
QUESTIONS IN PARLIAMENTARY DISCOURSE DURING DIFFERENT RULING PERIODS IN TAIWAN: A NEO-POLITENESS-THEORETICAL ANALYSIS

Bin-Bin Yu

bbyu@mail.lhu.edu.tw

Lunghwa University of Science and Technology, Taiwan

Abstract

Kuomintang (KMT) is the largest party in Taiwan and it has long held the reins of government since 1949, except the period between 2000 and 2008, in which the *Democratic Progressive Party* (DPP) came into power. Previous studies on parliamentary discourse in Taiwan focused more on question and answer sessions in the legislature when the KMT was in power. The current research, therefore, aims to investigate questions in parliamentary discourse when the DPP was in power. The purpose of this study is twofold: to examine legislators' use of politeness strategies for questioning government officials during parliamentary question and answer sessions on the one hand and also to find out possible factors that influence their choice of questioning strategies on the other. Based on video recorded data, the present study adopts Lee-Wong's framework of the classification of politeness strategy types for conversational interaction, which has been greatly revised from Brown and Levinson's classical politeness theory. Initial findings show that the bald on record strategy is in wide use, which has been found in more than half of the total questions. Other strategies are used for either modification or intensification or both. Besides, the change of political roles as a government supporter or an opposition member does have some influence on legislators' use of politeness strategies for questions.

Keywords: face, parliamentary discourse, politeness strategies, questions

Introduction

A relevant issue that merits the present study is the political power change in Taiwan in 2000 and its ramifications on regularly occurring patterns of verbal behavior of legislators as well as government officials during question and answer sessions. As widely known, *Kuomintang* (KMT, *Nationalist Party*) had been the ruling party in Taiwan for over five decades before the presidential election in 2000, in which *Democratic Progressive Party* (DPP) took power. The loss of the presidential election in 2000 to the DPP turned the KMT into an opposition party for the first time, and the loss of the presidential election in 2004 made it in opposition till 2008. Most previous research on parliamentary discourse in Taiwan focused on question and answer sessions in the legislature when the KMT was in power (e.g. Kuo, 1994; Yu, 2007). Little attention has been paid to the DPP ruling period. The current research, therefore, aims to investigate questions in parliamentary discourse when the DPP was in power.

Research purpose

Thus, the purpose of the study is twofold: to examine legislators' use of politeness strategies for questioning government officials during parliamentary question and answer sessions as well as to find out possible factors that influence their choice of questioning strategies.

Review of relevant literature

There is a widespread perception that parliamentary question time is characterized by antagonism, and the perception is not without merit (Bayley, 2004). Previous research on parliamentary discourse in Taiwan also placed much emphasis on verbal conflict between government officials and opposition legislators, namely members of the parliament. Kuo (1994) argued that verbal conflicts were inevitable during parliamentary interpellations, wherein one side asked face-threatening questions and the other attempted to preserve face. The conception of face was then an important element in her arguments. She indicated that most questions raised by opposition members were intended for embarrassing and badgering government officials because they believed that it was the way to achieve their goals, and that the government officials in attempting to protect themselves from losing face might give evasive answers or respond with equally confrontational verbal behavior. However, Kuo's study shows no regularly occurring patterns of parliamentary discourse.

In the British Parliament, there is a code governing the form and content of questions called *Erskine May's Treatise on the Law, Privileges, Proceedings and Usage of Parliament* (which is popularly referred to as *Erskine May* or the shorter title, *Parliamentary Practice*). The existence of the parliamentary code, in Pérez de Ayala's (2001) view, is of particular importance for the study of parliamentary discourse. *Erskine May* rules members' language use, stating which face-threatening acts are permitted, which are forbidden, and the kind of language that is anticipated in the parliament. Nevertheless, there are no explicit formal rules governing the form and content of questions in the Legislative Yuan, namely the national parliament in Taiwan. Besides, legislators are protected by the Constitution from being responsible for discussing any official business in the parliament. This privilege gives members quite a lot of freedom of questioning.

Yu (2007), based on Lee-Wong's (2000) framework of the classification of politeness strategy types for conversational interactions, presented a number of politeness strategies used by legislators for questioning government officials in the parliament in Taiwan. Her findings showed that the combined use of different strategy types was possible and also that the *bald on record* strategy without redress was in wide use, which was found in more than half of the total questions (53.2%). Besides, her findings also revealed different preferences between dominant KMT legislators and opposition members for the two major politeness strategy types, i.e. modification and intensification. The data collected in Yu's (2007) study were sampled from the videotapes recorded before the year 2000 when the KMT was in power. A comparison of her data with those drawn from the DPP ruling period between 2000 and 2008 can then see whether legislators' choice of politeness strategy types are affected by their political role of a government supporter or an opposition member or are associated with the properties of particular parties.

