臉 *liǎn*', there are other notions and concepts that underlie or are related to Chinese politeness. For example, Gu (1990) suggests that Chinese politeness includes attitudinal warmth and refinement.

FTA at all. However, in reality, though the complimentee may prevent his/her positive and/or negative face from being damaged by choosing not to do the FTA, this act of his/hers can still be deemed to be an FTA, as the complimenter's positive face is indeed threatened (or even damaged) by the fact that his/her compliment is completely ignored. Since for the complimentee (who had tried to avoid doing an FTA in the first place), this ensuing FTA happens accidentally, maybe no-acknowledgment strategies can be regarded as performed in such an indirect manner as to violate Gricean norms and invite conversational implicatures for the addressee.

Obviously, the possible face-threatening and/or-damaging effect of the no-acknowledgment strategy calls into question Brown and Levinson's claim about a ranking order of strategies: the higher the number of a given strategy, the more polite the strategy (no-acknowledgment is the highest-numbered strategy, 5). Their claim is further called into question by the discussion earlier on in which one type of non-acceptance response—self-humbling/self-abasement (strategy 3: negative politeness)—is found to be more polite than is acceptance (strategy 2: positive politeness), while another type, rejection (strategy 1: baldly without redress) is less polite.

Second, as far as self-humbling/self-abasement responses are concerned, Brown and Levinson seem to accept unequivocally that this type of utterances instantiates negative politeness, as they signal deference, which in turn signals negative politeness. In fact, either premise appears problematic under scrutiny. On the one hand, for deference to be instantiated within self-humbling/self-abasement responses, such responses would have to be explicit (e.g. *'It wasn't nearly as good as yours'*), so that they can confirm the addressee's superior status. However, one might just as well argue that rather than convey that alter is of higher status than ego, the complimentee's negative comments about him/herself imply the opposite, inasmuch as s/he considers his/her own judgment to be superior to that of the complimenter, thus threatening or even damaging the latter's face wants. By contrast, an implicit response like *'Well, actually, it was just pure luck'* does not seem to indicate anything about relative status at all. Thus it seems somewhat far-fetched to claim that such implicit utterances show the complimentee's concern for the complimenter's desire to act unimpeded (i.e., negative politeness). One might just as well argue that this kind of responses actually demonstrate the speaker's concern for the complimenter's face wants as not to be dismissed out-of-hand (i.e., positive politeness).

On the other hand, even though (as Brown and Levinson maintain) deference can instantiate negative politeness, it can also instantiate positive politeness, namely when given to certain aspects of alter's face, "such as his/her personality, and/or importance to ego and the community at large" (O'Driscoll, 1996: 25). Under these circumstances, the speaker recognizes and respects the positive face wants of the addressee by saying or implying how important and valuable the latter is, thus placing special emphasis on the ties between them (O'Driscoll, 1996). Therefore, while an explicit self-humbling/self-abasement response like *'It wasn't nearly as good as yours'* is undoubtedly an on-record non-acceptance with redressive action (it obviously softens the blow of a bald rejection by giving a reason), instead of claiming that this response recognizes the complimenter's higher status and thus his/her

desires of relative immunity from imposition (i.e., negative politeness), one might just as well say that it implies the importance and value of the complimenter in the eyes of the complementee, so that the latter abases him/herself to show deference (i.e., positive politeness).

The above discussion points to a clear conclusion: not all matters of face and politeness can be dealt with in terms of a simple positive/negative distinction, and accordingly, many arguments based upon such a clear-cut positive/negative distinction (as proposed by Brown and Levinson) may in the end turn out to be rather problematic. Take Brown and Levinson's suggestion that certain cross-cultural differences (such as the greater use of acceptance among Americans vs. of non-acceptance among Chinese) can be usefully explained in terms of positive versus negative politeness (Americans live in a positive politeness culture, Chinese in a negative politeness culture). Now, since some non-acceptance responses actually are oriented toward positive politeness (such as the above example '*Well, actually, it was just pure luck*'), a simple positive versus negative account must fail; similarly, the Chinese examples clearly show the inapplicability of Brown and Levinson's formulations.

Chinese non-acceptance responses are a case in point. As mentioned above, the Chinese norm is to display modesty, a culturally held value about what constitutes a good face and being polite. Since Brown and Levinson's theory does not really explain Chinese politeness behavior, the question is how to account for this type of utterances. Obviously, Chinese non-acceptance utterances reflect this cultural norm of modesty. By rejecting the compliment given and/or humbling/abasing themselves, complementees verbally demonstrate their knowledge of Chinese face, thereby achieving public acknowledgment of their reputation or prestige and maintaining their face. More importantly, they are able to give the complimenter face, and this behavior will in turn be considered polite. In other words, because the value of modesty is salient in Chinese society at large, the Chinese complimenter feels that his/her face is enhanced as s/he recognizes that the complementee has been polite to him/her. A Westerner, however, is likely to feel rebuffed and may suffer some face damage in that, by appealing to a value such as honesty, s/he might infer that his/her opinion is not important to the complementee.

