

# A Retrospective Analysis of Chinese Obligatory Compliments Strategies Use: Keeping Polite in Managing Interpersonal Relationships

Zhou Yi\*

Nanchang Normal College of Applied Technology.

\*Corresponding Author  
Zhou Yi

Nanchang Normal  
College of Applied  
Technology.

### Article History

Received: 01.05.2025  
Accepted: 25.05.2025  
Published: 20.06.2025

**Abstract:** Compliments are a common speech act in interpersonal communications that have a role in building rapport. Compliments vary greatly from culture to culture in terms of strategies and functions. Different from the compliments used in other cultures, Chinese people are concerned with face and emphasize harmony, so they often use compliments as a pragmatic strategy to build rapport. Thus, He Ziran proposes the concept of “Chinese Obligatory Compliments (COCs)” from the perspective of interpersonal pragmatics, pointing out that these are a kind of compliment response strategies (CRs) that Chinese people will make self-denigration and return compliments towards others' compliments to keep modesty and politeness in Chinese context so as to build rapport. So, this thesis aims to analyze what are COCs? What specific strategies of COCs will adopt to keep modesty so as to build rapport? How to make a retrospective analysis of COCs from socio-cultural factors? In order to address these questions, this thesis proposes an integrated model based on the Rapport Management Theory by Spencer-Oatey and the Politeness Principle by Gu Yueguo to analyze the collected data of COCs from some Chinese TV dramas. Consequently, this study finds there are four strategies of COCs as the CRs that keep polite and build rapport. Then, the COCs are interpreted from Chinese socio-cultural factors, so as to promote the localization of interpersonal pragmatics and introduce more language phenomenon with Chinese characteristics to the world.

**Keywords:** Chinese Obligatory Compliments; compliment response strategies; build rapport; socio-cultural factors.

### Cite this article:

Yi, Z., (2025). A Retrospective Analysis of Chinese Obligatory Compliments Strategies Use: Keeping Polite in Managing Interpersonal Relationships. *ISAR Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*, 3(6), 80-89.

## 1. Introduction

Compliments are a widely used language phenomenon around the world and are recognized as an important speech act in a socio-cultural context. As a speech act, compliments also have a lubricating effect on interpersonal communication (Holmes, 1986:490). Foreign scholars began to conduct academic research on compliments since 1960s, and by now these studies are already relatively comprehensive and mature. Many foreign studies have identified that compliments have complexity in their topics (Lin *et al*, 2012:1486; Holmes, 1988: 460; Manes and Wolfson, 1981:129), syntactic patterns (Manes and Wolfson, 1981:129; Herbert 1991:381), inter-lingual comparison in compliment responses (Nafise Razi, 2013:62; Tang and Zhang, 2009:326; N. Lorenzo-Dus, 2001:108), and further.

Furthermore, the complexity of compliments is also proven in different cultures. Yuan (2002:196) proposed that studying who compliments whom, how, for what purposes, and receiving what

responses will enhance our understanding of a people's culture, social values, and the function and meaning of language use in a community. So many Chinese scholars have studied Chinese compliments in Chinese community. In particular, Chinese scholar He (4) proposed “虚言应酬” (*xū yán yìng chōu*, Chinese Obligatory Compliments) as a pragmatic strategy in constructing rapport in Chinese context, which obey the politeness maxims. This notion extends compliments to interpersonal pragmatics field, which regards such compliments as a pragmatic strategy to build rapport in Chinese context, which also proves Spencer-Oatey (2002:18)'s idea that compliments are typically face-enhancing speech acts in that they have a positive effect on interpersonal relations.

However, study on compliments from the perspective of interpersonal pragmatics is still under-researched, especially in the Chinese context. Chinese is a country attaching importance to politeness and *Mianzi*, which are significant factors in rapport management. As Chinese Obligatory Compliments (COCs) (He,



2018:4) can serve such function to enhance *Mianzi* and build rapport, this thesis aims to analyze the strategies and the corresponding interpersonal functions of Chinese obligatory compliments to address this lacuna and promote the localization practices of interpersonal pragmatics in the Chinese context.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 The Definition of Chinese Obligatory Compliments

A compliment is a speech act that has been carefully studied by scholars. The most widely accepted definition of compliments in English comes from Holmes (1988: 446), who conducted research in New Zealand. He succinctly captures the essence of compliments as “a speech act which explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed, for some 'good' (possession, characteristic, skill, etc.) which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer”. Manes and Wolfson (1981: 129) further expanded this definition to include social implications, defining compliments as “a social strategy used to establish a relationship or maintain solidarity”. From their idea, it can be found that compliments have functions in managing rapport. Thus, from the perspective of interpersonal pragmatics, specifically, He (2018: 4) defines Chinese Obligatory Compliments as a form of self-denigration used strategically to reciprocate compliments in a modest manner. To illustrate this concept, He (2018: 4) provides an example:

01 *Lǎobǎn: duǎnduǎn yīnián jiù yǒu zhèyàng de yèjì, hěn bùcuò, yǒu qiántú!*

Boss: You have achieved such achievements in just one year. You are very good and promising!

02 *Zhíyuán: lǎobǎn nín guòjiǎng le. Wǒ qíshì yě méi gàn chū shénme, zhǐ shì zhōngshí zhíxíng nín bùzhì de rènwù. Suǒyǐ shuō, háishì nín língdǎo yǒu fang.*

Staff: I'm flattered. I did not actually do anything, just faithfully carried out the tasks you had set out. Therefore, it is owed to you who lead.

In this conversation, two individuals of different powers - a boss and a staff member - interrelate with each other. The boss initially expresses approbation towards the staff member's accomplishments in their work. However, the staff member does not accept the compliment directly, claiming that his achievement is merely a result of following the orders of their superior (02). This self-denigration serves two purposes - it allows the staff member to maintain modesty in front of the boss, and to offer compliments to their boss in order to foster positive interpersonal relations.

