

# How to make a drama out of (im)politeness: (Im)politeness in *The Joy Luck Club* (1993)

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## Abstract

*The Joy Luck Club* (1993) is a film adapted from Amy Tan's best-selling novel of the same name (1991). It mainly deals with the differences in social/cultural and personal values between four Chinese-born mothers and their daughters, who are born in the United States. In this paper I focus on the story of one pair, Suyuan and her daughter June. I have chosen two extracts from two consecutive scenes in the film: (a) two mothers brag about their daughters' talents; (b) a family argument between June and Suyuan. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate (A) how politeness and impoliteness theories can help us to interpret the conversations from the two extracts, and hence our understanding of the characters' relationships, and (B) how the non-linguistic elements in the film (including paralinguistic and performance features) work together with the dialogue to reinforce the effects created in (A).

## Introduction

Most of the work that has been done so far relating to stylistic textual analysis has tended to be on traditional literary genres, such as poems, prose and fiction. Even in the case of drama, it is mainly the dramatic text (i.e. the script) that the stylistic approach has been applied to (see, for example, McIntyre, 2006; Poole, 1994). McIntyre's (2006) book on point of view in drama mentions about the non-linguistic elements such as stage performance, which, however, is accessed mainly through *reading* the scripts. Why does the traditional stylistic analysis seldom cover the issue of integrating drama performance? To answer this question, Short (1998:7-9) suggests that a drama performance often changes from one to the next, and hence can be 'unfaithful' to the original script. For example, the director and the acting staff can give various interpretations to the original play of *Hamlet*, and then produce it in various ways, and/or in different theatres around the world. It can be difficult to provide a sensitive analysis of these variables in relation to live performances. Films, however, are recorded on video or DVD, which enables us to look through the performances repetitiously for a more detailed study. One may then ask how we can analyse dialogue in film. In traditional film criticism, the linguistic aspects of film dialogue are seldom dealt with in most film criticism. For example, the term "dialogue" is defined in Katz's (1998) exhaustive film encyclopedia as:

[...] in a film, all the spoken lines. Since the cinema is essentially a visual medium, dialogue is, or should be, used more sparingly than in the theatre, supplementing action rather than substituting for it. (1998: 366)

This definition suggests that film critics tend to view film dialogue as something less important in comparison with the visuals. Indeed, as McIntyre (2008: 312) mentions, typical film studies tend to focus more on either "macro-level analyses of issues pertaining to the film as a whole (e.g. narrative structure, the representation of particular ideologies)", or "are micro-analyses of film" (e.g. detailed analysis of lightening, or camera work, or editing, etc.). It is based on these that the stylistic multimodal analysis differs from the typical film studies. In order to account for not only what is said, but also how it is said, and also the contextual and co-textual elements, we have to examine our data with the most detailed transcript. Related to this, my textual analysis in sections 3 and 4 will be based on a full transcription of the two extracts, including images, dialogue, and description of visuals.

I shall make clear at this point that this difference in methodology in treating film dialogue is not intended as an attack on practices of film critics, nor cultural studies. A film should always be perceived as an organic whole, which outputs information spontaneously from the visual and the audio channels. However, due to space and time limitations, this paper cannot cover all the filmic elements from camera work to sound effects, from colour to lighting, etc. Instead, the issues mentioned above lead me to work towards an explanation of (a) what we can get from analysing the film dialogue (i.e. what a character speaks); (b) what the effects we can get by integrating (a) with, specifically, the paralinguistic features (i.e. how a character speaks) and

character’s performance (i.e. how a character behaves physically while speaking).

For purposes of illustration and analysis, I have chosen the film *The Joy Luck Club* (1993) which can be roughly called a family melodrama. It mainly deals with the personal conflicts in the mother-and-daughter relationship. This conflict-driven personal relationship is based on misunderstandings in relation to a cultural gap. Although I have selected two extracts, clearly, the amount of data is not large enough for providing a more significant analysis statistically speaking. However, it is hoped that future research can be carried in this area, including more texts from a greater variety of films.

## Politeness

Politeness is normally perceived as a series of social practices of ‘good manners’. When person A refers to person B as ‘good-mannered’ or ‘polite’, she/he actually refers to certain behaviour person B performs, and in turn the comfortable feeling created on person A. Goffman (1967) was the first sociologist who brought the issue of politeness phenomenon to academic attention. He regards politeness as a social rule of human conduct (see Section 2.2) which is based on face-maintenance.

### ‘Face’ and the ‘extension of ego’

The concept of ‘face’ is firstly introduced by Goffman (1967: 5) and defined as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact”. It is commonly believed that the ‘polite acts’ are established within a certain community with certain cultural systems, and also they are performed within this community under the guidance of the cultural systems. Based on this, Liu (1986: 28) extends Goffman’s definition of face by introducing a useful diagram which demonstrates how one’s feeling of face is related to the elements concerning one’s daily life. The diagram is called “ego and the extension of ego”, and is given below.

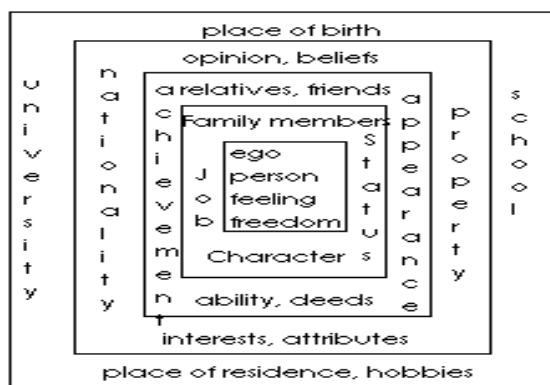


Figure 1 Ego and the extension of ego

The 'ego' located in the centre is considered as the most important element in relation to one's face, including personal feeling and freedom. Other elements around 'ego' are placed at different distances from the centre, according to the degree of impact they can have on face. This means, the further one element is situated from the 'ego', the less impact it would have on face. Since Liu's diagram is prototypical, the elements and their positions may vary from culture to culture, from place to place, or even sometimes from person to person. Hence, it is likely for us to have a situation where some of the components are foregrounded while others remain in the background. Liu gives an example based on the Chinese cultural context. In a Chinese middle school where the teachers hold a meeting with the parents of their students, it is often the parents, even the ones of high status (say, a government official or the owner of a company), who pay respect to the teachers. This is because the teacher-parent relation is foregrounded and other factors become less relevant. In one of my extracts where the two mothers brag about their daughters (see Section 3.1), the women's relationship as enemies takes over their friendship, and the (verbal and/or physical) interactions are more likely to create a face-threatening effect.