Thus, we can see that for the Chinese, this type of response in fact has nothing to do with Brown and Levinson's claimed bald-on-record and/or negative politeness strategies. An interesting question then arises as to whether this will hold true for other types of Chinese compliment responses as well. As to utterances involving implicit agreement or non-acceptance (e.g., many of the amendment strategies like '*transfer*', '*downgrade*', and combination strategies), these, too, can to some extent be explained by the modesty norm: when employing these responses, complementees often humble or abase themselves by diminishing the complimentary force of the praise originally directed to them. In respect to no acknowledgment and face relationship related responses, both main strategies may be explainable based upon Brown and Levinson's arguments concerning the off-record strategies that could invite the complimenter to make conversational implicatures.

However, utterances that involve direct acceptance or agreement (e.g., acceptance strategies and some of the amendment responses like '*upgrade*', and combination



strategies) appear to pose a serious problem to the culture norm explanation. Face is an individual trait, and there are many other variables, such as ‘gender’, ‘status’, and ‘distance’ that may affect speech act behavior; hence it seems very unlikely that we will be able to account for all speakers’ politeness performance entirely from the perspective of cultural conditioning. We certainly can expect to find individuals within the same culture oftentimes making very different types of responses; not surprisingly, acceptance responses occur in a modesty norm society like Taiwan, while non-acceptance utterances occur in an acceptance norm culture such as the U.S.

An examination of the various types of Chinese compliment responses clearly shows that they in general have very little to do with positive or negative face. Accordingly, the strong cross-cultural evidence that they provide points to the inapplicability of Brown and Levinson’s argument as to how the addressee’s positive and/or negative face wants may be directly damaged when responding to compliments. Even O’Driscoll’s revised universality claim (which maintains a culturally specific face) appears to apply to cultures, not to situations. As the discussion of compliment responses in the present study has demonstrated, there may exist situations and speech acts for which concerns relating to the spectrum of positive and negative face wants are of only incidental significance.

Another widely discussed framework for cross-cultural comparison of politeness realization strategies is Leech’s (1983) Politeness Principle. Leech’s theory provides us with some helpful insights for accounting for the different preferences for compliment response strategies between native Chinese and English speakers. Simply put, he constructs a politeness behavior model containing the six maxims of tact, generosity, approbation, modesty, agreement, and sympathy, and suggests that cross-cultural variations are caused by the relative precedence given to one of these maxims. Following Leech, we may argue that American conventions do not make it favorable to disagree with compliments made by others to oneself. This would indicate that in parts of the English-speaking world, the maxim of agreement takes precedence over the maxim of modesty. By contrast, Chinese mores make it favorable to disagree, which suggests that Chinese society gives precedence to the maxim of modesty, rather than to that of agreement. With respect to the realizations of the other types of main response strategies, Leech suggests that these strategies may be seen, to different degrees, as compromises between the needs to adhere to the maxim of modesty vs. that of agreement.

#### **4. Conclusions and implications**

As we have seen in the preceding, the compliment response behaviors of native Chinese and American English speakers appear, at first sight, to illustrate the politeness strategies of Brown and Levinson’s universal model. However, the initially manifested support for their claims to universality, i.e., the fact all the model’s main strategies could be observed in both Chinese and English, and explained as fitting in with their theory, represented only the first layer of the analysis. At a deeper level, due to the fact that the motivations for Chinese politeness behavior are in

reality different from those purported by Brown and Levinson, we have found clear evidence contradicting this fit.

Brown and Levinson's universal formulations are primarily based upon the problematic premise that the constituents of face are universal. Empirically, however, there have been problems with their universality claims when applied to speech act behavior across languages and cultures and it has been suggested that these claims are not warranted by the theoretical construct (e.g., Blum-Kulka, 1989; Watts, Ide, & Ehlich, 1992). For example, Wierzbicka (1991) argues that most pragmatic theories of universality are in fact biased by the Anglo-Saxon convention "which places special emphasis on the rights and on the autonomy of every individual, which abhors interference in other people's affairs (*It's none of my business*), which is tolerant of individual idiosyncrasies and peculiarities, which respects everyone's privacy" (p. 30). Such theories therefore do not work when applied to many other societies. In this kind of cultural belief, negative face desires play an indispensable role in speech act behavior: ignoring others' negative face conflicts with speakers' underlying cultural values and may be seen as inappropriate or impolite (Brown & Levinson, 1978, 1987; Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989).