### 2.2 Compliment Response Strategies

Pomerantz (1978: 106) suggested that compliments can be face-threatening acts, and proposed two principles as a guideline for responding to a compliment (1) agreeing with others and (2) avoiding self-praise. Based on these, she outlined three possible compliment responses: accept, reject and avoid self-appraisal, and the last response strategy is actually consistent with Chinese Politeness Principle proposed by Gu Yueguo (1992:11) which requires people make self-denigration when mentioning something relevant to themselves. However, such category of CRs can not cover CRs in Chinese context. Through research, Yu Ming-chung (2005:20) researched the compliment response behaviors of native Chinese speakers and he found that there are six compliment responses in Chinese compliments, and they are *acceptance*

*strategies, amendment strategies, nonacceptance strategies, face relationship related response strategies, combination strategies and no acknowledgment.* Compared to the category proposed by Pomerantz, Yu Ming-chung's category of Chinese CRs has inheritance and development, specially it has the Chinese localized response strategy of *face relationship related response strategies*, which can imply that Chinese compliment responses is related to face and politeness. There is a possibility that “I'm embarrassed” could well be a phatic expression, effectively meaning “Thank you”. Fong (1998:257) explains, “on the surface I say ‘no, no, no.’... However, inside I accept it. I feel really excited. This strategy actually obeys the principle of “avoid self-appraise”, and this principle indicates the value of low self-esteem, which is ubiquitous in eastern countries. This is actually a universal and localized CR phenomenon in Chinese context, but few scholars have made research on this language phenomenon. In this way, this thesis aims to analyze the response strategy of COCs, which aims to keep polite and give others' face when receiving people's compliments.

### 2.3 Compliment and Rapport Management

Compliment can be considered as one type of speech act performing the most function of enhancing people's face, and some scholars have verified compliments can promote rapport management. Spencer-Oatey (2000:11) proposed that compliments are face-enhancing speech acts, as they have a positive effect on interpersonal relations. Personal compliments usually enhance people's quality face, and compliments also boost identity face when they are used to enhance the complimentee's position or role within a group. He (2018:4) also regards Chinese Obligatory Compliments as a kind of pragmatic strategy in rapport management. Thus, in this thesis, we will discuss how Chinese Obligatory Compliments promote rapport management in the Chinese cultural context.

## 3. Theoretical Framework

The study of Chinese Obligatory Compliments is from the perspective of interpersonal pragmatics, and it follows modesty and politeness in Chinese culture context (He, 2018:4). Actually, He (2018:4) attaches politeness to COCs, but has not mentioned the factor of face in COCs. As mentioned above, COCs is a type of *face relationship related response strategies*, as people say “I am embarrassed/No, no, no...” on surface, or even credit their achievements to others, they just keep modesty on one hand, and give face to others and elevate others' status so as to draw closeness in between. Thus, this thesis will apply the Politeness Principle (PP) by Gu (1992:11) which analyze Chinese politeness and Rapport Management Theory (RMT) by Spencer-Oatey *et al* (2002:11-36), which emphasizes face management and interpersonal relationship management.

### 3.1 Politeness Principle

In China, society also emphasizes the need for politeness. Among various politeness principles, the one proposed by Gu (1992:11) can be the best to meet the needs of politeness in Chinese society. The politeness principle proposed by Gu has five sub-maxims. One of these maxims is the self-denigration maxim, which comprises two sub-maxims: (1) denigrate the self and (2) elevate the other. Following this principle, people refer to demeaning themselves or things related to themselves to show "humble"; when referring to the listener or something related to the listener, it is necessary to elevate others to show respect (Gu, 1992:80). This principle is

reflected in the strategies of Chinese Obligatory Compliments, which show humility by praising others more and dispraising themselves more. Through these two strategies, people can keep polite and modest.

### 3.2 Rapport Management Theory

#### 3.2.1 Components of Rapport Management

Rapport Management Theory aims to analyze the formation of harmonious and disharmonious relationships in interpersonal relationships, especially studying the strategies that people promote, maintain or threaten harmonious social relationships through the use of language (Spencer-Oatey, 2000:11). There are two components of Rapport Management: face management and sociality rights management. In face management, Spencer-Oatey (2002:14) divided face into quality face and identity face. Quality face is related to personal qualities, such that people want others to give a positive evaluation of their own personal qualities, such as ability, reputation, appearance and others. For the identity face, people always desire others to acknowledge their social identities or roles, such as group leaders, valued customers, and close friends, which is closely associated with our sense of public worth (Spencer-Oatey, 2002:14).

Second, sociality rights management includes two components: equity rights and association rights. Equity rights include cost-benefit and autonomy-imposition (Spencer-Oatey, 2002:35). The former refers to the degree to which people are exploited or disadvantaged and should be roughly balanced. The latter is the degree to which people are controlled. Association rights mean that people have the right to keep in touch with others in accordance with their relationship.

Apart from the components of RMT, some factors from social perspective are also significant in influencing strategy use, which will be introduced in the following section.

#### 3.2.2 Factors Influencing Strategy Use: Contextual Variables

##### (1) Power

Max Weber’s social stratification is widely applied by western sociolinguists and is based on the combination of fortune (economic status), prestige (status class), and power (political status) (Dai Xiaqing, 2004:192), which indicates that there are many factors to identify people’s powers. Spencer-Oatey (2002:32) proposed that power is typically operationalized in terms of unequal role relations, such as teacher-student or employer-employee. Power has different labels, which include social power, status, dominance, and authority (Spencer-Oatey, 2002:33). Brown and Gilman (1960:255) proposed that “one person may be said to have power over another in the degree that he is able to control the behavior of the other”. In this thesis, we take social status as the label of power which will be influenced by people’s occupation, wealth and education, and people have higher power is able to control the behaviors of the other, and the social status is a significant factor influencing COCs strategy use.

##### (2) Solidarity

Manes and Wolfson (1981:129) have defined compliments as “a social strategy used to establish a relationship or maintain solidarity”, which gives compliments interpersonal implications. Park (1924:339) defines social distance, or solidarity, as “the continuum of grades and degrees of understanding and intimacy

that characterize social relations generally”, which views understanding and intimacy as significant labels of solidarity. What’s more, Spencer-Oatey (2002:34) points out the contextual variable of solidarity also has many different labels, such as distance, social distance, closeness, familiarity and relational intimacy. She (2002:34) also lists possible components (which are often overlapping) based on a review of a range of pragmatic studies: social similarity/difference; frequency of contact; length of acquaintance; familiarity, or how well people know each other; sense of like mindedness; and positive/negative affect. Thus, in this thesis, we regard familiarity and frequency of contact as the label of solidarity, which is a significant factor in analyzing COCs.

