A Graphic-Semiotic Analysis of the Chinese Multimodal Elevation and Denigration Phenomenon[*]

Dániel Z. Kádár

Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest, Hungary

This paper addresses the cultural specificity of Chinese written deferential and rude communication. By exploring expressions of (im)politeness in written discourse, the present study contributes not only to Chinese language studies but also to postmodern politeness research, which tends to neglect semiotic-graphic analysis of written forms. Apart from its practical findings, it reinforces the recent theoretical argument according to which it is difficult to capture culturally unique linguistic phenomena, and the cultural specificity of a phenomenon can be captured by mapping its elaborateness from an intercultural perspective.

Keywords: discourse analysis, graphic/semiotic features, elevation/denigration, Chinese written genres

Introduction

This paper addresses the cultural specificity of Chinese written deferential and rude communication. In general, one can approach the cultural specificity of communication from various perspectives: (1) It is possible to elaborate "native" theories of discourse, that is, one can reconsider dominating theories of discourse and conversation analysis and "reframe" certain communication phenomena from a culture-specific perspective (e.g., GU, 2011 forthcoming); (2) It is possible to focus on certain culture-specific manifestations of discourse. In other words, culturally dominant trends in discourse and communication studies can be reconsidered either on a theoretical or on a practical level, or both if one adopts a culture-specific theory to study culture-specific linguistic phenomena. Nevertheless, the present research is rooted in "Western"—in particular, European—research traditions and concepts, and so it focuses on the culture-specific manifestations of communication rather than adopting any culture-specific analytic methodology.

The claim of this paper is that human communication has universal features to some extent, that is, it is difficult to identify culture-specific discourse phenomena that exist in one language or sub-language but not in others. Therefore, if researchers intend to analyze communication in a culture-specific context, then they must primarily focus on the "degree of development" of certain phenomena rather than debating whether such phenomena exist in other languages or not. Certain cultures and societies assign more importance to given communicational means than others, therefore, such communicational phenomena become more developed in some

societies than they are in others, so their examination can shed light on "local" socio-cultural values and standards. In fact, this is a recent argument in postmodern politeness research in general (Pizziconi, 2011), but as far as the author is aware, it has not been implemented to the exploration of the graphic representations of (im)politeness.

The paper addresses a unique feature of Chinese linguistic (im)politeness by studying traditional Chinese written genres—including, wedding announcement cards and shame placards—as a case study. This study examines the so-called elevation and denigration phenomenon in the above-mentioned genres from graphic and semiotic perspectives. Its aim is to prove the claim that elevation and denigration are represented through elaborate graphic means, due to their pivotal role in traditional Chinese written communication (GU, 1990). In other words, the pivotal role of elevation and denigration phenomena in traditional Chinese culture results in a graphic system through which they can be expressed; this system is more elaborate than its counterparts in other cultures, even though it must be emphasized that several of its graphic devices arguably exist in other languages and cultures. That is, while individual manifestations of the phenomena discussed in the paper are not culturally unique, the whole traditional Chinese elevating-denigrating graphic system is unique due to its degree of development.

In studying the above-mentioned issues, the present study relies on Kádár (2007), according to which the traditional Chinese elevation and denigration system provides a two-fold, polite-impolite application possibility. As the examples studied will show, this claim holds true for written genres where elevating and denigrating formulae are used. The graphic and semiotic examination of the visual design of Chinese written genres illustrates the fact that Chinese deferential and rude practices of elevation and denigration are similar in many respects.

The Intrinsic Values of Chinese Writing

Before beginning the examination of the above-mentioned issues, it is necessary to briefly introduce some basic features of Chinese writing, which determine the graphic system of elevation and denigration.

The written expression of deference and rudeness through visual design is not peculiar to Chinese. Van Leeuwen's (2006) work showed how developed the textual design can be in "western" languages. Unique to Chinese writing, however, there is a direct relation with visual reality (Miklós, 1979). For instance, one can consider the case of Chinese landscape paintings (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. A Chinese landscape painting.

Such paintings contain a text—usually a poem related to the landscape—which not only describes the visual elements of the painting but usually has artistic value as part of the painting, due to its refined calligraphic form. Art historian Miklós (1979, p. 220) noted regarding the painting of the Figure 1, "the picture in reality contains a two-fold message: One is the picture in a literal sense and the other is the written text. They are mutually connected, they presuppose each other". That is, Chinese writing is perceived as a part of visual reality. A related characteristic of Chinese writing is that it is possible to use the form of the writing itself to express ideas, due to its intrinsic artistic values. The construction and arrangement of Chinese characters can assist in conveying the meaning of the author, as well as the content itself (however, complementary use of text and picture is far from being unknown in the West).