### **Co-operation in face-work**

Goffman suggests that the *face-work*, which exists in all social encounters, follows a "guide for action, recommended [...] because it is suitable or just" (Goffman, 1967: 48). This is called *the rule of conduct*. It is this rule-governed nature that makes much face-work ritualized and conventionalized. Goffman's face-work consists mainly of two processes - *the avoidance process* and *the correction process*. The first is the process during which a person tries to avoid threats which are likely to occur in contacts by preventing particular topics arising and certain activities happening. When this effort fails, the participant will undertake the second process, i.e. to recognize them and to correct them. A commonly used strategy in being tacitly cooperative is *reciprocal self-denial*. Often the speaker takes a voluntary role to "depreciate" himself while complimenting the others. Such ideas are similar to the Maxims of Approbation and Modesty in terms of Leech (1983) (see Section 2.3).

Within the two processes, Goffman notes a strategy he calls *deference*. This refers to a "component of activity which functions as a symbolic means by which appreciation is regularly conveyed to a recipient of this recipient, or of something of which this recipient is taken as a symbol, extension, or agent" (1967: 56). Deference can be applied not only to someone in power, but also among social equals. There are two main forms of deference: *avoidance rituals* and *presentational rituals*. Whereas presentational rituals refer to acts like compliments, solutions and invitations made by the individual to show their concern towards their interlocutors (Goffman, 1967: 71), avoidance rituals refer to "those forms of deference which lead the actor to keep at a distance from the recipient and not to violate the 'ideal sphere' that lies around the recipient". The 'sphere' typically includes such matters that cause pain, embarrassment or humiliation to the recipient (Goffman, 1967: 62-65). As shown in the second extract below, the child June, although having less institutional power, penetrates her mother's 'ideal sphere' by bringing up a taboo topic (see Section 4.1).

## Brown and Levinson: Face-threatening acts and politeness strategies

Borrowing the term partly from Goffman, Brown and Levinson refer to *face* as “the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself” (1987: 66). From this we can see that face can be transferred into wants - the desire that one’s actions be unimpeded by others or that one’s wants are desirable by others. The former kind of wants is named as *negative face*, where the latter is *positive face* (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 66). Whereas negative face is reflected in one’s desire “to have the freedom to act as one choose”, positive face refers to one’s desire “to be liked, approved of, respected and appreciated by others” (Thomas, 1995: 169).

Further, Brown and Levinson construct a Model Person (henceforth, MP) who is attributed with rationality and face, and they examine how this MP acts in different situations where politeness is involved. For Brown and Levinson, there are some speech acts that are inherently face-threatening, and are named as the “face-threatening acts” (henceforth, FTAs) - those social acts that intrinsically threaten face. There are negative FTAs, like issuing commands and asking for help or services, and positive FTAs, like giving criticism. Under normal circumstances, an MP always refrains from performing FTAs, but when it is no longer possible to avoid performing FTAs, the MP would tend to minimize the face-threatening effect of the FTAs. There are four possibilities if s/he decides to perform the FTA: (a) three sets of “on-record” strategies and (b) one set of “off-record” strategies. In (a), one can perform the FTA without any redressive action and produce the highest face threat – “bald on record”. One can also perform FTAs “on-record” by using positive or negative politeness. By “off record”, Brown and Levinson mean the FTA is performed in a way that “there is more than one unambiguously attributable intention so that the actor cannot be held to have committed himself to one particular intent” (1987: 69). That is, the FTA is performed by means of an implicature and always requires the hearer to make an inference (Grice, 1975). Brown and Levinson elaborate the “off-record” strategy into a list of fifteen super-strategies based on Grice’s Cooperative Maxims.

The strategy of using rhetorical questions is seen in western culture as a politeness strategy. Because of its indirectness, Brown and Levinson suggest that it is a violation of the quality maxim to redress a threat. In Chinese culture, however, rhetorical questions can sometimes threaten one’s face. The reason for this is that when a rhetorical question is produced, there is no answer expected from the hearer, either because “the answer is too obvious, or too difficult, or too much to the H’s disadvantage” (Liu, 1986: 76). Hence, the employment of rhetorical questions can be considered more impolite and face-threatening to the hearer, and should be viewed as a bald-on-record strategy. I will discuss this strategy in more detail in the discussion of the family argument (see Section 4.1).

Brown and Levinson’s work has attracted a great deal of discussion, including much criticism, e.g. that their description of FTAs implies that these acts are face-threatening to either the speaker or the hearer, whereas in reality, we can find examples where a FTA can threaten the face of the speaker *and* the hearer (e.g. an apology). I would like to add another point here which is relevant to my texts. That is, Brown and Levinson’s approach to politeness is based on a hypothetical Modal Person who is

assumed to be rational and care about other's face and feelings (1987: 66). Goffman also suggests, in his mentioning of the "ideal sphere" (see Section 2.2), that bringing up the topics which are painful and embarrassing or humiliating to the hearer can be impolite and hurtful to the hearer's feeling. All these seem to suggest that the social rite of politeness might not be working properly among people who have less control of their emotions or less sense of appropriateness in their social behaviour (sometimes, for example, children or adults who are drunk). We shall see in the later analysis that the child performs mostly impoliteness strategies and shows no consideration of the interlocutor's face. This is probably because a child is less "qualified" to be a Modal Person (see Section 4.2).

### Leech's politeness principle (PP) and maxims

In this section I will discuss Leech's approach (1977, 1983) towards politeness, namely the 'Politeness Principle' (henceforth, the PP). According to Leech, it is normally used "to minimize (other things being equal) the expression of impolite beliefs' and 'maximize (other things being equal) the expression of polite beliefs" (Leech, 1983: 81). By using the word "principle"<sup>1</sup>, Leech explicitly suggests that the PP is more pragmatic than linguistic and is parallel to Grice's "Cooperative Principle" (1975). This enables Leech's framework to provide a more satisfactory explanation of those social/verbal communications in which Grice's CP fails to explain. I should make it clear that, although I will be mainly applying Leech's framework to my extracts, I am aware that there are problems with his work which have been discussed by a number of people<sup>2</sup>. I shall present his PP here and comment at the end of this section.

