A Pragmatic Analysis of the Speech Acts of Requesting in Chapter 45, *Dream of the Red Chamber*

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**Abstract.** In social activities, people must weigh and make efforts to balance the positive and negative faces. This paper aims to analyze the dialogues in Chapter 45, *Dream of the Red Chamber* in terms of the manifestation of positive and negative faces in the light of the Speech Acts of Requesting in Pragmatics. In details, Tanchun’s and Li Wan’s ways of request and Wang Xifeng’s answers are described and analyzed. Consequently, it may give an indication or suggestion of how Speech Acts of Requesting in Pragmatics applied in the daily life.

**Introduction**

Philosophers Brown and Levinson (1987: 23) asserted in the Face Theory that, generally speaking, “humans have two desires in social relations: negative face—i.e., the desire for the freedom of action and freedom from imposition; and positive face—i.e., the desire to be accepted and praised by others”. These two desires of face are hard to reach consistency, since a man who cares too much about his personal freedom of action may possibly impose his wants or desires to another person by face-threatening-acts (FTA), and consequently make himself less accepted by that person and loss his positive face; and a man who cares too much about other people’s acceptance and expects for their recognition and praise may likely cause himself to be suppressed and restrained by them and therefore loss his negative fact. According to Brown and Levinson (1987: 25), the reason that “politeness is redessive action is because some communicative acts (e.g. request,compliment, invitation, etc.) are considered to be intrinsically face-threatening acts (FTA)” . Maintenance of positive and negative face entails the cooperation between both parties to the communication, because the social politeness system urges people to behave following the principle of non-aggression to the other party to a communication in normal circumstances. The following part is going to manifest the two faces theory through the detailed communication analysis of Chapter 45, *Dream of the Red Chamber*. Then how is the Speech Acts of Requesting in Face Theory applied in literature as well as in the daily life could be glimpsed in a way or another.

**Analysis**

**To Begin with, The Conversation between Tanchun and Wang Xifeng is Analyzed as Follows**

“We have two requests, one is mine and the other Sister Four’s, with some remarks by Lady Jia.” Tanchun smiled. Here, a bald-on-record strategy was publicly implemented without any redressive action. In the theory of Brown and Levinson (1987: 57), Bald on-record strategy does not “attempt to minimize the threat to the hearer’s face”, although there are ways that bald on-record politeness can be used in trying to “minimize face-threatening acts implicitly, such as giving advice in a non-manipulative way”.

According to Brown and Levinson (1987: 59), “face-threatening act (FTA) is the act that inherently damages the face of the speaker by acting against the wants and desires of the other”, since Face is the public self image that every adult tries to project. In addition, there are two faces which are mentioned before: Positive Faces and Negative Faces. The former is “the want of every member that his or her
wants be desirable to at least some others”, and it is also called “self-esteem” (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 59); The latter is “the want of every capable adult that his or her actions be unimpeded by others. In another word, it is freedom to act” (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 59). Often using such a strategy will “shock or embarrass the addressee”, and so this strategy is most often utilized in situations where “the speaker has a close relationship with the listener, such as family or close friends”. In this case, Tanchun’s two requests put straightforwardly and accentuated with Lady Jia’s influence directly threatened Wang Xifeng’s negative face, since a request will certainly have Wang imposed upon and impair her freedom from imposition, namely the negative face. Such a request strategy should only be employed between good or even intimate friends to prevent their harmony from injury, which is called solidarity politeness.

-“What’s wrong? You seem so serious.” said Wang Xifeng with a smile on her face. Here Wang raised the question directly without hesitation, reflecting her maintaining her capable image in front of people and the complacence for her positive face being recognized.

-“We started a poetry society, but the first gathering was a failure. People considered too much friendship and put the gathering into a mess. I want to invite you to maintain the order there impartially and incorruptibly as a supervisor.” said Tanchun beaming.

It is also from the theory of Brown and Levinson (1987: 65), “the strategies for doing face-threatening acts are Politeness Strategies”. They are used to formulate messages in order to save the hearer’s or speaker’s face when face-threatening acts are inevitable or desired. Being polite is “a battery of social skills to ensure everyone feels affirmed in a social interaction”.

The first sentence shows off-record politeness, intended to avoid suggestion of imposition. Off-record politeness is the “indirect” strategy (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 67). “This strategy uses indirect language and removes the speaker from the potential to be imposing”. It relies heavily “on pragmatics to convey the intended meaning while still utilizing the semantic meaning as a way to avoid losing face” (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 68). The second sentence uses Wang’s positive face of being impartial and incorruptible to pressurize her into accepting the request for protecting her public image, in spite of the impairment to her negative face.

-“The second thing is that, Sister Four needs things to draw the Grand View Garden but the stock is insufficient. She reported this to Lady Jia and got the answer that ‘There may be some surplus from the previous works left in the downstairs of the back house, go and find them out. If no, send someone to buy,’” Tanchun smiled. Here Tanchun used the same strategy—i.e., off-record politeness, without expressing any compulsive intention in her words, but the degree of request, involving both of Lady Jia and Sister Four, is significant, as it implies that Wang may harm the three persons’ face simultaneously if refuses the request. From this the readers may catch a glimpse of Tanchun’s speaking skills.