### 3.3 An Integrated Theoretical Model for COCs

Since the subject of this thesis is Chinese Obligatory Compliments, we can not take the Rapport Management Theory as the only theoretical basis without taking Chinese contexts into consideration. As self-denigration and returning compliments are main realizing strategies of COCs, it is necessary to apply Politeness Principle into the analyzes of COCs. Thus, we combine the Rapport Management Theory by Spencer-Oatey (2000:11) and Politeness Principle by Gu (1992:11) to analyze Chinese Obligatory Compliments from a comprehensive and localized perspective. In the following section, the explanation and introduction of the new integrated theory model will be introduced:

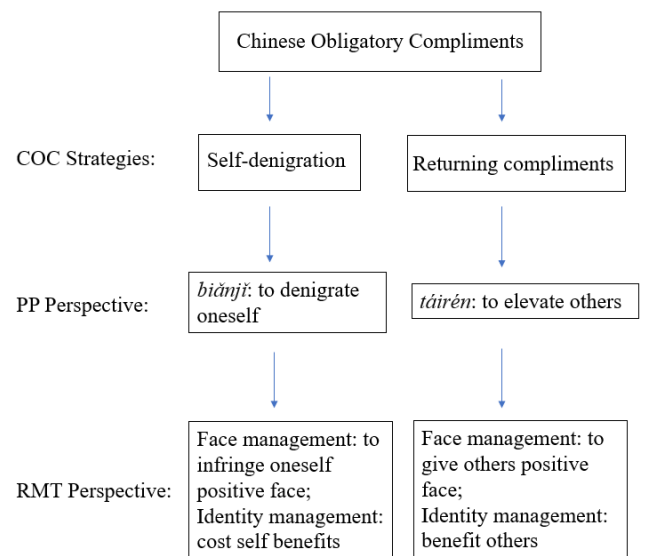


Table 1: An Integrated Theoretical Model for COCs

In this model, we can see the COC strategies includes self-denigration and returning compliments (He, 2018). For the strategy of self-denigration, firstly from the perspective of Politeness Principle, people can show modesty through denigrating oneself, which is a localized characteristic of Chinese politeness (Gu, 1990:11). Then, such speech act actually infringes the positive face of speaker-self so as to cost the speaker’s benefit as he/she deny his/her achievements, possessions and so on. Second, for the returning compliments responses, people can give face to others through returning compliments, so as to elevate others’ status. It is actually a speech act to give benefits to others as the speaker credit achievements to the listener.

So far, the interpretation of COCs is from the theoretical level, we should further go deep into practical level to analyze the specific communications of Chinese interlocutors, which will be shown in the following section.

## 4. Methodology

First, the research questions should be elucidated. In this paper, two questions are raised and need to be investigated: (1) what strategies of COCs? (2) how can COCs be interpreted from Chinese socio-cultural factors? Under the integrated theory based on Rapport Management Theory and Politeness Principle, the first question will be investigated based on the collected data from some TV serials. Then, for the second question, the social factor—contextual variables—power and solidarity will be used to analyze the strategy use of COCs, and the cultural factors “harmony” and “facework” are applied to offer the cultural trace of COCs.

Second, for the data collection, this study collects data from two popular television dramas in recent years, they are *Golden Years (2020)* and *My First Half of Life (2017)*. In these two TV serials, the language phenomenon of COCs is common, and the conversations occur in many daily contexts such as business context, family context, working context, and the interlocutors are in different powers and solidarities. Consequently, we select 120 video clips from these serials, containing 384 turns in total which record how the interlocutors use Chinese Obligatory Compliments as the CRs to response to others compliments. Obviously, the amount of data is large enough to ensure the reliability of research results, and to ensure the reality of data, these video clips from these serials are collected from official mainstream video websites in China, and the serials mentioned before are collected from CCTV (tv.cctv.com) and iQiYi (www.iqiyi.com). For the transcription, this study initially transcribes these conversations in videos into Chinese characters. Subsequently, it involves the manual task of transcribing the characters into Pinyin phonetic notation, as well as providing corresponding English translations. The English translations are collected from the English version of these serials or translated by the author, and finally checked and approved by two professors.

## 5. Results and Discussion

### 5.1 Strategies of Chinese Obligatory Compliments

Golato’s (2005:564) research, Germans use compliments to express the truthfulness, while for Americans, the social functions are more important than the truthfulness. Therefore, people will adopt compliment strategies or compliment response strategies to achieve certain social functions, which can also be reflected in the Chinese compliments of COCs. Through analyzing and conclude the collected data, this paper finds there are four strategies of COCs as the response strategy towards others compliments. The specific statistical results are shown as below:

Table 2 Strategies of Chinese Obligatory Compliments

COC response strategies	N	%
Self-denigration	24	43.6%
Returning compliments	18	32.7%
Rapport-related response strategies	4	7.3%
Combining strategies	9	16.4%
Total	55	100%

From the statistical results, the most frequently adopted response strategy to (obligatory) compliments is *self-denigration*, which accounts for 43.6% of responses. Furthermore, the act of *returning compliments* is also a commonly used response strategy,

accounting for 32.7% of responses. Notably, individuals will occasionally employ *rapport-related response strategies* to respond to compliments, such as “*dōushi yī jiā rén* (we are families)”, which serves to promote rapport and accounts for a small proportion of 7.3% of responses. The *combination* strategy is also observed in individuals’ COC response strategies, accounting for 16.4%, which combines self-denigration and returning compliments together. Then, we will show some specific excerpts from the collected TV serials to illustrate these COCs strategies.

#### 5.1.1 Self-denigration

The statistic results shows that when facing Chinese Obligatory Compliments, most people will adopt self-denigration strategy, which was first proposed by Gu (1992:80), who suggested it as one maxim of the Politeness Principle in China to keep modesty. Other scholars also discuss this politeness strategy, such as Ian Walkinshaw et. al (2018:40) investigate self-denigration as a relational strategy that performs a face-saving relational function and a socially moderating function, wherein a speaker uses it to appear modesty rather than inappropriately vain. The previous studies have shown that self-denigration is widely recognized as a strategy for demonstrating modesty, which is highly valued in Chinese culture. Therefore, when individuals encounter obligatory compliments from others in certain social contexts, employing the self-denigration strategy can be an appropriate way to maintain modesty and establish rapport with others. An excerpt can illustrate this strategy specifically:

Excerpt 3:

Context: At a dinner gathering, Jiang Nansun’s father aims at introducing Li Yifan, a renowned stock analyst based in Shanghai, to his daughter as a potential romantic partner. During the meal, the parties have the following conversations.