#### *Politeness maxims*

Leech (1983: 131-8) explicates the PP by dividing it into the following maxims for polite behaviour:

- (1) The Tact Maxim
  - (a) Minimize the cost to others
  - (b) Maximize the benefit to others
- (2) The Generosity Maxim
  - (a) Minimize the benefit to self
  - (b) Maximize the cost of self
- (3) The Approbation Maxim
  - (a) Minimize dispraise of others
  - (b) Maximize praise of others
- (4) The Modesty Maxim

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<sup>1</sup> Leech distinguishes *principles* from *rules* in this way: "Principles differ from rules in being normative rather than descriptive, which means that (a) they can be infringed without ceasing to be in force; (b) they can conflict with other co-existing principles; (c) they are relative rather than absolute in their application; (d) they tend to yield interpretations in terms of continuous rather discrete values" (1980 [1977]: 4; also 1983a:21-30).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Fraser (1990) and Thomas (1995).

- (a) Minimize praise of self
- (b) Maximize dispraise of self
- (5) The Agreement Maxim
  - (a) Minimize disagreement between self and others
  - (b) Maximize agreement between self and others
- (6) The Sympathy Maxim
  - (a) Minimize antipathy between self and others
  - (b) Maximize sympathy between self and others.

Due to the space limitations, I will focus only on (3) and (4) from the above list - the maxims of Approbation and Modesty - which are relevant to my examples. The two maxims seem to be two sides of a coin in that whereas the Approbation Maxim is more 'hearer-centered', the Modesty Maxim is 'self-centered'. The former is explained as avoiding saying unpleasant things about the hearer but giving more compliments. The latter requires the speaker, normally in a situation when they are praised and hence their face is enhanced, to say things which either deny or reduce the degree of the praise of the self.

Leech further suggests that the PP, co-existing with the CP with their respective goals and maxims, has a higher regulative role in daily communications. In other words, in order to maintain social equilibrium and friendly relations, sometimes the interlocutors would sacrifice Cooperative maxims to adhere to Politeness maxims (1983:82). I agree with Leech on this point, especially in some situations where interactions are based mostly on the social goal of mutual harmony, as we can see in the following example illustrated by Thomas (1995: 66):

- Example 1 [*Context: A is asking B about a mutual friend's new boyfriend*]  
A: Is he nice?  
B: She seems to like him.

B could have just answered with "No" or "Yes" which would be the precise amount of information A requires. Grice defines this kind of non-observance as *flouting* - "a speaker blatantly fails to observe a maxim at the level of what is said, with the deliberate intention of generating an implicature" (Thomas, 1995: 65). By flouting, the speaker has no intention of deceiving or misleading, but to "prompt the hearer to look for a meaning which is different from [...] the expressed meaning" (Thomas 1995: 65). Hence, in Example 1 above A would assume that B is somehow 'incapable' of speaking informatively and honestly. This leads A to look for another implicature (perhaps that B does not like the new boyfriend but tries to be polite). One possible implication is that, as Thomas explains (1995: 66), B's flouting stems from "a clash between the maxims of Quantity and Quality", because s/he has to speak on the basis of the evidence they have (i.e. the maxim of Quantity), but cannot say for sure whether the new boyfriend is nice or not (i.e. the maxim of Quality). In effect, this gives A the impression that B does not really like the new boyfriend, but in order to be polite and avoid threatening the boyfriend's positive face, B flouts the Gricean maxims of Quantity and Quality to uphold the Approbation Maxim in Leech's terms (i.e. minimize the dispraise of others).

### *Irony principle*

Sometimes, however, when, for example, approbation is applied, the speaker might 'praise' the hearer for something which is actually bad (and both the interlocutors know it is bad). This is labelled by Leech as the "Irony Principle" (henceforth, the IP) and described as:

If you must cause offence, at least do so in a way which does not overtly conflict with the PP, but allows the hearer to arrive at the offensive point of your remark indirectly, by way of implicature (1983: 82).

The IP "enables a speaker to be impolite while seeming to be polite; it does so by superficially breaking the Cooperative Principle, but ultimately upholding it" (1983: 142). As we will see in one of the examples later<sup>3</sup>, the two Chinese mothers appear to be polite (at least to sound polite), but in fact is "indulging in an "honest" form of apparent deception, at the expense of politeness" (Leech, 1983: 83).

So far we might notice that this IP seems to produce more of an impolite impression on the hearer rather than a polite and "nice" one. With regard to this issue, Leech suggests that in a situation where IP is observed, the notion of 'politeness' is better thought of as *relative politenesses* – a kind of politeness that is "relative to context or situation" (Leech, 1983: 102). By this, we are encouraged to identify and interpret politeness based on the specific context/situation where the social communication is carried out. So in the case of IP, it is more important to identify in a specific situation, whether the IP is used with the intention to minimize impoliteness.

Although Leech was the first one who explicitly suggests that the PP is parallel to the CP, he does not to clarify the relationships between these two principles. He seems to indicate the principles come to play in order – "if the CP is violated, the PP is invoked, and if that is violated, the Irony Principle comes into play" (Dillon *et al.* 1985: 454). Like in Example 1 above, is it really the case that person B tries to observe the PP by violating the CP, or that B simply observes the CP because they do not know this new boyfriend well enough to give a judgment? Dillon *et al.* (1985: 452-6) provide an enlightening discussion of these sorts of issues. I will not go into more detail here due to the spatial limitations.

## **Linguistic theories on impoliteness**

*Culpeper (1996): Impoliteness strategies*

On the basis of Brown and Levinson's model in Figure 2, Culpeper (1996: 356) suggests that every politeness strategy has its opposite, namely, impoliteness strategy to attack face. They are:

- (1) Bald on record impoliteness
- (2) Positive impoliteness

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<sup>3</sup> See section 3.1



- (3) Negative impoliteness
- (4) Sarcasm/mock politeness

The “bald-on-record” impoliteness normally occurs when FTAs are used “in a direct, clear, unambiguous and concise way in circumstances where face is not irrelevant or minimized” (Culpeper, 1996: 356). For the purpose of a better distinction, Culpeper (1996: 356) claims that Brown and Levinson’s “bald on record” is a *politeness* strategy. It is normally used in situations where impoliteness is not intended (e.g. when the face concerns are suspended in an emergency, when the threat to hearer’s face is very small, or when the speaker has more power over the hearer). A parent, for example, has the power, right and duty to perform FTAs to the child, if, they think that it is in the child’s interest.

