# The Collapse and Birth of Linguistics Politeness Systems
## Research of the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Chinese Politeness
## Final Report

Daniel Z. Kadar
Research Institute for Linguistics, Hungarian Academy of Sciences
E-Mail: kadaz@nytud.hu

## 1. Background & objectives

This research has reconstructed the collapse of the historical Chinese honorifics-based norms of linguistic politeness and the birth of their modern Chinese counterparts. China has been (and continues to be) famed for its long tradition of courtesy, deference, and ritualised behaviour in social and interpersonal interaction. However, much of this tradition seems restricted to the ideological level, rather than as part of everyday communication. In colloquial Chinese 'traditional' politeness seems to be lost, or at best, obscure. Many politeness practices – even ones as simple as the use of colloquial terms of address such as 'miss' (*xiaoje* 小姐) – have gone through numerous changes in the last century. Consequently, conflicting views and contradictory perceptions of Chinese politeness have formed.

This phenomenon can only be understood through retrospection: the system of Chinese communication underwent an unprecedentedly huge transformation under the influence of (early-)modern historical events. In the course of the period spanning the second half of 19th century to the 1990s – which is quite short from a historical linguistic/pragmatic perspective – the traditional norms of deferential communication and the huge Chinese honorific lexicon practically disappeared from Chinese society and were replaced by a new set of norms and a small lexicon of polite expressions. In other words, Chinese that had been an 'honorific-rich' language like Japanese and Korean became an 'honorific-poor' language with many new language behavioural rules.

In order to answer the 'mysterious' disappearance of traditional Chinese honorifics, the present project a) has comparatively examined historical (18th century to early 20th century) and contemporary (1950 to present) Chinese norms of polite communication, and b) has uncovered the motivating factors behind the large-scale changes that took place during modern times.

## 2. Framework

Due to the fact that this project carried out both historical and contemporary inquiries, in a strict methodological sense it amalgamated two different methodologies, i.e. historical pragmatics and sociopragmatics/sociolinguistics. As to the former, this project can be described a typical historical pragmatic, or more precisely, pragmaphilological (Jackobs and Jucker, 1995) work. That is, I aimed to describe

> the contextual aspects of historical texts, including the addressers and the addressees, their social and personal relationship, the physical and social setting of text production and reception, and the goal(s) of the text (ibid. p. 11).

This approach proved to be efficient to explain how certain utterances, in retrospect, conveyed 'politeness' in historical social interactions.

With regard to the analysis of modern and contemporary data, I applied a typical sociopragmatic and sociolinguistic approach. The guiding notion for such an analysis is that politeness is a reflection of three components of language in use. These three components are linguistic rules, cultural norms, and social practices. That is, a language system has certain constraints on how politeness is expressed by means of linguistic tools. The component of cultural norms embodies values placed on certain dimensions of human interaction, such as

views on hierarchy, self and group membership, and interpersonal relationship. The component of social practices reflects the current ways of doing things in society and the changes that go along with societal developments.

The above-mentioned two methodologies have been interlinked with the joint goal of describing the diachronic change of politeness in China. In this respect, this project provides a 'function to form' historical pragmatic analysis. That is, I attempted to track "how a particular function has changed the forms it employs" (Culpeper, 2009: 190). In the case of this project, the particular function is the expression of politeness. My work can also be categorised as a typical sociolinguistic inquiry into how historical events and societal changes have led to changes in linguistic forms of politeness.

The analytic methodologies have been anchored to discursive thinking in several ways. Firstly, in order to avoid generalisations, I had to put some self-reflexive emphasis on the very fact that this project *has been* normative by nature, i.e. it has primarily aimed to map and compare the *norms* of politeness in historical and modern/contemporary China. Another discursive concept that I have adopted is the ambiguity of politeness. Ambiguity means that while in a certain society there are dominant politeness ideologies and practices, they are always contested, and there are competing 'polite' social discourses. In this sense politeness can be identified as a typical social discourse, that is, according to Fairclough's (2003) definition

> it is a particular way of representing some part of the (physical, social, psychological) world— there are alternative and often competing discourses, associated with different groups of people in different social positions (ibid. p. 17).

