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Closing Conversations in English, Spanish and Chinese

Introduction: Basic Features of Conversation

The ordinary conversation is said to be the basic unit of discourse upon which all other genres are based. It is a naturally bounded unit of talk and refers here to an exchange between two interlocutors. The essential features of conversations are that they are fully interactive, locally managed, and are usually about mundane topics (Nofsinger 1991). The interactive nature of conversation stems from the turn-taking feature and the relevance requirement. What one partner can say is limited by the content of the previous utterance.

Most competent language users identify with the problem of how to exit a conversation gracefully (Leech 1983). Why is it that we can not simply say to someone, "I have nothing more to say. Goodbye." Laver (1981) points to the continual tension interlocutors feel between the need to exit efficiently and the need to be polite. The latter has to do with one's social identity, or face, our own and the addressee's, which must be protected in conversational interactions (Brown and Levinson 1987). The problem is how to turn off the turn taking mechanism without one speaker losing face and to provide an opportunity to bring up a topic which heretofore would not have been relevant.

Conversations are collaborative. Bakhtin (1986) has emphasized that speakers orient themselves to the characteristics and anticipated responses of the hearer. This results in a kind of double voice where the addressee re-invoices and re-accents the words of the speaker. This was a common feature of the conversation closings in my data. .

Closings as framing devices

Common communication occurrences tend to become highly routinized. In the case of conversations, the beginnings and endings are made up of a finite number of moves and rituals, while the middle is more spontaneous and free flowing. These rituals are key features of the social life of any society, and studying them closely will reveal much about the ways social relations are organized in the culture.

When signaling availability to engage in a conversation, one is agreeing to the constraints or rules that oblige speakers to behave and respond in particular ways. While the system allows for individual identities, varying role relationships and specific contexts, both parties are nonetheless expected to maintain a kind of ritual balance. Conversational partners are generally unaware of the underlying system until such occasions when expectations are violated. When one omits the expected ritual, it gives the impression of anger, rudeness or worse.

When one participant wants to end the conversation, he or she gives a pre-closing signal indicating a disinclination to continue, often beginning with a particle such as ‘well’ or ‘okay’. Following this, there is usually a binding of the topic such as a summary statement or aphorism. The other partner may now introduce a topic that, until then, would not have been relevant. However, it is expected that the actual closing will occur soon after the preclosing signal is given.

Conversation closings as face threatening acts

I claim that, in most cultures, moving to close a conversation is an intrinsically face threatening act (FTA) since the speaker must indicate that he/she does not share the hearer’s desire to continue. If this is so, then mitigation is required. Brown and Levinson (1987) identify three main strategies of politeness used across cultures for facework. *Positive face* has to do with satisfying others’ need for affiliation and approval. *Negative face* involves protecting one’s own freedom of action and refraining from impeding the actions of others. A communicative act is done *off-record* in order to make it difficult for the hearer to attribute a single communicative intention to that act. An example of an off-the-record closing would be a simple summarizing expression (e.g. “So there you have it’.

Types of mitigation, consolidation, and redress

Goffman (1967) coined the term *facework* for expressions designed to counteract face threats to self and others. Mitigation and redress are necessary to preserve the face of both conversational partners, but especially that of the OCP, the person being left. Redress can take the form of regret (e.g. “I wish I could continue this lovely chat”), pleasure (“It was great seeing you”), reasons or accounts (“I have a class in five

minutes", and reference to future contact ("I'll see you tomorrow in class"). The leave-taker may use a kind of mitigation that protects the negative face of the speaker (e.g. "I know you have a lot to do today"). Or he/she may invoke the interest of the other as in "I don't want to run up your phone bill."

Laver (1981) categorizes these types of expressions according to their functions, mitigation and consolidation. Mitigation allows the participants to achieve a cooperative parting so that the person being left avoids the feeling of rejection. Consolidation serves to solidify the relationship between the two parties by emphasizing the positive aspects of the encounter, the continuation of the relationship, and mutual solidarity. This kind of phatic communion (Malinowski 1972) is needed because conversation, unlike other speech genres such as the interview, is characterized by the semblance of equal speaker rights (Wilson 1989). This requires the addressee to restrain his/her emotional involvement in the conversation so as not seem offended. Pretending not to notice when one's partner has done something face-threatening is itself a kind of redress or preventive facework (Cupach and Metts 1994). .