In contrast, as noted before, the Chinese sociocultural context embraces a tradition according to which individuals should subordinate themselves to the group or the community, thereby downplaying the importance of self or ego (e.g., Oliver, 1971; Tu, 1985; Mao, 1994). As a consequence, there has long been a high value placed on communal needs over individual preferences. In terms of Brown and Levinson's definitions of positive and negative face, Chinese sociocultural norms actually place much greater emphasis on positive politeness (or solidarity politeness, in Scollon & Scollon's terminology, 1983), i.e., the desire for social approval, than on negative politeness, i.e., the desire to act unimpededly. As far as responding to compliments is concerned, the present study has shown that whereas negative politeness plays an important role in the realization of politeness strategies for native English speakers, the Chinese regard this type of face desires as irrelevant to politeness. The examination of compliment responses has provided strong support for the claim that the Chinese tend to deem negative face desires as negligible or irrelevant to their politeness behavior. Furthermore, the present study also indicates that when applying a given universal framework to some society, it is indeed necessary not only to have knowledge of that society's cultural conventions (in order to detect its constituents of face), but also to consider the framework's general applicability to the situations and their accompanying speech acts.

To summarize, besides expressing broad, general accordance with the universality claims, the present study in particular strongly supports Wierzbicka's (1991) argument that "different cultures find expression in different systems of speech acts, and that different speech acts become entrenched, and, to some extent, codified in different languages" (p. 26). Hence, though my study does indicate that there are some general shared concepts and dimensions of politeness across native Chinese and American English speakers, the different preferences for the strategies used show the importance of a culture for its speakers' speech act performance, the differences having to do with a culture's ethos and its own specific way of speaking (Hymes,

1974). Indeed, speakers of a given culture have been shown to have mutually shared expectations about what the appropriate behavior and its social meanings are in different contexts (Blum-Kulka, 1987; Yu, 1999b). For compliment responses, the practice in American culture, which places special emphasis on agreement in discursual activities, appears to be for the speaker to respond to compliments with acceptance forms. By contrast, the practice in Chinese society, which attaches a high value to relative power and modesty in spoken interactions, seems to be that the speaker will respond to compliments with non-acceptance forms. In addition, we can now see how cultural norms and social factors may intervene in determining the distinctive patterns of compliment response behavior for a given speech community. It thus goes without saying that the important role sociocultural norms play should never be treated lightly when exploring the cross-cultural evidence for evaluating the universality of speech act performance.

## Appendix. Compliment Response Strategies

**(1) Acceptance strategies:** Utterances that recognize the status of a preceding remark as a compliment. Generally, the following substrategies are regarded as subsumed under the main Acceptance strategy:

- *Appreciation token:* Utterances that recognize the status of a preceding remark as a compliment without being semantically fitted to the specifics of that praise. Generally, they are words showing gratitude, such as ‘*Thank you*’. Appreciation token can also be responses like smiles or nods. For example:  
English: Thank you!
- *Agreement:* Utterances that agree with the complimentary force of the speaker by a remark semantically fitted to the compliment. For example:  
English: Yeah, I think it went well, too.
- *Pleasure:* Utterances that show the complementee is pleased. For example:  
English: I’m glad you liked it.
- *Association:* Utterances that include more than one of the ‘*Acceptance*’ sub-strategies above. For example:  
English: Thank you! I’m glad you liked it. (*Appreciation Token + Pleasure*)

**(2) Amendment strategies:** Recognizing the status of a preceding remark as a compliment, the speaker tries to amend its complimentary force. Generally, the following substrategies are regarded as subsumed under the main Amendment strategy:

- *Return:* Utterances that reciprocate the act of complimenting by offering praise to the complimenter. For example:

Chinese: Nǐ yě dǎ de	bùcuò
you too play (complex stative construction)	not bad
(你也打得不錯. You play very well, too.)	

- *Downgrade*: Utterances that scale down the complimentary force of the praise. For example:

Chinese: Haí guò de qù la.  
 still pass complex stative construction) go (expletive)  
 (還過得去啦. Just so-so.)

- *Upgrade*: Utterances that increase the force of the compliment. For example:  
 English: Yeah, I really killed you today, eh?
- *Question*: Utterances that question the sincerity or appropriateness of the compliment. For example:

Chinese: Shì ma? Nǐ zhēnde juéde wǒ dǎ  
 is (question mark) you really think I play  
 de bùcuò?  
 (complex stative construction) not bad  
 (是嗎? 你真覺得我打得不錯? Is that so? Do you really think that I played  
 very well?)