In accordance with this definition, along with focussing on standard norms and ideologies of Chinese politeness, I also analysed non-standard and competing norms, hence demonstrating the complexity of politeness phenomenon. Finally, I employed a typically discursive analytic methodology in that I focussed on authentic sources and explored different discursive factors. In order to avoid generalisations, I analysed some data that reflects certain native speakers' interpretations of certain utterances as polite or impolite.

## 3. Data
Due to the fact that I have studied both historical and contemporary Chinese politeness, I made use of multiple databases.

Exploring historical Chinese requires some critical awareness in the selection of data sources. Fundamentally, all real historical pragmatic data are reliable and authentic in the sense that they are texts produced as part of certain historical discursive practices. With this in mind, I applied different genre types, letters and novels, which represent

a) The two major interaction types, monologues and dialogues. Traditionally, 'spoken 'and 'written' were differentiated, but in modern historical pragmatic studies no sharp difference is made between 'spoken' and 'written' genres, and it seems to be more accurate to define genres as 'monologic' and 'dialogic'.
b) The two major literary styles of China (Classical and vernacular Chinese).

Along with these two major genre types, I relied on a unique intercultural source type, i.e. Chinese textbooks written for Ryukyuan students of Chinese.

My contemporary dataset consisted of four types of data: spoken data, written texts (newspapers and public signs), TV broadcastings, and observations. The dataset included over five hundred hours of recorded spoken data and TV broadcasts, collections of various kinds of Chinese newspapers over years, over one hundred photographs of public signs and posters, and professional documents such as resumes, emails and faxes. There are also multiple methods applied in data collection, including ethnography, interactional sociolinguistics, participant

observation, survey interviews, and focus groups. Each method yielded a slightly different perspective of the object under study, but by combining data collected from these methods, we are able to triangulate our interpretations and findings.

Importantly, since collecting and analysing such a large amount of contemporary Chinese data was beyond my possibility in the present one-person project, I have ventured into research collaboration with Dr. Yuling Pan (United States Census Bureau), a leading researcher on modern Chinese language behaviour employed by the government of the United States. Our joint work has produced various co-authored publications (see the List of Publications attached).

## 4. Results

The findings of the project can be summarised as follows:

The data studied has shown that traditional Chinese was an honorific-rich language and that historical Chinese politeness was relatively rigid in terms of the use of honorific terms and deferential vocatives. However, there were various occasions where this norm was challenged. A subsequent inquiry into contemporary Chinese discursive behaviour has revealed that Chinese had become an 'honorific-poor' language and that the system of honorific terms of address and deferential vocabulary had taken on new meanings and implications. As the research of the transition of historical to modern in terms of politeness has revealed, Chinese politeness practices changed over time due to shifts in ideological standing in recent Chinese history. Moreover, the change or the result of the change was more complex than it appeared: there existed linguistic vulnerability within the structure of the Chinese language itself as well as societal forces that caused the disappearance of historical Chinese politeness expressions and gave birth to contemporary Chinese politeness, which expresses itself in very 'untraditional' forms of politeness.

Since the main publication outputs of the project are listed in a different file, in what follows the present report only summarises the main topics to which it has contributed, and lists a limited number of publications that I regard as representative ones:

*1. Theorisation of Chinese linguistic politeness*

The project's main results have been introduced in various publications such as:

1. 2011    Dániel Z. Kádár & Yuling Pan: 'Politeness in China', pp. 125–146. in eds. Dániel Z. Kádár & Sara Mills, *Politeness in East Asia*, CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS, CAMBRIDGE

2. 2011    Yuling Pan/Dániel Z. Kádár: *Politeness in Historical and Contemporary Chinese* (with the preface of Sara Mills), CONTINUUM, LONDON & NEW YORK
Hardcover, ISBN: 9781847062758, 202 pp.