Power: Jiang's father is the elder, and Li Yifan and Jiang Nansun are the juniors. Thus, based on Brown and Gilman (1960:255)’s view, Jiang's father is in high status who has the power to control Li Yifan and Jiang Nansun’s behaviors, who are in low status.

Solidarity: Jiang's father and Li Yifan have known each other, but they are not families and do not frequently contact, so they are in ordinary relationship. Jiang's father and Jiang Nansun are father and daughter, so the two are in intimate relationship. As Jiang Nansun and Li Yifan are meet for the first time, so they are in unfamiliar relationship.

01 *Jiǎng bà: Zhè yīfàn ne, shì shànghǎi yǒumíng de gǔpiào fēnxī shī, yào shuō tā dièr ā, méiyǒu rén gǎn chēng dìyī.*

Jiang’s father: Li Yifan is the famous stock analyst in Shang Hai. If he ranks second, no one could rank first.

02 *Lǐ yīfàn: Bú bú bú, búgǎn zhème shuō.*

Li Yifan: I don’t dare to say that.

*Liú jīn suì yuè dì 27jǐ*

Episode 27 of *Golden Year*

In this conversation, Jiang's father wishes to introduce Li Yifan to his daughter as a potential boyfriend, and thus, he makes a compliment to Li Yifan that he is a well-known stock analyst in Shanghai and that if he ranks second, no one could rank first (01). These compliments enhance Li’s social identity face and quality face from the face management (Spencer-Oatey, 2002:11-20),

which help elevate Li Yifan's social status and reputation in front of Jiang Nansun. However, under the Chinese Politeness Principle (Gu, 1990:11), accepting such compliment may seem to be arrogance (Gu, 1990:12), as people should adopt self-denigration to lower their status to others (Yu, 2005:1). Thus, Li Yifan uses COC and adopt *self-denigration strategy*, saying "I don't dare to say that" (02), out of modesty and avoid self-praise (Pomerantz, 1978: 106). By doing so, Li Yifan cost his own social identity, but obeys the maxim of self-denigration from the politeness perspective, so as to succeed to behave modestly in front of Jiang Nansun and maintains a humble image.

### 5.1.2 Returning Compliments

In the literature review, scholars have analyzed the strategy of returning compliments, with varying views on its purpose and effectiveness. For instance, 周芹芹 (2013:53) views it as a strategy to receive compliment, and people return compliments to show their appreciations to the complimenter. On the other hand, Chen and Yang (2010:1955) propose that returning compliments can be received or rejected, depending on the specific communicative contexts. In this study, we define due to the polite requirement in Chinese society, the strategy of returning compliments as an act of accepting compliments, but people should make no response directly/on surface and return compliments so as to show modesty and respect in return. A sample illustration of this strategy is provided below:

Excerpt 2:

Context: Jiang Nansun is having lunch with the leader of her company, and the following conversations take place in between.

Power: Based on Spencer-Oatey (2002:32)'s view, as Jiang Nansun is the employee while her leader is the employer, Jiang is in low power and her leader is in high power.

Solidarity: As the degree of familiarity and the frequency of contact between Jiang and her leader are not high, so they are in ordinary relationships.

01 *Lǐng dǎo: Búcuò, jiǎng xiǎojiě, niánjì qīngqīng jiù dúdāng yīmiàn. Méi ràng wǒ shīwàng.*

Leader: Not bad, Miss Jiang. You can work alone even though you are very young.

You didn't disappoint me.

02 *Jiǎng nán sūn: Gēn zhe nǐ hé liáng xué dào hěn duō.*

Jiang Nansun: I have learned a lot from you and Li Ang.

*Liú jīn suì yuè dì 34jì*

Episode 34 of *Golden Years*

In this conversation, the leader first praised Jiang for being able to work alone at such a young age (01). However, as the subordinate, Jiang should keep modest so she doesn't receive the compliment directly, but use COC and adopt *returning compliment strategy* to respond to the leader that she has learned a lot from the leader and another leader Li Ang (02), which indicate it is owe to leaders that taught her a lot so that she can have some achievements. In this strategy, Jiang make compliment to the leader, which gives quality face to the leader who have great ability in work so that Jiang can learn a lot. Besides, in front of the party who is in higher power than Jiang herself, Jiang doesn't recognize her ability, which is an

act of showing modesty that people are required to dispraise themselves to show respect and politeness in front of others (Gu, 1992:12).

### 5.1.3 Rapport-related Response Strategies

Yu (2005:20) identified a unique strategy called "*face relationship-related response strategy*" in her study of Chinese compliment response strategies. This strategy is employed by Chinese people to maintain modesty by superficially showing embarrassment while accepting compliments (Fong, 1998:257). Similarly, this study finds that when responding to Chinese Obligatory Compliments, people use rapport-related response strategies to establish rapport. Such strategies typically include words or phrases with rapport meaning such as "family" and "people on one's own side". The following excerpt illustrates this phenomenon:

Excerpt 5:

Context: Jinyan Group's new property opened, and the boss of this company Ye Jinyan brought his friend to buy an apartment. After the deal, the manager of sales department Yang Ke has the following conversation with the boss Ye Jinyan.

Power: In the communicative context, Yang is the sales department manager of Ye's company. Thus, Yang is in lower status, and Ye is in higher status.

Solidarity: Ye and Yang are in superior-subordinate relationships, and they are not frequently contact with each other, so they are in ordinary relationships.

01 *Yè jīn yán: Jú shì gěi nǐmen kāi wán le, shèngxià jiù kàn nǐmen de le.*

Ye Jinyan: I have introduced the first business for you, the rest is up to you.

02 *Yáng kē: Xīngkuī shì yè zǒng rénmiàn guāng, yàobú dìyī tiān kāipán xiāoshòu bù bú tài hào kàn.*

Yang Ke: Fortunately, Mr. Ye has many connections, or the turnover in our department on the first day is not very good.

03 *Yè jīn yán: Dōu shì yī jiārén.*

Ye Jinyan: We are all families.

*Liú jīn suì yuè dì 24jì*

Episode 24 of *Golden Year*

This conversation centers on the sale of the first apartment by Jinyan's sales department, prompting the sales manager to extend a compliment to the boss. The sales manager attributes the success of the sale to the boss's influential relations (02), thereby enhancing the boss's social identity face from the face management. However, rather than superficially accepting or rejecting this obligatory compliment, Ye, who is in higher power, employs a rapport-related response strategy in his response, which emphasizes the familial bond among the individuals involved, suggesting a deeper level of interpersonal connection beyond mere professional relationships (03). Despite holding a position of high power, Ye employs a phrase that emphasizes a familial relationship among colleagues, and he is not concentrate on face, so as to promote solidarity and rapport between Ye and his staff, ultimately benefiting the relationship between the two parties.