Universal constraints on conversation and conversation closings

Goffman (1967) argues that human beings are "ritually delicate" creatures. All cultures have rituals for opening and closing conversations. Greetings and partings across cultures share the feature of phatic communion, talk that has as its goal the smoothing relationships between participants Laver (1981). Preclosing signals help the interlocutor anticipate what will happen next. (Firth 1972), helping to keep the conversation orderly and allowing both parties to exit gracefully and then move on.

Brown and Levinson (1987) claim that their abstract notion of "face" is universal. That is, all of us have a need for approval (positive face) and a need to be unimpeded in ones actions (negative face). Therefore, across cultures and subcultures, strategies of politeness will be employed. On the other hand, they point out that notions of face reflect cultural ideas about the nature of the social persona, honor and virtue, shame and redemption, and the like (p.13). These researchers examined studies of politeness in diverse groups and identified three social factors that determine the level of tact that speaker (S) will use to an addressee (H). These are relative power (P) of S over H, the social distance (D) between S and H, and the ranking of the imposition (I) involved in doing the face-threatening act (FTA)(p.15).

The study

This study based on 142 audio-recorded conversations testing the effects of gender, ethnicity/language (Spanish, English and Chinese), and social proximity on conversation closings. The conversations were about ten minutes in length and all subjects were aware that they were being audio-recorded. In the present paper, I will focus mainly on ethnicity as a variable (See Appendix).

There were three research questions: (1) Who gave the first preclosing signal, the Initiating Conversational Partner (ICP) or the Other Conversational Partner (OCP)? (2) How long were the conversation closings (measured in terms of real time, number of utterances (speaker turns), and number of information phrases)? and (3) How many polite expressions were produced (oriented to either the positive or negative face of the addressee) after the first preclosing signal was given?

Ethnicity as a variable

The data consist of conversations conducted in English, Chinese and Spanish. In addition, there were conversations conducted in English in which one speaker was a native speaker of American English (AES) and the other was a native speaker of Chinese (CS) or Spanish (SS). The AESs were all residents of the New York City area. Many were tutors or colleagues at the community college.

The SSs were from countries in Latin America as well as the Caribbean. The CSs came from both the Peoples Republic of China and Taiwan. All of the non-native speakers were enrolled in a speech course for foreign students. The students had been living in New York from less than one year to seven years.

In this study, I have conflated culture and ethnicity with native language. While acknowledging that there are many cultural differences among the countries sharing a single language, I am assuming overarching similarities based on common historical, social, religious, and linguistic traditions (Dealy 1992, Johnson 2000). Cultural norms underlie language use in everyday communication even if they are not made explicit. First languages and discourse practices are learned in particular socio-cultural contexts.

Hypotheses

Overall, I predicted that the initiating conversational partner (ICP), rather than the other partner (OCP), would more often make the first pre-closing move. It is the ICP who has a particular purpose for initiating the interaction, so it is likely that this individual will arrive at point when he/she feels that this purpose has been satisfied (Grosz and Sidner 1986). For this reason, the ICP may assume a more managerial role in the conversation.

I predicted that the native speakers English, Spanish and Chinese would exhibit both convergent and divergent patterns. I hypothesized that, in all three groups The ICP would more often give the first pre-closing signal than the OCP. I believed that the closings of the Spanish conversations would be longer than either the English or the Chinese. The more elaborate Spanish closings would reflect the Latin American ideal of oratorical nobility and outwardly impeccable manners. This is in contrast to American Puritan-capitalist style marked by appearing factual, down-to-earth, and sincere (Dealy 1992). The Chinese conversations, I thought, would have the shortest closings, due to the lowest number of polite expressions. Chinese interlocutors are constrained by principles of sincerity, modesty, and balance (Gu 1990).

Another principle that comes into play is *'han xu'* or implicit communication. The word '*han'* means to reserve or to contain and the word '*xu'* means to store or to save. To be '*han xu'* means to leave good feelings between people unspoken so as not to upset internal or relational balance (Gao and Ting-Toomey 1998).