3. 2011    Yuling Pan/Dániel Z. Kádár: 'Contemporary vs. historical Chinese politeness', *JOURNAL OF PRAGMATICS, Special Issue: Postcolonial Pragmatics*, eds. Richard W. Janney & Eric Anchimbe, pp. 1528–1539, Vol.43/6

4. 2012    Dániel Z. Kádár: 'Historical Chinese politeness and rhetoric. A case study of epistolary refusals', *JOURNAL OF POLITENESS RESEARCH, Special Issue: Chinese Face and (Im)politeness*, eds. Yuling Pan & Dániel Z. Kádár, pp. 93–110, Vol.8/1

5. 2010    'Exploring the historical Chinese denigration/elevation phenomenon', pp. 117–145, in eds. Jonathan Culpeper & Dániel Z. Kádár, *Historical (Im)politeness*, PETER LANG, BERN

*2. General theorisation of linguistic politeness (with the aid of data studied in the project)*
I have used various findings of this project to make contributions to theoretical inquiries into linguistic politeness. This undertaking has resulted, among others, the following representative publications:

6. 2011    Dániel Z. Kádár&Sara Mills (eds.): *Politeness in East Asia*, CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS, CAMBRIDGE
ISBN: 9781107007062

7. 2011    Marcel Bax& Dániel Z. Kádár: 'The historical understanding of historical (im)politeness: Introductory notes', in. *JOURNAL OF HISTORICAL PRAGMATICS, Double Special Issue: The Historical Understanding of Historical (Im)politeness*, eds. Marcel Bax and Dániel Z. Kádár, pp. 1–24, Vol.12/1-2

8. 2011    'Postscript', pp. 247–264, in ed. Linguistic Politeness Research Group', *Discursive Approaches to Politeness*, MOUTON DE GRUYTER, BERLIN

9. 2011    'Introduction: Politeness research in and across cultures', pp. 1–14, in eds. Francesca Bargiela-Chiappini and Dániel Z. Kádár, *Politeness across Cultures,* BASINGSTOKE, PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

10. 2010    with Jonathan Culpeper: 'Historical (im)politeness: An introduction', pp. 9–35, in eds. Jonathan Culpeper & Dániel Z. Kádár, *Historical (Im)politeness*, PETER LANG, BERN

*3. Chinese epistolary research & publication of sources*
Since Chinese letter writing is a regretfully neglected topic, in order to address this gap I published the annotated English translations of some of the most important epistolary sources studied, such as:

11. 2009    *Model Letters in Late Imperial China: 60 Selected Epistles from 'Letters of Snow Swan Retreat'*, LINCOM GMBH, MÜNCHEN & NEWCASTLE
Paperback, ISBN: 9783929075625, 240+iii pp.

More importantly, I have summarised my epistolary studies in the following monograph, which due to good selling numbers has been very quickly republished in a paperback form, and which has also won the Young Scholar Award of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences:

12. 2010    *Historical Chinese Letter Writing*, CONTINUUM, LONDON & NEW YORK
Hardcover, ISBN: 0826430880, ISBN 13: 9780826430885, 288+xviii pp.
Softcover (2011), ISBN: 9781441180360

*4. Rykyu studies*
Since as part of my project I have examined and translated various Chinese textbooks written for Ryukyuan (Okinawan) students, I have made various research contributions to Ryukyu studies, including the following representative publications:

13. 2011    *Gaku-kanwa: A Ryūkyūan Source of Language Education* (with the preface of Patrick Heinrich), CSP, NEWCASTLE
HARDCOVER, ISBN: 978-1-4438-2950-2, 135 pp.

14. 2012    'Language education, power, and cultural expansion in Ryukyu: Chinese *kanwa*

textbooks', in. eds. Shinshi Miyara and Patrick Heinrich, *Handbook of Ryukyuan Languages*, MOUTON DE GRUYTER, BERLIN

Along with publishing in the above discussed areas, the project has also made it possible to me to edit various research volumes with leading publishers such as Cambridge University Press, Palgrave Macmillan, and John Benjamins.