#### *Impoliteness and characterization*

So far we have covered generally the linguistic work on how speakers are polite through their verbal productions and how they mitigate impoliteness linguistically. In this section I focus on Culpeper’s (1998; 2001) approach to impoliteness in dramatic texts, especially to the issue of how impoliteness helps us understand a fictional character. Culpeper (1998: 83) suggests that the choice of an (im)politeness strategy of a particular character helps to increase our understanding of the personality of this character. More specifically, it helps us to understand “(1) how characters position themselves relative to other characters, and (2) how they manipulate others in pursuit of their goals” (1998: 83).

My interest here, however, is in whether or not children have a sufficiently adult-like comprehension of face to effectively conform to politeness norms in social interactions. Brown and Levinson’s proposal of a Modal Person (see section 2.3) seems to suggest that in normal circumstances children, due to their limited social experience and knowledge, are assumed to show less concern with regard to how they are perceived by the public. This leads to the assumption that, compared to adults, it is more likely for children to do FTAs without noticing that they are being ‘impolite’. Such an assumption can be reinforced by the fact that children are normally bound by fewer social obligations, which encourages them to be more expressive and direct in expressing their emotions. One study (Camras, Pristo, & Brown, 1985) suggests that children are still in the process of acquiring the appropriate sociolinguistic skills, politeness being one of them. This study also points out that the children with a hostile-aggressive nature, for example, would be more easily provoked and act less politely than the adults with the same nature.



### **(Im)politeness in *The Joy Luck Club***

In this chapter I use the concepts that I have explained previously on the two extracts from the film *The Joy Luck Club*. The extracts are mainly about two characters, the Chinese mother Suyuan, who has immigrated to the United States, and her daughter,

June, who is a second-generation American. When June was a little girl, Suyuan had too high expectations for her, hoping that she would be a piano playing prodigy. June resents her mother's pressure, and tries to get away with practising sloppily. Since her piano teacher, old Mr. Chong, is deaf, she can play incorrectly without him noticing. Suyuan's best friend, Lindo, is also ambitious about her daughter, Waverly, who is China Town's chess champion. There are competitions between the two mothers who always brag about their daughters when they meet. This feeling of competition has transferred to the young girls, who now dislike one another. In a school performance June plays terribly and makes many mistakes in front of her parents and their friends. June's performance failure embarrasses her mother publicly.

### Extract 1: Suyuan and Lindo brag about their daughters' talents

Extract 1 below happens before June performs. My discussion will start with the linguistic analysis of the voice-over narration which helps us to contextualise the conversation. I will then carry out a more detailed politeness discussion of the conversation. Lastly, I will examine how the message we get from the linguistic analysis is reinforced by integrating the non-linguistic elements from this film extract. By 'non-linguistic elements', I mainly refer to how the speakers deliver their speeches verbally (i.e. the paralinguistic features), and what physical behaviour they exhibit (i.e. character's performance). A table with the dialogue and some general visual features is provided below. The audio information is further divided into diegetic sound (i.e. dialogue and other sound effects which are "presented as originating from a source within the film's fictional world") and non-diegetic sound (which is "represented as coming from a source outside the space of the narrative") (Bordwell & Thompson, 2001: 430, 432). In the extract below, the diegetic sound is the mothers' conversation whereas the nondiegetic sound is the voice-over narration (henceforth, VO). I have further divided shots 3 and 5 because of the some interesting changes in character's performance (see column 'Description of Visuals' in the table below).

Shot no.	Image	Description of Visuals	Diegetic Sound	Nondiegetic Sound
1		Little June stands behind the curtain, waiting for her piano performance. She looks out towards the audience.		[VO] When I was young, Auntie Lindo
2		The camera cuts to Lindo and Suyuan, who sit next to each other.		[VO] ...was my mother's best friend and archenemy.







3.1		June, still waiting at the backstage, takes a deep breath.		[VO] Their weapons of choice were comparing their children.
3.2		She then looks out towards the audience again.		Mom was sick of hearing Auntie Lindo brag about her daughter...
4		The camera is cut to a close-up of Lindo's daughter, Waverly. She sits with one of her hands supporting her chin.		[VO] ...Waverly, who was Chinatown's chess champion.
5.1		The camera cuts back to the two mothers.	[Lindo] I ask my daughter: "Help me carry grocery." She think this too much ask. All day long she play chess. I dust off all her trophy.	[VO] That night mom figured I'd redeem her with my international piano debut.
5.2		Lindo turns to Suyuan, starting to initiate a conversation. She also stretches out her hand to draw Suyuan's attention.	Appreciate me? No. You lucky. You don't have the same problem.	
5.3		Still within the same frame composition, Suyuan delivers her turn.	[Suyuan] My problem worser than yours. If I tell June time to wash dish, she hear nothing but music. It's just like you can't stop this natural talent.	

Table 1 The two mothers' bragging in the school performance

*Linguistic analysis of the voice-over narration (shots 1-5.1)*

The VO in shot 1 immediately provides us with the contextual information concerning the two women's personal relationship. The phrase "best friend and archenemy" suggests that the relationship between Suyuan and Lindo is somehow paradoxical. According to Liu's (1986:28) diagram of ego and ego extension (see Section 2.1), the closer a personal element (in this case, the daughters' talents) is situated in relation to

the ego, the more one is concerned about face, and different personal elements can be more related to face depending on specific situations. Based on this, we can assume that the two mothers, although in normal circumstance are friends, have a clash of personal interest which is their daughters' talents and achievements. This is clearly indicated by the phrase "comparing their children" in the VO in shot 3.1. Also the value-laden word "weapons" indicates that the degree of hostility can overtake the friendship when the mothers are in a situation where their daughters are competing. This relationship positions the two mothers in an interesting situation where (a) they have to 'compete', creating a certain degree of impoliteness, but at the same time (b) to be polite (or at least pretend to be polite) for their friendship (i.e. any side's victory would cause face-loss to the other side). So we can view (a) as the conversational goal of the two interlocutors, whereas (b) is the social goal.