Theoretical foundations

A sketch of classical politeness theory

Politeness theory proposed by Brown and Levinson has been the most influential pragmatic theory of politeness to date. Since the first publication of their theory in 1978, politeness has become a major concern in pragmatics, attracting a wealth of theoretical and empirical studies (e.g. a special issue dedicated by *Journal of Pragmatics* to politeness in Blum-Kulka and Kasper, 1990; a historical review of literature on politeness in Bousfield and Grainger,

2010; a considerable bibliography on politeness in DuFon, Kasper, Takahashi, and Yoshinaga, 1994; Lee-Wong, 2000; another special issue dedicated by *Journal of Pragmatics* to face in Mey, 2003; Watts, 2003; even a journal appearing especially for politeness since 2005, *Journal of Politeness Research*).

Central to Brown and Levinson's politeness theory is the concept of face, defined as "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself" (Brown and Levinson, 1987, p. 61). It consists of two specific types of desires or "face-wants" (Brown and Levinson, 1987, p. 13) that interactants attribute to one another, namely a *negative face* want, which is the desire not to be imposed on or impeded by other people, and a *positive face* want, which is the desire to be thought well of or valued by others. Conversational interaction is based on speakers balancing the satisfaction of their own positive and negative face wants with the face wants of other interactants. The need to balance face wants, according to their theory, is due to the fact that many actions a speaker engages others in are intrinsically imposing or *face-threatening* to the hearer. Politeness is regarded as a "redressive action" (Brown and Levinson, 1987, p. 25) taken to counteract the effects produced by face-threatening acts (FTAs).

Furthermore, Brown and Levinson adopted Goffman's (1967) conception of face-work as a set of politeness strategies for face maintenance. These politeness strategies proposed fall into five main categories: 1) *bald on record* covering the most direct way possible if the face risk is minimal or if there are good reasons for ignoring the risk; 2) *positive politeness* attending to the hearer's positive face wants such as showing approval, using in-group identity markers, and raising common ground; 3) *negative politeness* geared to satisfy the hearer's negative face want such as using conventionally indirect ways of language use, giving deference, and minimizing the imposition on the hearer; 4) *off record* involving such non-conventionally indirect ways of language use as using tautologies, giving hints, and using metaphors; and 5) *opting out* doing no face-threatening acts at all if the risk is too great. According to their theory, the list of five strategic options represents a scale of politeness: the more a given act is perceived to threaten the speaker's or the hearer's face, the more the speaker will select a higher-numbered strategy. In other words, a higher-numbered strategy is assumed to be more polite.

Revised politeness-theoretical framework

Greatly revised from Brown and Levinson's classical politeness theory, a new framework of the classification of politeness strategy types for conversation interactions has been proposed by Lee-Wong (2000). Her examination of politeness strategy types is associated with the categorization of the *head act* of an utterance, based on the framework of the Cross-cultural Speech Act Realization Project (Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper 1989). It refers to "the minimal unit" serving as a request or "the core of the request sequence" (Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper 1989, p. 275). It is identified by means of its propositional content. If a head act is identified through its propositional content, all of the three types of sentence form, i.e. imperatives, interrogatives, and declaratives, can perform the function of requests in Chinese (cf. Li and Thompson, 1981; Lee-Wong, 2000).

The use of *bald on record* proposed in Brown and Levinson's classical politeness theory is thus redefined as that of the head act in the three sentence types without either "modification", which covers face mitigation and enhancement, or "intensification", which involves face denigration and aggravation (Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper 1989; Lee-Wong, 2000). A typical linguistic means to realize a request core is the form of imperatives. If directness denotes the explicitness of illocutionary intent of the head act or the core request, imperatives can be regarded as the most direct request form.

The realization of the head act also serves as a differentiation from other elements of the

utterance, the presence of which is not essential for the utterance to be understood as a request such as an “alerter”, “supportive moves”, and optional internal modifiers or intensifiers linked to the head act (Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper 1989). An alerter is an opening element preceding the head act, which serves as an attention getter such as the address term. A supportive move is a unit external to the act proper, modifying its impact either by mitigating or by aggravating its force, e.g. “grounders” (Edmondson 1981, pp. 122-124), which provide reasons for the act. It can be posited before or after the act.

The three types of sentence form are conventionalized forms of appositives used in *bald on record* requests. Since these forms are oriented towards the achievement of a goal, namely asking the addressee to do something, they are viewed as imposing. The imposition can be downgraded by modifiers internally syntactically linked to the head act or externally outside the structure of the head act in the supportive moves and upgraded by intensifiers internally syntactically linked to the act proper or externally outside the act proper. Politeness strategy types include modification and intensification, internal or external. “Modification” and “intensification” are used as functional terms, and “internal” and “external” are associated with structural positions. For example, in the utterance *Paul, please come forward*, ‘come forward’ is the head act, ‘Paul’ is used as an alerter, the conventional polite expression ‘please’ is counted as a politeness strategy for internal modification.