- *Comment*: Responses that while accepting the force of a given compliment, do not accept credit for the accomplishment or attitude that is praised. Rather, the speaker depersonalizes the force of the compliment. For example:  
 English: I put a lot of work into it last night.
- *Transfer*: Utterances that switch the force or the focus of the compliment back to the complimenter. For example:

Chinese: Laǒshī yaòshì juéde haí kěyǐ de  
 sir if think passably okay (nominalizer)  
 huà, qǐng duō chī yìdiǎn.  
 speech please more eat a little  
 (老師要是覺得還可以的話, 請多吃一點. Sir, if you think it is okay,  
 please have some more.)

- *Association*: Utterances that include two or more of the ‘Amendment’ sub-strategies above. For example:  
 English: It’s only O.K. I think yours is pretty good. (*Downgrade* + *Return*)

Chinese: Mǎmǎhūhū la! Shì nín bù xǎnqì.  
 so-so (phrase-final particle) is you no reject  
 (馬馬虎虎啦! 是您不嫌棄. Just so-so! You’re being too kind!)  
 (*Question* + *Comment*)

**(3) Non-acceptance strategies:** Utterances that deny, question, or joke about the content of the compliment or avoid responding directly to the praise. Generally, the following substrategies are regarded as subsumed under the main Non-acceptance strategy:

- *Disagreement:* Utterances that disagree with the assertion of the compliment, or responses showing that the compliment is undue or overdone. For example:

Chinese: Méiyǒu la.  
no (phrase-final particle)  
(沒有啦! No.)

- *Qualification:* Utterances that do not accept the full complimentary force of a given compliment by questioning the quality that is praised. For example:  
English: Well, actually I think it sort of dragged out.
- *Diverge:* Utterances that question the force of the compliment by suggesting other intended acts. For example:

Chinese: Bié nào le.  
stop make scene (phrase-final particle)  
(別鬧了. Stop making fun of me.)

- *Association:* Utterances that include more than one of the ‘Non-acceptance’ substrategies above. For example:  
English: I don’t think so. You’ve got to be joking.  
(*Disagreement* + *Diverge*)

Chinese: Nǎ yǒu! Wǒ dǎ de bù  
where have I play (complex stative construction) not  
haǒ. Méiyǒu nǐ dǎ de haǒ.  
good. no you play (complex stative construction) good  
(哪有! 我打得不好. 沒有你打得好. No. I don’t play well. It’s not as good  
as yours.) (*Disagreement* + *Qualification*)

**(4) Face relationship related response strategies:** Utterances that do not appear to accept, amend, or reject the compliment given. In essence, this kind of metacommunicative response does not address the propositional content of the compliment; rather, it deals with the occurrence of the compliment within the interaction. For example:

Chinese: Bùhaoyìsi.  
embarrassed  
(不好意思. I’m embarrassed)

**(5) Combination strategies:** The case in which the addressee's responses combine two or more of the four main strategies described above. For example:

English: Thank you! Did you really think it's good?

(*Acceptance* [Appreciation Token] + *Amendment* [Question])

Chinese: Méiyǒu                      la.                      Wǒ      xiǎng   wǒ   jīntiān  
                  no                      (phrase-final particle) I                      think I                      today  
                  yùnqì      hǎo  
                  luck      good  
                  (沒有啦! 我想我今天運氣好. No, I think I'm lucky today.)  
                  (*Non-Acceptance* [Disagreement] + *Amendment* [Transfer])<sup>10</sup>

**(6) No acknowledgment:** The case in which the speaker chooses not to respond to the compliment bestowed upon him/herself.

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<sup>10</sup> As defined, the 'Combination' main strategy refers to the situation where more than one *main* strategy, e.g., *Acceptance*, *Amendment*, *Non-acceptance*, *Face Relationship*, is produced in a single compliment response sequence. That is to say, only an utterance that combines more than one *main* strategy will be coded as 'Combination'. By contrast, in situations where two or more of the substrategies of a certain main strategy are employed at the same time in a given compliment response, this response, as defined above, is coded as the 'Association' substrategy that belongs to that specific main strategy. For example, 'Thank you! Do I really look that great?' (*Acceptance* [Appreciation Token] + *Amendment* [Question]) is coded as a *Combination* main strategy, while 'Thank you! I'm glad you enjoyed it' (*Acceptance* [Appreciation Token + Pleasure]), as an *Association* substrategy that is subsumed under the *Acceptance* main strategy.

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