Based on our real-world knowledge, we know schematically that a school performance is normally seen as a good opportunity for children to present and feel more confident, but also for the parents to feel proud of their children. So in the above extract, Suyuan's face is already enhanced, even though her daughter has not yet performed. As a result, feeling the need to preserve her face, Lindo chooses to initiate the bragging in shot 5.2 about her daughter's chess-playing.

#### *Linguistic analysis of the conversation (shots 5.2-5.3)*

In terms of social identity, Suyuan and Lindo are not only homemakers and mothers, but also are first-generation immigrants from China. This is clearly indicated by their appearance, and also their shared dialect, namely, 'Chinglish' (i.e. the spoken/written English that is influenced by Chinese). As Guan suggests (2007: 9), Chinglish can be represented on various levels from phonetics to semantics, from syntax to discourse, etc. Due to the space limitations here, I will only point out one linguistic feature – no singular or tense markers for third-person verbs – that may be relevant to our general interpretation.

The third person singular verbs has no –s inflection (e.g. "she think", "she play", "you lucky" in shot 5.2; "she hear" in shot 5.3) – a simplification which is in line with what happens in Chinese. Since Lindo and Suyuan's use of English verbs are uninflected, it is difficult to identify whether the situations they describe are generalized situations or happened in the past. Take Lindo's speech in shot 5.2 for instance. She describes a situation by saying "I ask my daughter: 'Help me carry grocery'". This can be seen either as a reported direct speech presentation, suggesting a past event that she asked help from her daughter Waverly, or as a generalized presentation of Lindo asking for Waverly's help based on a series of iterative experiences. Then she reports the response of her daughter ("She think this too much ask"). This is more likely based on what Waverly said verbally (or maybe on repetitive occasions), which is now being presented by her mother in the form of an indirect thought presentation.

Since Lindo's conversational goal (to enhance her own face) conflicts with the social goal (to minimize praise of herself), she is faced with a choice concerning how she delivers her message – either to observe the CP (in which case she must tell the

truth that her daughter is very talented and hence attacks Suyuan's face) or observe the Politeness Principle (in which case she must NOT tell the truth by attacking her own face). As shown in the following discussion, the result is that Lindo exploits the PP (i.e. at least to *sound* polite) in order to uphold the CP.

As a whole, we can identify Lindo's speech as a complaint. The first two sentences can be seen as the spelling out of *preparatory conditions* in Searle (1969) terms. She then makes two direct complaints – “All day long she play chess” and “I dust all her trophy”. We know schematically that parents would seldom complain about their children's full engagement in talents, or about their achievements adding extra housework. This leads us to an impression that Lindo's complaints are clearly not true. There is hence an obvious breach of the Quality Maxim in terms of Grice's CP. The implicature generated from this violation is that Lindo is actually boasting about her daughter, but trying to make her boast sound modest. Arguably one can say that in Lindo's case, the Maxim of Modesty is upheld at the level of ‘what is said’, but at the level of ‘what is really meant’ the Modesty Maxim is actually violated. In effect, the viewers get a sense of irony and humour, since it is through the IP that Lindo delivers an indirect boast, a polite speech act through her ‘mock modesty’.

We shall now take a look at how Suyuan responds to Lindo's boast. She is faced with a choice – either to challenge Lindo's sincerity, which would be massively face-threatening, or to beat Lindo at her own game. We can see from shot 5.3 that Suyuan chooses the latter, in which she also tries to minimize the praise of herself in a mock manner. Suyuan starts her turn with an insincere complaint, saying “My problem worser than yours. If I tell June time to wash dish, she hear nothing but music”. From Suyuan's response, we can see that she successfully interprets Lindo's complaint in shot 5.2 as a boast. Consequently, by stating that she is in a worse situation, Suyuan indicates that her daughter, June, is actually more involved in her talent. Also the use of the IF-clause presupposes a situation where June would rather play the piano than helping her mother.

#### *Integrating the non-linguistic features*

Although I have used the word ‘non-linguistic’, I am aware that such term is too ambiguous. A typical film criticism can include aspects from lighting to costume, from performance to vocal quality, etc. Hence, it seems unfair to use such a grand word. Nevertheless, I still use it sometimes because the word ‘non-linguistic’ works more like an umbrella term that can include any aspect relevant and important for our interpretation. In the case of Extract 1, as I will soon cover in the following discussion, it is the paralinguistic features of the spoken dialogue and character's performance that are mostly related to our linguistic interpretation and also our understanding of the characters' relationship.

Unlike written literature, films provide us with the access not only to what it is said, but also to how it is said, through the paralinguistic presentations and characters' facial expressions. My discussion of the paralinguistic features is mainly based on Gillian Brown's *Listening to Spoken English* (1990: 112-37) where he gives a detailed and extended discussion of interpreting speaker's attitude through vocal features. Brown

(1990: 115-136) studies the paralinguistic features of spoken English based on a series of variables - (1) pitch span, (2) placement in voice range, (3) pitch direction, (4) lip setting, (5) pause and (6) tempo. The graphological changes in the dialogue below indicate the following: + standing for a pause, CAPITAL for stress, ↑ and ↓ for rising and falling pitch level, underline for slow tempo. Also for the purpose of clarification, I have added more specified paralinguistic descriptions which are italicised in square brackets.

Speaker	Dialogue
Lindo	[ <i>normal pitch level</i> ] <u>I ask my daughter. 'Help me carry grocery'</u> . She think this too <u>much ask.</u> ↑ [ <i>sudden rising pitch level</i> ] <u>All day long she play + chess.</u> [ <i>speed-up tempo</i> ] I dust all her TROPHY. Appreciate me? No. You lucky. You don't have the same problem.
Suyuan	[ <i>normal pitch level</i> ] My problem + worser than yours. If I tell June time to wash dish, she hear nothing + but music. It's like you can't stop this natural talent.