Turning to issues of deference and rudeness, the present paper claims that the elevation and denigration phenomenon manifests itself in the visual design of texts. As GU (1990) explained, polite elevation and denigration means denigrating one and elevating the other, and vice versa in the case of impolite elevation and denigration phenomenon. PENG's (2000) cognitive research showed that the linguistic elevation and denigration phenomena are connected to the positive and negative values of the real world, such as highness and lowness. These values can be expressed through certain arrangements and style of the characters referring to the elevated and the denigrated persons/entities in a given text. In short, the aforementioned close relation between Chinese writing and visual reality makes it possible to form a wide range of graphic patterns that convey deferential and rude semiotic messages—this is why Chinese provides a particularly rich source for the examination of written deference and rudeness.

Data

Besides addressing the merits of Chinese in the examination of written deference and rudeness, another issue that has to be discussed before the analysis of the examples is the choice of data used in the present paper.

The present research is based on a database of 86 greeting/invitation cards and brief letters. Collecting data for the study of written deferential elevation and denigration is relatively simple, due to the vast amount of publications on "practical writing" or "ying yong wen" (應　　) (ZHANG, 1979; HUANG, 2001). "Practical writing" includes applied genres, such as Chinese letters and greeting cards, which are typically categorized by the Chinese as "polite genres" (ZHU, 2005). Though from a discourse-evaluative perspective (Eelen, 2001; Watts, 2003), these genres per se are not "polite" (no genre is "polite"), it holds true that they presuppose the use of elevating and denigrating styles and formulae that express deference (at least as a "default" meaning) (Agha, 2007) in the Chinese cultural context. Due to limitations on space, the present paper studies the graphical characteristics of two Chinese wedding invitation/announcement cards.

A more problematic issue is the collection of rude data. Besides, rude self-elevation and addressee-denigration have to be studied differently, because while the means of addressee-denigration are relatively codified in both the spoken and written languages, self-elevation is typically applied in colloquial language and discourse of lower social classes, hence, it rarely occurs in written genres (Kádár, 2007), except for some Chinese novels.

Traces of the written addressee-denigration phenomenon can be found in several written genres, including shame placards, caricatures, etc.. The present research analyses a shame placard as a case study. The genre of shame placards has a long tradition in China, as shown by the following historical illustration (see Figure 2). In this picture, a certain "Chen Mo" is humiliated in public for kidnapping a child. The text of the shame placard

reads: "Dog-criminal Chen Mo stands in a cage to be shown to the public". Although there are a few similar drawings in existence, they do not reveal much about the graphic characteristics of shame placards. Furthermore, these pictures usually record the public humiliation of people of the lower classes, in the case of whom the shame placards are meant to symbolize the power of the authorities instead of denigrating the already low social position of the given person. More useful data are provided in this sense by the recently published photos of LI (2003). LI, a Chinese journalist, managed to take photos during Chinese "Cultural Revolution" (1966-1974), and many of his photos commemorate the mass-rallies of the period, where well-known and high-ranking functionaries of the Chinese Communist Party and other previously high-ranking persons were humiliated in front of large audiences by Maoist extremists. That is, the photos of these persons who were forced to wear large humiliation placards are noteworthy, because they not only represent the graphic characteristics of denigrating texts, but also in their case, the denigration of social rank and public self image playing an important role.

Figure 2. A historical shame placard.

The study of written self-elevation is even more problematic than that of interlocutor denigration. The few traces of this graphic phenomenon are scattered in novels, comic books, etc.. The present paper raises the example of a traditional-style, humorous "self-elevating seal" that was published on the Internet.

After this overview of data used in the present study, let us now analyze the case studies.