### 5.1 4 Combination Strategy

The combination strategy, a communicative strategy containing two or more response strategies in Compliment Responses (CRs), has been proposed by several scholars (Holmes, 1986: 490; Yu, 2005:20). In the context of Chinese Culture of Compliments, a combination strategy is also observed. Specifically, it combines self-denigration and returning compliments when responding to others' (obligatory) compliments. The following excerpt can illustrate this phenomenon:

Excerpt 6:

Context: Luo Zijun's husband Chen Junsheng has an affair with Ling Ling, who is in the same company with Chen. Chen Junsheng agrees to take Ling Ling by car to go work together on the next morning. However, on the next morning, Luo asks Chen to take her to the supermarket near Chen's company, so the three people take the car to the company together. The following is part of the conversation between Luo and Ling:

Power: As Chen Junsheng is Ling Ling's superior, Chen and his wife Luo are in high power, and Ling is in low power.

Solidarity: Luo and Ling are meeting for the first time. Thus, they are in unfamiliar relationships.

01 *Luó zǐ jūn: Tāmen Yīdiàn dōu búxiàng nǐ ā, nǐ yīkàn shàng qù jiùshì běnběn fēnfēn, lǎolǎo shíshí de nǚhái zǐ. Wǒ xīhuān de ya. Suǒ yǐ jiàodé gēn nǐ hěn tóuyuan.*

Luo Zijun: They are not like you at all, you look like an honest girl who does your duty. I like, so I feel very close to you.

02 *Líng líng: Qǐshí wǒ jiùshì yīgè láodòng fūnǚ, nǎ xiàng chén tàitài yùnnqì nàme hǎo, méiyǒu yǎli, bǎoyáng dé nàme niánqīng piāoliàng, zhēnshì shàng bèizǐ xiū lái de fúqì ā.*

Ling Ling: In fact, I am a working woman, how can I be as lucky as you without pressure. You are well maintained in beauty and youth, which is truly a blessing from the previous life.

*Wǒ de qián bàn shēng dì 2 jí*

Episode 2 of *My First Half Year*

In this conversation, Luo initially expresses her appreciation for Ling Ling's quality and personality (01), which is a common compliment reflecting her true thoughts. However, in order to maintain a lower status in front of Luo and to ensure her satisfaction, Ling Ling first dispraises herself by identifying herself as a working woman, thereby undermining her social identity face (even though she is actually a staff member in a big company), but effectively conveys modesty in front of Luo, and lower Luo's guard of finding she is having an affair with her husband. Subsequently, Ling Ling returns an obligatory compliment to Luo by expressing her admiration for Luo's beauty and youthfulness and indicating herself is not beautiful enough so as to form a contrast (02). By doing so, Ling Ling enhances Luo's quality face through the personal face perspective and successfully pleases Luo and builds rapport with, which are well-received by Luo. As such, the combination strategy involves a self-denigration approach followed by returning obligatory compliments, which maintains modesty while fostering a positive social interaction.

From the above explanation and discussion of four specific strategies of COCs as the CRs, we have some findings: first, under the need of politeness of dispraise oneself and elevate others (Gu, 1990), Chinese Obligatory Compliments are a ubiquitous response strategy towards to others' compliments. Second, from the perspective of interpersonal pragmatics, Chinese Obligatory Compliments are a useful language tool to show modesty and give positive face to others so as to build rapport in between. Third, self-denigration and returning compliments are two most frequently used strategies of COCs, which are of high representative characteristics of COCs. What's more, rapport-related response strategy aims at draw closeness and build rapport, and sometimes people will adopt combination strategy to strengthen the interpersonal function of COCs.

Furthermore, language should not be limited to the study of their linguistic characteristics. As many scholars have made research about the socio-cultural factors related to compliments, such as Danziger and Roni found "the specific socio-cultural history of Israel showed that the linguistic choices are part of a larger cultural performance of *firgun* (a localized compliment form in Hebrew" (2018:73), which indicates socio-cultural factors have their explanations on compliment performance. Thus, given the extensive research conducted on the strategies of Chinese Obligatory Compliments, this study aims to explore the socio-cultural factors behind the use of these strategies and their efficacy in building rapport in Chinese context.

### 5.2 Interpretation of COCs from Socio-cultural Factors.

Previous studies (Wolfson, 1989:134; Dai, 2004:192; Spencer-Oatey, 2000:32) have revealed that power and solidarity significantly influence people's communicative behaviors, and this thesis finds these social factors also play a critical role in shaping COCs. As such, in order to promote the localized research of COCs that uncover the socio-cultural trace which promote the creation and use of COCs, we will introduce the solidarity and power as the factors that influencing the strategies use (Spencer-Oatey, 2002:32) of COCs, and *He* (harmony) and *Mianzi/Lian* (facework) as the cultural trace as the explanation perspectives of COCs.

#### 5.2.1 Social Factors

##### (1) The Factor Influencing COC strategies use: Power

This part examines the role of power in COC strategies. Brown and Gilman (1960:255) first proposed the notion of social relationships. In their work, the two dimensions of social relationship that condition the choice of address terms are power usually realized in terms of social status and solidarity realized in terms of the degree of social distance (Li Xiuhua, 2005:5). Through analysis, we find that the data revealed three distinct types of power relations: high power individuals to low power individuals, middle power individuals to middle power individuals, and low power individuals to high power individuals. This section will further analyze the frequencies of COC strategies as the CRs in different power individuals. The results of this analysis are presented in the figure below:

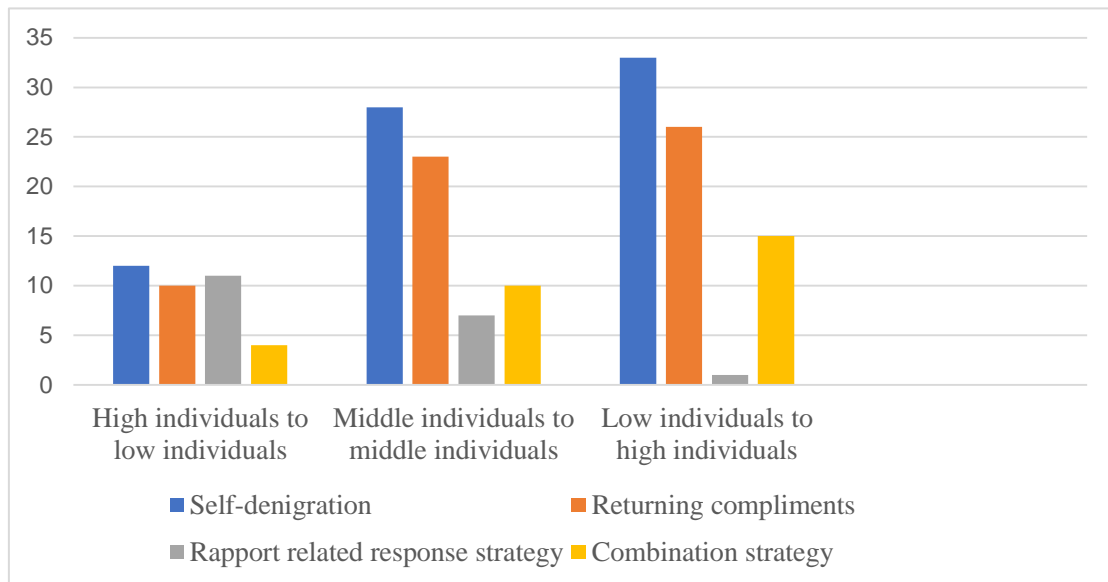


Figure 2 The Frequency of COC Strategies in Different Powers

Drawing on the data presented above, it can be inferred that the employment of pragmatic strategies of obligatory compliment varies across different social status relations. It is intriguing to find that with the power gradually falling, the frequencies of strategies of *self-denigration*, *returning compliments*, and *combination strategy* are growing up, especially the *self-denigration strategy*; while the frequency of *rapport related response strategy* is growing down. Thus, the following section is going to analyze these phenomena from the perspective of power.

First, the *self-denigration* strategy is mostly frequently used in individuals with various powers among all strategies of COCs, which accounts for 73 times in total. This result is in line with the research result of Yu (2005:1) that people should adopt self-denigration to lower their status to others, so people in low power tend to adopt this strategy to keep modesty. Besides, even individuals in high power, they would prefer to use this strategy to lower their status in front of others, but the frequency of this strategy appearing in high-power individuals is lower than in low-power individuals. This phenomenon is also confirmed in the strategy of *returning compliments*, which is an act of giving compliments, after all, one important function of compliment is making others feel good (Jia Yuxin, 1997:370). Specifically, this strategy actually gives positive face to others, and obey the *tàirén* maxim by Gu (1992:11) that to elevate others when discussing others' affairs, especially in front of people who are in higher status. So this strategy is also more frequently employed by low-status individuals as a means of showing humility. Sometimes, people will adopt these two strategies together to strengthen the usage effect so that they will choose the *combination strategy*. Furthermore, individuals with high power tend to employ *rapport related response strategy* when receiving (obligatory) compliments

from low-status individuals, which serves to avoid arrogance and draw psychological closeness, thereby strengthening rapport-relatedness, as family is a word that has a high degree of familiarity (Holmes, 1990).

Based on the statistical results and relevant explanations presented above, it can be concluded that power plays a significant role in influencing both the adoption of COC strategies and response strategies. Hence, when using obligatory compliments, it is important to be mindful of the power dynamics within the social interaction.

**(2) The Factor Influencing COCs distribution: Solidarity**

Some previous scholars have already found the relevance between solidarity and CRs. Wu and Baljit (2017:127) made research and examined how social distance influence the compliment response of Malaysian Chinese undergraduates, and their study revealed that over 80% students take social distance into consideration when responding to compliments. Besides, Wolfson (1989:134) has proposed the Bulge Theory and revealed that social distance is a significant factor that influences people's speech behavior. The similar results also be proved in the present study that solidarity will influence the use of Chinese Obligatory Compliments, and further find that people in intimate/familiar relationships and unfamiliar relationships will adopt similar pragmatic strategy in COCs. Based on this previous study, the current study aims to explore the usage of Chinese Obligatory Compliments in three social distances, namely, unfamiliar relationships, ordinary relationships, and intimate relationships, whose degrees of familiarity are gradually decreasing. The statistic results show that the frequencies of COCs are different among these social distances. Figure 4 exhibits the statistical outcomes of the frequencies:

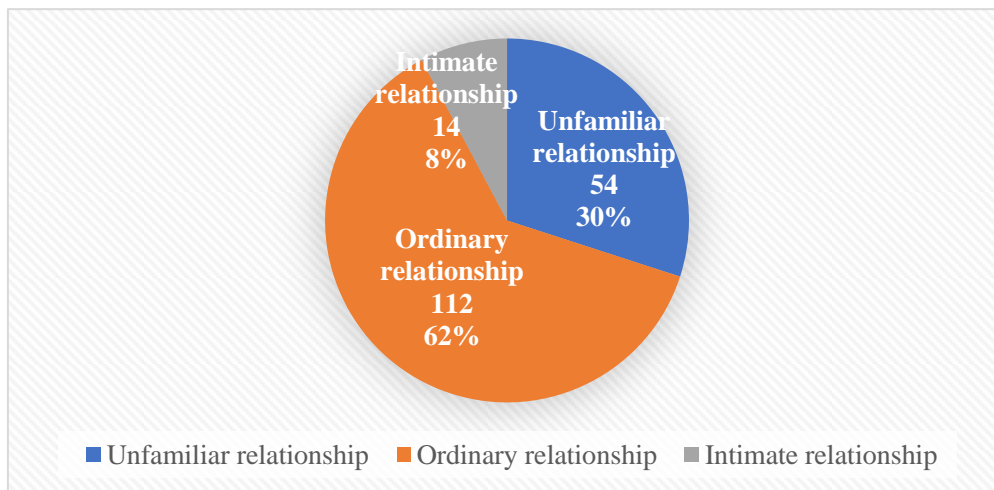


Figure 4 The Frequency of COCs in Different Solidarities

Based on the statistical analysis, it can be inferred that Chinese Obligatory Compliments are predominantly used in ordinary relationships as a pragmatic strategy to enhance rapport, with a frequency of 112 times and accounting for 62% of the total proportion. In contrast, the use of COCs is less frequent in unfamiliar and intimate relationships, with a frequency of 54 times (30%) and 14 times (8%), respectively. This suggests that the use of COCs is context-dependent, and the solidarity between interlocutors plays a critical role in determining the frequency of COCs use as a rapport-building strategy.