Table 2 Paralinguistic description of the conversation in Extract 1

As Brown suggests (1990: 125), slow tempo itself has little significance in terms of interpretation, but can be more informative if there is any change in one's speech tempo, as we have seen in Lindo's speech from the above table. Lindo starts with a slow tempo which gives us an impression that she thinks carefully and is confident about what she is speaking. Lindo uses this feature to reinforce the sense of sincerity to her complaint about her daughter. But in fact, this feature of slow tempo effectively increases the humour effect since her 'complaint' is not at all true. Apart from this, Lindo starts her turn by speaking within a normal pitch range, but then raises her pitch level. So comparatively speaking, we can feel an obvious rise in her pitch level, from a "growl" range to a "squeak" range (Brown, 1990: 119). This in turn creates an impression that she really feels bothered by her daughter. What is also interesting is that Lindo uses once a pause just before the word "chess". It is not difficult to identify that this pause is used more for a rhetorical purpose, which is to draw her hearer's attention on the key information and to cue her hearer's to the correct implicature – that Lindo's daughter is very talented in playing chess. Similarly, the stress put on the word "trophy" reinforces the impression that Lindo is actually boasting rather than complaining.

In comparison, the paralinguistic features of Suyuan's speech seem to be less marked. She uses two salient pauses before "worsen" and "but music". Based on this, we can sense that Suyuan might try to draw Lindo's attention on her daughter's talent in playing the piano. However, I would suggest that, by using the two pauses, the intended perlocutionary effect of Suyuan is to defeat Lindo. Since Lindo always likes to brag about her daughter, Suyuan has to use her daughter in order to 'win the game'. The first pause before the comparative 'worse', for example, indicates clearly that Suyuan already places herself in a 'competition' with Lindo. In fact, such intention is

also indicated by the voice-over narration by the adult June: “Mom *was sick of Auntie Lindo brag about her daughter...mom figured I’d redeem her with my international piano debut*” (my emphasis). Here Suyuan’s wish world (Ryan, 1991) is described more as to save her face, rather than to enhance her face by showing off.

Now we shall look closer at the facial expressions of the two mothers while they are ‘competing’. Lindo’s facial expression, especially her eye and head movement, is much richer than Suyuan. I have given more specific descriptions (italicized and in brackets) of their facial expressions and body movements. Since most of the character movements are performed spontaneously with the utterances, I have place the specific performance description with the relevant speech in the same column.

Speaker	No.	Dialogue
Lindo	1	I ask... ( <i>eyes looking downwards and stretching out her arm towards Suyuan</i> )
	2	( <i>looking down</i> ) ‘Help me carry grocery’ ( <i>looking up at Suyuan</i> ).
	3	( <i>looking down</i> ) She think this too much ask ( <i>looking up at Suyuan and soon looking down</i> ).
	4	( <i>looking down</i> ) All day long she play ( <i>looking up at Suyuan</i> ) chess.
	5	( <i>still looking at Suyuan</i> ) I dust all ( <i>Lindo’s eyes move aside and then back on Suyuan</i> ) her trophy.
	6	( <i>still looking at Suyuan</i> ) Appreciate me?
	7	( <i>looking down, and touches on Suyuan’s hands</i> ) No. You lucky.
	8	( <i>looking at Suyuan</i> ) You don’t have ( <i>looking to the front</i> ) the same problem.






Table 3 Description of Lindo’s performance in Extract 1

As I have mentioned in the visual description of shot 5.2 (see Table 1), Lindo initiates the conversation by stretching out her arm to draw Suyuan’s attention. Such intimate behaviour occurs again in no. 7. In Chinese culture at least, intimate actions between the women such as holding or touching each other’s hands are more associated with friendship or intention for friendship. Based on this, in the above case of 7, we are given the impression that Lindo, realising that her boast threatens her interlocutor’s face, might be trying to reclaim her friendship with Suyuan. Such impression is reinforced linguistically by Lindo’s speech in which she delivers a compliment of Suyuan (“You lucky”).






So far I have demonstrated how the features in relation to paralinguistics and character performance can be related for the purpose of our interpretation. I will extend such discussion more by focusing on the second extract – a family verbal conflict between the mother (Suyuan) and the daughter (June).

## Analysis of the family argument scene

The second example is taken from the scene immediately after the piano performance fiasco by which Suyuan's pride is punctured. Suyuan lost face in front of her enemy Lindo, which urges her to make June do more practice. Suyuan still believes that her daughter is talented and only needs to work harder. However, the fact that June puts little effort into playing the piano contradicts Suyuan's belief. This section will apply the framework of impoliteness (see Section 2.5) onto Extract 2. Then I will move on to discuss how their conversational behaviours (i.e. the paralinguistic and performance features) contribute to our understanding of this family argument and the mother-and-daughter relationship.

Shot no.	Image	Description of visuals	Diegetic sound	Nondiegetic sound
6		June is watching TV. Suyuan walks in. The camera is situated slightly lower than Suyuan, looking up at her.	<b>SUYUAN:</b> Four o'clock. Turn off TV. Practice piano time.	
7		The camera cuts to June, who is looking up at Suyuan, frowning, and then she looks down, back to watch the TV.		<b>VO:</b> I couldn't believe what she was saying, like I was supposed to go through the same torture again. Forget it!
8		Suyuan raises her eyebrows. The same camera work as in shot 6 is applied here.	<b>SUYUAN:</b> What I say? Four o'clock.	
9		June replies to her mother, but still lies on the floor without any physical sign going to play the piano.	<b>JUNE:</b> I'm not going to play anymore. Why should I?	
10		Suyuan steps forward, forming a close-up on her face. The short distance gives us a clearer picture of her facial expression-she frowns.	<b>SUYUAN:</b> What did you say?	



<p>11</p>		<p>June still lies on the floor.</p>	<p><b>JUNE:</b> I'm not your slave. This isn't China. You can't make me.</p>	
<p>12</p>		<p>The camera is cut to a long shot, showing us the overall physical conflicts between the mother and daughter. Suyuan pulls June up from the floor by holding at her arms, while June is resisting. Suyuan then drags June into another room where the piano is, and throws June at the piano chair.</p>	<p><b>SUYUAN:</b> Get up!</p>	
<p>13</p>		<p>The camera is cut back to a close-up on June, who is crying.</p>	<p><b>JUNE:</b> You want me to be someone I'm not! I'll never be the kind of daughter that you want me to be!</p>	
<p>14</p>		<p>Suyuan, frowning, and stands right next to June. Meanwhile, Suyuan keeps her eyes wide open.</p>	<p><b>SUYUAN:</b> Be two kinds of daughter: obedient or follow own mind. Only one kind of daughter could live in this house: obedient kind.</p>	
<p>15</p>		<p>June is still crying</p>	<p><b>JUNE:</b> Then I wish I wasn't your daughter! I wish you weren't my mom!</p>	

16		Suyuan, still frowning, slightly opens her mouth to breath, trying to stop herself from crying.	<b>SUYUAN:</b> Too late to change this.	
17			<b>JUNE:</b> Then I wish I were dead, like them, the babies...	<b>VO:</b> That's when I remembered what we could about.
18		Suyuan closes her mouth and her face seems to be frozen.	<b>JUNE:</b> ...that you killed in China!	