The Findings

Who gives the first preclosing signal?

Overall, in the majority of conversations, almost 75%, the first pre-closing signal was given by the ICP. This affirms the important managerial role of the person who initiates the conversation. This was true regardless of ethnic mix, although the Spanish speakers seem to be more tightly bound to this principle than the other two groups.

Table I: ICPs and OCPs as ICCs (initiators of the conversation closing)

ICC	N	%
Total	142	100%
ICP	106	74.6%
OCP	36	25.4%
Significance: p=.0001, highly significant		

Table2: ICPS and OCPS as ICCs by Ethnicity

ETHNICITY	N	ICP	OCP	ICP%
Spanish/Spanish	29	23	4	79.3%
English/English	37	24	13	64.9%
Chinese/Chinese	15	10	5	66.7%
Spanish/English	35	26	10	72.2%
Chinese/English	25	23	2	92%
Significance: p=.104, not statistically significant				

In which conversations were the longest closing sections found?

I found that the closing section of a conversation of a conversation roughly ten minutes long was about 24 seconds in length. In data, the shortest closings lasted only about five or six seconds, and the longest nearly two minutes.

Table 3: Length in Real Time by Ethnicity

Ethnicity and Culture	N	LENGTH MEASURED IN SECONDS
Total	142	23.13
Spanish/Spanish	29	26.03
English/English	37	22.51
Chinese/Chinese	15	16.27
Spanish/English	36	31.81
Chinese/English	36	12.26
Significance: p= .003, highly significant		

The findings here indicate that ethnicity is an important variable in terms of closing length. The contrast between the Spanish conversations and the Chinese conversations is particularly stark. The longest closings with respect to actual time were those in conversations between Spanish and English-speaking interlocutors. The closing sections in conversations between SS males averaged 30.75 seconds. This may be due to the emphasis in the Latin culture on verbal eloquence.

The English speakers seem to be accomodating to the speech styles of both the SSs and the CSs. This is not surprising since all of the subjects regarded their partners favorably. In the case of the SS/AES pairs, they may be said to by *hyper*converging in that they are going beyond both English and Spanish norms (Giles and Coupland 1991).

Length as measured by speaker turns

The length of conversation closings was also measured in terms of the number of speaker turns beginning with the first pre-closing signal. The mean number of speaker turns or utterances for the corpus was 6.70. The number of turns ranged from a minimum of one to a maximum of 16. A sign of intent to terminate is one speaker yielding his or her turn to speak. Ethnicity proved to be a significant predictor of closing length.

These differences indicate that closing a conversation is not viewed as FTAs to the same degree across cultures. The Chinese closed their conversations with fewer utterances than either the Spanish speakers or the English speakers. The English closings had more speaker turns, but, measured in real time, the Spanish closings were longer. The fewest speaker turns (3.00) were found in the Chinese conversations.

Length as measured by Information Phrases

Table4: Length as Measured by Information Phrases

Spanish/Spanish	29	15.66
English/ English	37	12.76
Chinese/Chinese	15	8.67
Spanish/ English	36	17.50
Chinese/English	25	8.44
Significance: p= .003**,** highly significant		

Which closings contained the most polite expressions*?*

The longer closing sections are lengthy because they contain more polite expressions. There was a mean of 3.85 and a mode of 3.00 polite expressions of the types previously listed. The ICPs who gave almost 75% of the first pre-closing signals, produced more polite expressions than the 0CPs. However, cases where the OCP gave the first preclosing signal, he/she produced more polite expressions than the ICP.

Table 5: Number of Polite Expressions for ICPs and OCPs

ROLE	N as ICC	MEAN NUMBER OF POLITE EXPRESSIONS
ICP	106	2.35
OCP	36	1.48
Significance: p= .035, significant		

The ICPs produced more polite expressions to mitigate the preclosings signals. Moving to close a conversation does involve a threat to the face of the other party, but it also indicates that there is an expectation that the ICCs' polite expressions will be reciprocated, albeit it to a lesser degree.