Grounded within Lee-Wong’s (2000) framework, Yu (2007) has presented a number of politeness strategies used by legislators for questioning government officials in the parliament in Taiwan. The three major politeness strategy types include the use of the head act only (or *bald on record*), *modification*, and *intensification*. The latter two types may be *internal* or *external*. For example, internal modifiers may include the use of honorific forms, modal particles, inclusive ‘we’, conventional polite expressions, and quality hedges; external modifiers may be to communicate the speaker’s regret for impinging on the hearer, not to presume/assume, to be positive, and to claim close relations; internal intensifiers may contain the use of adverbials and repetitions, and external intensifiers may include the use of aggravating supportive moves, threat, and emphasizees. This study is based on her research on the classification of politeness strategies for questions in parliamentary discourse.

Data collection and analysis

Data collected for this study includes more than 8 hours of parliamentary question and answer sessions at standing committee meetings, where much of the substantial work of the Legislative Yuan is done by legislators (L) and government officials (G). These were randomly sampled from the video recorded data¹ kept in the Legislative Yuan and then transcribed before the analysis was to be undertaken.

There were three considerations in the sampling: 1) collecting the total number of question sessions which was identical to that in Yu (2007) for the research purpose of making a comparison; 2) including as more number of different legislators as possible in order to prevent biased results from a particular legislator; and 3) keeping the number of legislators between ruling and opposition parties balanced for preventing biased results from a particular party. Thus, the length of question time in both of the ruling periods, the total number of legislators in each ruling period, and the legislator number of parties in power and that of parties in opposition were almost the same. A detailed description of the data is provided in Table 1.

¹ Only very recent question and answer sessions are broadcasted on the Internet. Dated video data adopted here can be viewed only from within the Legislative Yuan, which is not allowed to be downloaded and taken away. Even legislators themselves are restricted to downloading their own question and answer sessions only.

Table 1: Data Description

Period	Total	Party in Power	Party in Opposition		
~2000	L:36 (vs. G:19) [8:23':31"]	KMT:18 [4:05':04"]	Opposition:18 [4:18':27"]	DPP:13 [3:14':10"]	NP:5 [1:04':17"]
2000~2008	L:36 (vs. G:15) [8:03':01"]	DPP:18 [3:53':24"]	KMT:18 [4:09':37"]		

Note. Data collected for the first ruling period (~2000) were derived from Yu (2007). The figures in the brackets [hours: minutes': seconds"] indicate the length of the total question time. Opposition parties in the first period included the DPP and the NP (New Party).

Politeness strategies were analyzed on the basis of *turn*, which refers to everything a legislator utters at a speaking time (Levinson, 1983; Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson, 1974, 1978). Legislators' questions were defined as requests for information or action from a functional point of view (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975; Tsui, 1994). The use of bald on record proposed in the classical politeness theory is redefined as that of the head act in the three sentence types without either modification or intensification. The analysis is illustrated as in (1).

(1)

¹*buzhang*, ²*quigwen* ³*nin* ⁴*gongtinghui de zhaokai qingkuang zenmeyang?* ⁵*qingkuang zenmeyang?*

Minister, please tell me how the situation of the public hearing is held. How is the situation?
(1. Alerter; 2. Modifier; 3. Modifier; 4. Head act; 5. Intensifier)

In the example question in (1), if only the request core or head act, namely *gongtinghui de zhaokai qingkuang zenmeyang?* 'How is the situation of the public hearing held?' were used, the strategy used would be coded as bald on record. However, other elements also occur here. The address term *buzhang* 'minister' is an alerter, which is an opening element preceding the head act. The use of the conventional polite expression *quigwen* 'please tell me' and the use of the honorific form of the second person singular pronoun *nin* are counted as two politeness strategies for internal modification. Besides, the repetition of the request proper *qingkuang zenmeyang?* 'How is the situation?' is counted as a strategy for internal intensification.

Conclusion

This paper is concerned with the regularly occurring politeness strategies used by legislators for questioning government officials during parliamentary question and answer sessions as well as possible factors that influence members' choice of questioning strategies. In general, the bald on record strategy is in wide use, which has been found in more than half of the total questions (55.6%). The remaining strategies are used for either modification (MD) or intensification (IT) or both. Out of 44.4%, the preference of the legislators for either MD or IT is in the following order: one MD (37.2%), one IT (24.5%), and two MDs (9.0%).

The change of political roles as a government supporter or an opposition member does have some influence on legislators' use of politeness strategies for questions. KMT members, when in opposition, tended to increase the use of bald on record and strategies for intensification. The bald on record strategy increased by 8.6% (from 46.3% to 54.9%), and the use of one IT increased by 10.7% (from 10.0% to 20.7%). On the other hand, DPP legislators, when in power, were inclined to increasing the use of one MD, which increased by 13.1% (from 22.0% to 35.1%).

Additionally, the similar statistical results of KMT legislators' use of strategies for modification and DPP members' use of strategies for intensification in the two different ruling periods suggest that the adoption of politeness strategies could also be attributed to the properties of particular parties.

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