Table 4 Verbal conflict between Suyuan and her daughter, June

### Linguistic discussion of the verbal conflict

The conversation in Extract 2 takes place at home where less politeness is involved in the conversation between family members. Also, because of her institutional power and obligations as a mother, Suyuan is more likely to perform FTAs (e.g. imperatives) with less redress. This can be seen in her first turn in shot 6 where she performs an indirect command. By spelling out the felicity condition (“Four o’clock”; “Practice piano time”) for the command, Suyuan produces the command with less face-threatening effect. In turn we also get the impression that Suyuan is only reminding June of her daily routine with no intention to threaten her face. Since Suyuan gets no response from June, she produces a FTA in the form of a rhetorical question in turn 8 – “What (did) I say?”. By implicature, it can be seen as an indirect command, like ‘Do as I told you’. Similarly in shot 10 Suyuan produces another rhetorical question, creating the same kind of face-threatening effect on June (see Section 2.3). We are given the impression that Suyuan performs the FTAs with less redress, especially up to turn (11) where she simply delivers a direct command (“Get up!”). Till now we can get the strongest effect of tension and conflict.

June’s verbal production is also characterized by her choice of impoliteness strategies. June firstly violates the turn-taking norm by not responding to Suyuan in shot 7. Brown and Levinson include this as one of the FTAs (1987: 233). Secondly, June uses a bald-on-record impoliteness strategy in shot 9 by producing the negative statement below:

Shot 9) “I’m not going to play anymore. Why should I?”

This acts as a refusal of the requested future action and her mother's commands. Following this, June replies with a rhetorical question "Why should I?", with high face-threatening effect. By using the obligative modal verb *should*, June implies that she has no obligation to play for her mother and is questioning her mother's right to demand it. June's impoliteness strategy threatens both Suyuan's personal negative face (her wanting June to play the piano) and her institutional positive face (her role as a mother). By doing this, June tries to go against the 'dutiful-daughter' role which her mother is forcing her into. Moreover, June also attacks her mother's positive face by expressing impolite beliefs. She first attacks Suyuan's cultural and social roles as a Chinese and a mother in shot 11 below:

Shot 11) "I am not your slave. This isn't China!"

June expresses the unreasonable misbelief that she has been treated like a slave by her own mother, and that it is common in China for parents to do this. June soon launches the second attack on Suyuan's role as a mother in shot 15 by expressing explicitly her 'wish-world':

Shot 15) "Then I wish I wasn't your daughter! I wish you weren't my mom!"

Again in shots 17 and 18, June attacks Suyuan's positive face in the fiercest way:

Shot 17, 18) "Then I wish I were dead, like them, the babies that you killed in China!"

Here June not only attacks Suyuan's positive face by selecting a sensitive topic (Culpeper 1996: 357), but also violates the Maxim of Quality – "do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence or say what you believe to be false" (Thomas 1995: 63). In fact, the truth is shown immediately in the next flashback scene where Suyuan, under extreme duress from the war, has left her babies in a relatively peaceful village in order to protect them from harm and in the hope that they would be adopted.

### **Impoliteness and the characterisation of June**

Throughout the verbal argument, June rebels against her mother's points, and effectively tries to threaten and/or blame her in order to achieve the goal of not having to play the piano. In the end, the family secret puts Suyuan in a vulnerable position, open to her daughter's accusation. One would then come to a conclusion about June's characterisation, saying that she is rude and aggressive, and shows no respect towards her mother. However, I would suggest that a judgment of the characterisation of June should be based more on the specific context - she is a child, and she is brought up in a completely different cultural and social context from her mother.

What is also interesting about June's conversational behaviours is how frequently she violates the CP and the PP (i.e. almost in every turn and sentence). This deviation in terms of quantity indicates that June is in a situation where she cannot

control herself. Grice assumes that his Cooperative Principle is based on adult speakers who are able to control their language. They know consciously or unconsciously whether they speak the truth. Children, on the other hand, often cannot fully control their use of language for exchanges in social purposes (including politeness).

Politeness is often seen as the “golden rule” for social harmony. This is perhaps why Brown and Levinson (1978: 69) base their politeness theory on a hypothetical Model person (MP) with rationality and consideration of face. This excludes certain kinds of people who lack self-control or take less responsibility in this aspect. June in Extract 2 belongs to this non-MP group, and can be described as “hostile and unsophisticated”. She behaves (linguistically and physically) as if she is unable to control her emotions and language. She can be easily provoked because she is less concerned about face and politeness. Also, June shows little concern for other people’s feelings. Brown and Levinson (1987: 66) suggest that using the speech act of complaint “threatens the positive-face want, by indicating that the speaker does not care about the addressee’s feeling and wants, etc”. June, for example, performs the speech act of complaints in order to protest that Suyuan forces her to do things against her will.

Shot 11) “You can’t make me!”

and

Shot 13) “You want me to be someone I’m not!”

Now we have seen that June’s violation of the CP and PP is more related to her nature as a child. Based on this, we can have more interpretations of June’s characters. As I mentioned earlier, the imperatives Suyuan deliver in shots 6 and 8 (see below) have little face-threat.

Shot 6) “Four o’clock. Turn off TV. Practice piano time.”

Shot 8) “What I say? Four o’clock.”

This is because she is the mother and has the power and responsibility to remind June of her daily piano-practice. More importantly, as Culpeper (1996: 356) notes, Suyuan has no intention of attacking her daughter’s face, and hence her FTAs are more like what Brown and Levinson (1987: 69) call “bald-on-record”. It is also likely to have a situation where a character in personal terms would act powerfully even though they have less social, economic or institutional power, as one can see from Extract 2 above. June, the ten-year-old daughter, appears to claim more personal power by challenging and attacking her mother’s face and emotions. This can be reflected in a clash of interest between the daughter and the mother. Suyuan wants her daughter to learn something useful for the future, whereas June wants to do whatever she likes to, and consequently, she feels that her negative wants are threatened.