The first result is in agreement with the finding of Wolfson (1989:134), who noted that compliments tend to be given most often between people who are acquainted but not intimate, and compliments are seldom used in intimate relationships or totally unfamiliar relationships. His finding is confirmed in the present study of COCs, where Chinese Obligatory Compliments appeared only 4 times in intimate relationships. An interesting finding in the present study is that COCs appeared 16 times in unfamiliar relationships, accounting for a degree proportion of COCs' frequency in various solidarities, which is at odds with Wolfson's findings. This difference can be explained by the fact that strangers use COCs as a communicative strategy to reduce social distance, which serves the rapport building function evidenced in the former section. So, people in unfamiliar relationships will use COCs to draw narrow physiological distances. On the other hand, due to the pre-existing close psychological distance and mutual trust in intimate relationships, COCs are not commonly used as a communicative strategy to maintain harmony.

### 5.2.2 Cultural Factors

Apart from some social factors, Chinese cultural values are also significant in the production and use of Chinese Obligatory Compliments. Thus, in this section, some Chinese cultural values embedded in COCs will be discussed. Chen Tingyi (2008:57) has discussed some Chinese cultural values embedded in compliment speech acts such as “*li* (social hierarchy)” and “*mingfen* (social status)”, which restrict people’s use of compliments. However, the cultural values behind Chinese Obligatory Compliments have something different. Thus, this section will explain the cultural value from three aspects: the idea of *He* (harmony), the need for *Mianzi/Lian* (facework) in Chinese context.

### (1) The Idea of “Harmony is Most Precious”

As the orthodox ideology of feudal society in ancient China for more than 2,000 years, Confucianism has profoundly influenced the cultural value orientation of Chinese society. Yu (2005:20) proposed Confucianism has a profound impact on the formulation of a Chinese belief system, and the most core point in the system of Confucianism is *Ren* (benevolence, humanity), which was described as “the highest human achievement ever reached through moral self-cultivation” (Tu, 1979:239). Besides, *Confucian Analects* proposed that “In practicing the rules of propriety, it is harmony that is prized.”, emphasizing the significance of harmony, which is an important ethical principle of Confucianism in handling interpersonal relations. In addition to Confucianism, other schools of traditional Chinese culture also emphasize benevolence and harmony. For example, Mohism emphasizes “Universal Love” and “Denouncing Unjust Wars”, requiring people to keep harmony and benevolence so as to love each other and benefit each other; Taoism emphasizes “Not Engaging in Contention” and proposes that people should live in harmony as their philosophy of life. The idea of “harmony” has always been one of the important concepts of traditional Chinese thought. Such cultural values also promote people's tendency to build rapport in social interaction. Language can not only be a way to transmit ideas but also build rapport. As a linguistic strategy to build rapport, Chinese Obligatory Compliments can construct a harmonious atmosphere by praising others or maintaining modesty through self-deprecation to lower one's own evaluation to build rapport, which reflects the value orientation of “harmony is most precious”.

### (2) Facework

The concept of “face” was first proposed by the Chinese scholar Hu Xianjin. He pointed out that the concept of “face” includes *Mianzi* and *Lian*. Under Chinese culture, *Mianzi* refers to “the recognition of an individual's prestige and status by the public”, and *Lian* refers to “the respect of the group for individuals who conform to social and intrinsic standards of moral behavior”(2005:45). From the above two perspectives of the interpretation of face, we can have a further explanation: first, Chinese pay attention to face, and face needs to be preserved through the affirmation of others. Thus, in communications, by complimenting others’ *Mianzi*, people’s social identity needs can be met, which is conducive to building rapport. Second, under the

constraints of various moral norms in Chinese society, people need to follow these norms to preserve their face and shape their personal image. Just as Mao (1994:459) views this dynamic of facework in Chinese culture as an interactional orientation on the part of the individual speaker toward seeking connectedness and interpersonal harmony with his community. Therefore, the use of Chinese Obligatory Compliments in some communicative situations can give affirmation to others in public and save others' face. In other words, in Chinese society, the generation and use of Chinese Obligatory Compliments is necessary for the need to face social interactions.

## 6. Conclusion

This section presents the findings, limitations, and suggestions arising from this thesis. The findings of this thesis state what strategies do COCs apply to build rapport relatedness. Furthermore, these findings are further contextualized by analyzing the socio-cultural factors that influence the use of COCs. Despite the insights gained, this study also has some limitations. This section also offers some implications for future research on COCs.

### 6.1 Findings

This thesis examines Chinese Obligatory Compliments from three perspectives. First, through the analysis of data from two television series, four strategies of Chinese Obligatory Compliments have been identified: self-denigration, returning compliments, rapport-related response strategies and combination strategies. through analyzing the collected data based on the integrated theoretical model combining Politeness Principle and Rapport Management Theory, this study actually finds these strategies of COCs can help the speakers keep modesty and give positive face to others, so as to build rapport from the perspective of interpersonal pragmatics.

Then, how Chinese Obligatory Compliments are produced and used are explained from a socio-cultural perspective. It is evidenced that the choice of pragmatic strategies of Chinese Obligatory Compliments is affected by power and solidarity. Specifically, individuals with different powers tend to employ different strategies. Among them, praising others more is the most common strategy and it usually occurs in the context of low- to high-power individuals' communication, indicating respect and appreciation. In addition, when receiving compliments from high individuals, low individuals always return compliments to show modesty and meet the need to hide their abilities in front of high individuals. Solidarity also has an influence on obligatory compliments. It is also common for individuals in unfamiliar relationships to use obligatory compliments to reduce the social gap in between, as evidenced by the Chinese proverb, "Difficult the first time, easy the second."

Apart from social factors, some Chinese cultural factors can play an important role in the prevalence of obligatory compliments. First and foremost, Chinese culture is deeply influenced by the belief of "harmony" and "benevolence", being most desirable for a family, a business entity, a society, or the whole world. In addition, previous pragmatics studies actually have underestimated the factor of affection of people during their communicative interaction, so many affective concepts such as *Mianzi* and *Renqing* are significant emotive features in managing interpersonal relationships. Moreover, the Chinese politeness norm necessitates the use of self-denigration and the praising of others in order to be polite. For these Chinese culture values, Chinese people have their

necessity to use Chinese Obligatory Compliments to build rapport in their communicative interactions.