-“I know nothing about the poetry or pottery thing. Are you inviting me to snack there?” said Wang grinning. This is a manifestation of the Maxim of Modesty in Leech’s Politeness Principle (PP)—i.e., “to maximize dispraise of self and to minimize praise of self, a code of politeness in interpersonal communications” (Leech, 1983b: 80). In a simpler way speaking, Politeness Princple may be formulated in a general way from two aspects: other things being equal, “to minimize the expression of impolite benefits and maximize the expression of polite benefits” (Leech, 1983b: 81). We could see how Wang is good at such strategies and skills to, on one hand, comfort other people’s feelings; on the other hand, distract people’s attention on her less competitive aspect through self-mockery. Meanwhile, Wang Xifeng’s deliberately misinterpreting Tanchun’s requirement as inviting her to snack is an overtly flout to the Cooperative Principle (CP), according to philosopher Grice (1975:45). The principle claims “its governance in conversations and that, in the event a conversation goes against it, the hearer should perceive what the conversation implies beyond the literal meaning”. That is to say, listeners and speakers must speak cooperatively and mutually accept one another to be understood in a particular way if they want to build an effective conversation environment, because the cooperative principle describes how effective communication in conversation is achieved in
common social situations. In this case, Wang’s response connoted that she knew what Tanchun and her girls requested is not what they really desire. That is her smartness.

- “It doesn’t matter whether you can versify or not. Your job is to oversee those who slug and punish them.” said Tanchun. Here, Tanchun had to follow Wang Xifeng’s words and stressed again the first excuse they prepared as she was embarrassed to express directly by herself their intention for Wang’s funding. Apparently, old ginger is hotter than new, and Tanchun inferior to Wang in speaking skills.

- “No blandishing. Let me guess. You are not asking me to be a supervisor but a benefactor, right? Your society must entail hosting in turns. Now you want to set me there for your convenience to ask me for money, because your monthly payments are short. Isn’t that the idea?” said Wang Xifeng smiling. After the conversational interaction above, it is the time for Wang Xifeng to take control, otherwise it may also impair their face if she keep pretending courtesy and shuffling. So the smart Wang unveiled with a smile Tanchun and her sisters’ real intention—i.e., money, and ended with the rhetorical question “Isn’t that the idea” to relieve Tanchun’s embarrassment for her intention being seen by purposely lowering the certainty to her judgment.

**The Next Comes to the Conversation between Li Wan and Wang Xifeng**

- “Listen! What a marvelous speech, isn’t it? Such a glib tongue! But I just want to know that, will you manage the poetry society?” said Li Wan grinning. The former part of praise of Wang Xifeng not only adheres to Leech’s Politeness Principle by maximizing praise of other, but affirms Wang’s positive face—i.e., her image of being voluble, which appeases Wang Xifeng’s demand for image maintenance. According to Leech (1983b: 81), “maximizing praise of other is one of the ideas of Maxim of Approbation”, in which, the assertion and approval are properly delivered. In the latter part, she used the off-record politeness strategy by directly requesting Wang Xifeng to take actions to “manage”. This request strategy is only recommended to use between friends, whose close relationship, instead of bossiness, may be reflected if it is used in such a context.

- “What are you talking about? I will become a betrayer of the Grand View Garden and cannot support my living here if I don’t contribute some money to the society. I will assume office tomorrow morning, and, after accepting the seal, leave 50 liangs silver for your hosting activities. Who cares about the ‘supervisor’? I am no more than a layman who knows nothing about poetry or literature, and you may kick me out there several days later once you get the money!” said Wang Xifeng smiling. At the end, after rounds of verbal games with the girls, Wang Xifeng accepted the job in the gesture that she only did this for snacking, interlaced with her compliments to the girls—i.e. not engaging in the society, in other words, not accepting the girls’ request, is a betrayal of the Grand View Garden. Also, seemingly unnecessary, the following sentence “I will assume office tomorrow morning” violates the Maxim of Quality in philosopher Grice’s Cooperative Principle (Grice, 1975:46). Because according to Grice (1975: 46), the communicator is supposed to “make the contribution one that is true”. That is to say, in this case, “do not say what you believe to be false and do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence” (Liu & Wen, 2014:154). Here, the information provided in the speaker’s speech is more than the needed, suggesting Wang’s self-abasement, a manifestation of politeness in interpersonal communications.

**Conclusion**

Through a series of conversations, Tanchun and Li Wan, on behalf of the girls, solved their fund problem with the excuse of inviting Wang Xifeng to take part in the poetry society. On the other hand, Wang Xifeng, who accepted their requests, protected not only her positive face in people’s mind—the image of a capable person in the Grand View Garden who can solve problems—but also the girls’ face by self-abasement, which is an application of the polite strategy. Positive and negative face and many other politeness principles contribute to establishment of interpersonal harmony and are widely used in daily life, with enormous interests and philosophy behind them as long as people dig into them. This speaks for the necessity to learn pragmatics.


References