## Integrating the paralinguistic elements

Due to the spatial limitations here, I have chosen to focus only on the paralinguistic features in Extract 2, although interpreting the paralinguistic features cannot be isolated from the dialogue and the performance (see the “visual description” in Table 4). It is still worth noting that, although both extracts 1 and 2 present the verbal conversations between two interlocutors, the camera work and editing devices are used differently. In Extract 1 (see Table 1), we are presented with the conversation mainly through a single long shot and we get a balanced composition, where the each mother takes up half of the frame. In Extract 2 (see Table 4), however, most of the verbal conflict is shown with a series of cuts. This kind of shot/reverse-shot editing (c.f. Bordwell and Thompson 2001: 267) in Extract 2 is normally adopted in face-to-face conversations. Nonetheless, if we compare the choices of camera work and editing between the two extracts, the filmmaker intends to intensify the sense of conflict.

Again, I have presented the conversation in the table below with the paralinguistic indications by adopting G. Brown’s (1990) approach (see Section 3.1.3 for explanation of Brown’s approach to paralinguistic features).

Speaker and turn no.	Dialogue
Suyuan, 1	Four o’clock. ↑ Turn off TV. ↑ Practice piano time. [ <i>extended pitch span - starting with a relatively high pitch range, and gradually dropping down to normal</i> ]
June, 2	[ <i>no verbal response</i> ]
Suyuan, 3	What I say? ↑ Four o’clock. [ <i>high placing in the voice range</i> ]
June, 4	I’m not going to play anymore. ↓ <u>Why SHOULD I?</u> ↓
Suyuan, 5	What did you say? ↑ [ <i>raising the pitch range even higher</i> ]
June, 6	I’m not your SLAVE. This Isn’t CHIna. You <u>CAN’T MAKE ME.</u> [ <i>increasing voice volume</i> ]
Suyuan, 7	Get up! [ <i>sudden drop into a ‘growl’ range</i> ]
June, 8	No! [ <i>starting to shout loudly, with a placing in the voice range higher than normal</i> ]
	No! No, I won’t. [ <i>Then the loudness of her voice is reduced, together with her placement of her voice range</i> ]
	You want me to be someone I’m not! I’ll never be the kind of daughter that you WANT me to be! [ <i>Crying and speaking in a rapid tempo</i> ]
Suyuan, 9	Be TWO kinds of daughter: oBEdiant or follow OWN mind. [ <i>shouting in a low ‘growl’ voice range, with a low volume</i> ]
	Only ONE kind of daughter could live in THIS house: OBIDIENT kind. [ <i>still shouting breathily, in a low voice range</i> ]
June, 10	Then I wish I wasn’t your DAUGHTER! I wish YOU weren’t my mom!

	[ <i>high in voice range</i> ]
<b>Suyuan, 11</b>	+ Too late to change this. [ <i>no more shouting; speaking with a lowered the voice range, softly</i> ]
<b>June, 12</b>	Then I wish I were DEAD, LIKE THEM, the BABIES that you KILLED in China! [ <i>still high in voice range, shouting, in a fast tempo</i> ]

Table 6 Paralinguistic description of the conversation in Extract 2

In terms of the placement in voice range (c.f. G. Brown, 1990: 119-22), Suyuan and June show different patterns. Suyuan starts with a speaking range higher than her normal one (e.g. Suyuan 1, 3 and 5), but then her placement in the voice range falls down to normal, or even lower than normal. This is especially clear starting in turn 7 where Suyuan not only drops into a kind of ‘growl’ range, but also speaks with a kind of power - low in volume but with a certain degree of strength in terms of voice quality. In relation to the Suyuan’s speech in turn 7, she seems to re-claim her power as a mother through the above paralinguistic change, and to suggest that June should obey her orders. This is also the case in turn 9 which also gives us an impression of threatening. In turn 11, by putting stress on the words “daughter” and “you” (referring to Suyuan), June not only attacks Suyuan’s role as a mother, but also challenges the mother-and-daughter relationship. This is perhaps why Suyuan drops her voice range to the lowest point, and also her voice quality suddenly becomes soft. This leads us to assume that June really hurts her mother’s feeling without realising it, as we can see that June continues to attack her mother in turn 12.

As for June, the patterns of how she places her voice range and the tempo seem to be the opposite. June starts in a normal voice range in turn 4, while speaking in steady and normal tempo. Although in turn 6 she uses some stresses on certain words and also increases her volume, June still manages to speak steadily, in a normal voice range. We hence can assume that June tries to argue in reasonable manner for her rhetoric purpose - she wants to do what she likes rather than obeying her mother. However, June does not stick to this rhetorical strategy long enough to win the argument. Soon after Suyuan performs some physical threats through turns 7 and 8 (e.g. pulling and dragging June to the piano), June’s nature as a child is immediately exposed through what and how she speaks. In paralinguistic terms, June raises her voice range in turn 8, crying and shouting at Suyuan. Her high ‘squeak’ voice range with the certain degree of loudness keeps till the last turn of Extract 2. All these features indicate that June is incapable of fully controlling her emotions.

## Conclusion

The (im)politeness approaches have enabled me to prove the significant role certain linguistic elements play in films. As can be seen from the example above, language becomes a weapon in the bragging for the mothers to enhance their face when

associating with their daughters and also in the verbal conflict to destroy the interlocutor's face and to manifest power (institutional or personal). Further, the non-linguistic features in relation to paralinguistics and character's performance help us to see more clearly the contradiction between the mothers' conversational goal to enhance the face of the self, and the social goal to 'protect' the other's face. It is through this contradiction that the sense of humour is created.

In the second extract, both the linguistic and the paralinguistic features are used in different ways by the mother and the daughter. I have also been able to show that June's conflict with her mother is mainly because she, as a child, has an incomplete understanding of some of the social politeness conventions. We are given the impression of June as a child who lacks capacity to control her own emotions struggles for her personal power and gives no tolerance and understanding to her mother. In turn, this leads us to sympathise more for Suyuan, as her traumatic past is brought up by June. We are hence more likely to view Extract 2 as part of the family tragedy where the misunderstanding is more resulted by the clash of two different wish worlds, the mother's and the daughter's.

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