### 6.2 Implications

The present thesis offers an investigation into the strategies and response strategies of Chinese Obligatory Compliments in light of Rapport Management Theory (Spencer-Oatey, 2002:11-36) and Politeness Principle (Gu, 1990:14). The study aims to identify the strategies inherent in COCs, particularly those that are related to rapport, and to demonstrate that COCs are localized speech acts in Chinese culture that serve to build rapport. This thesis has practical implications for individuals seeking to utilize COCs in their daily interactions to achieve harmonious communication. Additionally, most scholars made researches on COCs about their linguistic characteristics such as topics, lexical patterns, functions and further. However, it does make a valuable contribution by introducing Chinese compliments into the framework of interpersonal pragmatics and addressing the underexplored field of COCs. Moreover, the study draws on Chinese cultural factors such as *He* (harmony) and *Ren* (benevolence) to interpret obligatory compliments in the Chinese context, thereby further localizing the study of interpersonal pragmatics. By doing so, this study lays the groundwork for future, more in-depth research on this subject.

### Works Cited

1. Brown, R., & Gilman, A. (1960). *The Pronouns of Power and Solidarity*. In Sebeok, T. A. (ed.), *Style in Language*, 253-276. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press. Print.
2. Chen, R., & Yang, D. (2010). Responding to compliments in Chinese: Has it changed?. *Journal of pragmatics*, 42(7), 1951-1963.
3. Danziger, R. (2018). Compliments and compliment responses in Israeli Hebrew: Hebrew university in Jerusalem students in interaction. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 124, 73-87.
4. Fong, M. (1998). Chinese immigrants' perceptions of semantic dimensions of direct/indirect communication in intercultural compliment interactions with North Americans. *Howard journal of Communication*, 9(3), 245-262.
5. Golato, A. (2005). *Compliments and Compliment Responses: Grammatical Structures and Sequential Organization*. John Benjamins: Studies in Discourse and Grammar. Print.
6. Holmes, J., (1986). "Compliments and compliment responses in New Zealand English." *Anthropological Linguistics* 28: 485-508. Print.
7. Holmes, J. (1988). Paying compliments: A sex-preferential politeness strategy. *Journal of pragmatics*, 12(4), 445-465.
8. Herbert, R. K. (1986). Say "thank you"-or something. *American speech*, 61(1), 76-88.
9. Herbert, R. K. (1991). The sociology of compliment work: An ethnocontrastive study of Polish and English compliments.
10. Lorenzo-Dus, N. (2001). Compliment responses among British and Spanish university students: A contrastive study. *Journal of pragmatics*, 33(1), 107-127.
11. Lorenzo-Dus, N., & Izura, C. (2017). "cause ur special": Understanding trust and complimenting behaviour in online grooming discourse. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 112, 68-82.
12. Mao, L. R. (1994). Beyond politeness theory: 'Face' revisited and renewed. *Journal of pragmatics*, 21(5), 451-486.
13. Manes, J., & Wolfson, N. (1981). The compliment

- formula. *Conversational routine: Explorations in standardized communication situations and prepatterned speech*, 96, 115-132.
14. Park, R. E. (1924). The concept of social distance: As applied to the study of racial relations. *Journal of applied sociology*, 8, 339-334.
  15. Pomerantz, A. (1978). Compliment responses: Notes on the co-operation of multiple constraints. In *Studies in the organization of conversational interaction* (pp. 79-112). Academic Press.
  16. Razi, N. (2013). A contrastive study of compliment responses among Australian English and Iranian Persian speakers. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 70, 61-66.
  17. Spencer-Oatey, H. (2000). *Culturally Speaking: Managing Rapport Through Talk Across Cultures*. London: Wellington Apartment. Print.
  18. Spencer-Oatey, H. (Ed.). (2008). *Culturally speaking second edition: Culture, communication and politeness theory*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
  19. Tang, C. H., & Zhang, G. Q. (2009). A contrastive study of compliment responses among Australian English and Mandarin Chinese speakers. *Journal of pragmatics*, 41(2), 325-345.
  20. Walkinshaw, I., Mitchell, N., & Subhan, S. (2019). Self-denigration as a relational strategy in lingua franca talk: Asian English speakers. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 139, 40-51.
  21. Wei-ming, T. (1979). *Humanity and self-cultivation: Essays in Confucian thought*. Berkeley, CA: Asian Humanities Thought.
  22. Wolfson, N. (1989). *Perspectives: Sociolinguistics and TESOL*. New York: Newbury Apartment Publishers. Print.
  23. Yingqi, W. (2017). *A study of compliment responses of Malaysian Chinese undergraduates* (Master's thesis, University of Malaya (Malaysia)).
  24. Yu, M. C. (2005). Sociolinguistic competence in the complimenting act of native Chinese and American English speakers: A mirror of cultural value. *Language and speech*, 48(1), 91-119.
  25. Yu, M. C. (2003). On the universality of face: Evidence from Chinese compliment response behavior. *Journal of pragmatics*, 35(10-11), 1679-1710.
  26. Yuan, Y. (2002). Compliments and compliment responses in Kunming Chinese. *Pragmatics. Quarterly Publication of the International Pragmatics Association (IPrA)*, 12(2), 183-226.
  27. 陈亭伊. (2008). 汉语称赞言语行为特征分析[D]. 西南交通大学.
  28. 戴庆厦. (2004). 社会语言学概论[M]. 北京: 商务印书馆.
  29. 顾曰国. (1992). 礼貌、语用与文化[J]. 外语教学与研究, 04:10-17+80.
  30. 何自然. (2018). 人际语用学:使用语言处理人际关系的学问[J]. 外语教学, 39(06):1-6.
  31. 胡先缙. (2005). 面子:中国人的权力游戏. 决策与信息[J]. 10:34-35.
  32. 贾玉新. (1997). 跨文化交际学[M]. 上海外语教育出版社, 370-371.
  33. 李秀华. (2005). 权势关系与话轮转换: 从社会语言学角度分析《雾都孤儿》中的会话[D]. 山东大学.
  34. 周芹芹. (2013). 汉语恭维回应语的社会语言学研究:拉波夫的语言变异观[M]. 上海: 上海交通大学出版社.