Table 6: Number of Polite Expressions by Ethnicity

ETHNICITY	N	MEAN NUMBER OF POLITE EXPRESSIONS
Total	142	3.85
Spanish/ Spanish	4.07	4.07
English/ English	37	2.86
Chinese/ Chinese	15	2.13
Spanish/English	36	5.50
Chinese/ English	26	3.72
Significance: p= .001, highly significant		

In terms the number of polite expressions used in closings, ethnicity is an important variable. These findings correlate with the longer closings found in the conversations of SSs and in those of the SS/AES pairs. It affirms that the Spanish-speaking world has developed an elaborate system of politeness strategies, emphasizing noble and fluent speech. Its members go to great lengths to perform the rituals needed to minimize potential face threats. In the case of the AES/SS' closings, the SSs seem especially sensitive to the relatively higher social positions of their English-speaking partners. When roles are asymmetrical, the less powerful interlocutor may use more polite speech in an effort to be seen as a competent communicator.

The AESs need to perform facework, but they also want to be efficient and sincere. The CS/CS and CS/AES closings contain the fewest number of polite expressions. The economy of strategy use in the Oriental interaction can be attributed to the politeness theory of *dian dao wei zhi, or 'point to is enough'.* It's better to just marginally touch the point. The Chinese prefer to end the potentially awkward part of the conversation as soon as possible (Liao and Bresnahan 1996). A second explanation is the concept of '*han xu',* in which nonverbal messages are valued over verbal ones, especially when they contain emotional content (Gao and Ting-Toomey).

A third explanation is that the use of positive politeness often involves the use of compliments. However, from a Chinese point of view, complimenting actually *threatens* the addressee's face. Since the compliment conveys the speaker's desire to make the hearer feel good, it indebts the recipient, obliging her to repay the debt. Thus, CSs tend to give fewer compliments than AESs and are likely to denigrate themselves or shift credit to others when they receive praise (Chen 1993).

Discussion

Ethnicity was a significant factor in terms of both length of closings and number of polite expressions found. Gender roles, status roles and degrees of social distance are all shaped by culture in which people are communicating. In China, for instance, people of other cultures are considered to be more distant socially that they are in an ethnically diverse society like the United States.

In communicating across cultures, individuals tend to conform to the conventions of their home cultures unless they have had prior training or experience to familiarize them with the other culture. If the

expected rituals are too abbreviated, too strange or absent altogether, the result can be a state of disequilibrium and a loss of face.

This study, particularly the Chinese data, points to the inadequacy of Brown and Levinson's theory to explain cross-linguistic politeness. Similar shortcomings have been identified in studies of Japanese (Ide 1989), Korean (Clancy 1989), Polish (Wierzbicka 1985), and Chinese (Gu 1990) (in Chen 1993). Chen, in a study of CSs' and AESs' responses to compliments, found that Leech's politeness principles better explained the very different responses of the two groups. His Politeness Principle (PP) comprises six maxims: Tact, Generosity, Approbation, Modesty, Agreement, and Sympathy.

Members of the three cultural groups closed conversations differently, partly because each culture has a distinct view about what constitutes self-image . For the SSs, self-image is based on elevating oneself through displays of verbal eloquence. To the AESs, self-denigration would amount to self-humiliation. In the Chinese culture, modesty is one of the most important constituents of self-image, so that appearing humble and modest maintains and enhances ones face (Gu 1990, Chen 1993).

Rituals of greeting and parting are performed to show that we are members of an order of social relations. Once established, these relations can transcend particular situations and can overcome barriers of time and space. However, they need to by symbolically maintained (Rothenbuhler 1998). The findings show that the informational and emotional content of these symbolic devices can by highly variable or even minimal. What seems of primary importance, is the perpetuation of a social relationship, a recognition of the both participants as social entities, a personal element in a common social context (Firth 1972:1-2). Rituals of parting are powerful devices for expressing the social order and for performing the roles and patterns that make up a culture.

Appendix

The Variables

Ethnicity / Language	**N=142**
Spanish/ Spanish	29
English/ English	37
Chinese/ Chinese	15
Spanish/ English	36
Chinese/ English	25
Gender	
Female/Female	48
Male/ Male	26
Male/Female	68
Social Proximity	
Intimates	29
Acquaintances	89
Strangers	31

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