Analysis of the Case Studies

Deferential Examples

Let us first examine the graphic characteristics of elevation and denigration in deferential discourse by studying two Chinese wedding announcement cards. The first one reads as follows (see Figure 3).
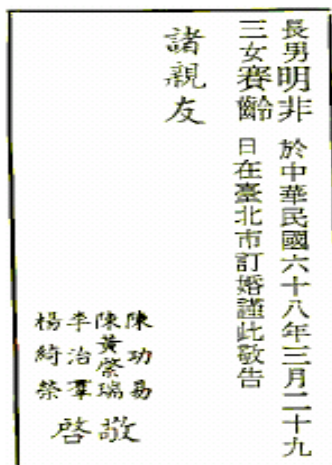
Figure 3. A wedding announcement card. Our first son Ming-fei and our third daughter Sai-ling will have their engagement ceremony on March 29th 1979, in Taipei. We would like to notify all our relatives and friends about this matter, with sincere respect. CHEN Gong-yi, CHEN-HUANG Qi-rui, LI Zhi-qun and YANG Qi-rong respectfully report this (Translated by the author).

The arrangements of characters that refer to the elevated and denigrated persons are typical to the texts studied, and so it can be claimed that it represents the typical graphic characteristics of written deferential elevation and denigration. Note that the layout of the card is traditional, that is, the text has to be read vertically and from right to left.

If one analyses this document from a graphic-semiotic perspective, it becomes evident that when referring to the young couple ("Ming-fei" (　　) and "Sai-ling" (賽齡)), the parents use characters that are somewhat larger than the main text because of informative considerations. A more noteworthy fact is that the parents use large characters to refer to the addressees, that is, "all of the relatives and friends" ("zhu-qinyou" (諸親　)), which are in obvious contrast with the small characters referring to themselves, hence, they manage to elevate the addressed persons and denigrate themselves (see Figure 4).
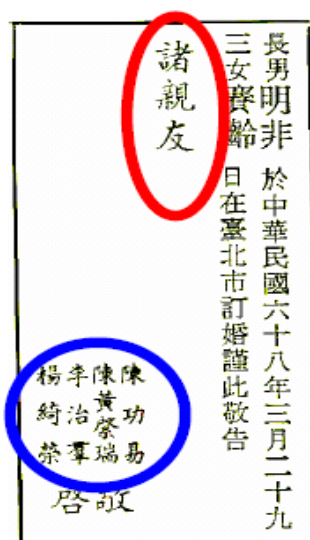

Figure 4. Differences between the size of characters denoting the authors' (denigration) and recipients' (elevation) names/titles.

Another noteworthy contrast can be found between the size of the characters of the parents' names and the concluding elevating verbal expression "jingqi" (啟) (respectfully report), which is written with very large characters. Again, size difference is utilized to express self-denigration and interlocutor-elevation (see Figure 5).
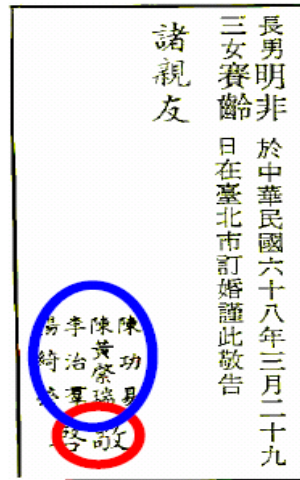

Figure 5. Differences between the size of characters denoting the authors' names (denigration) and an elevating verbal form (elevation).

Besides operating with the writing styles, the arrangement of the characters is also utilized for deferential denigration and elevation. The characters "all relatives and friends" are written on the upper part of the announcement, while the parents write their names on the lower part of the card (see Figure 6).
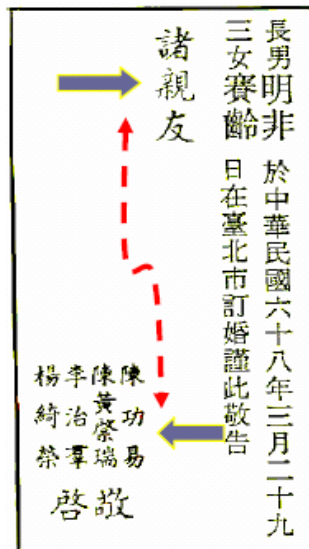

Figure 6. Expressing elevation/denigration through vertical arrangement.

In sum, this card illustrates how graphic devices are used to express elevation and denigration. However, this card is rather typical in terms of social relationships: There are cases when social relationship among the persons referred to in a given text is more complex. It is challenging therefore to consider how elevation and denigration are manifested in writing in such situations. Let us analyze the following example (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. A wedding announcement card. Our second son Yong-hui had their wedding ceremony with Ms. Hui-min, the respected second daughter of the wise couple RONG Yi-ren and LIN Shu-kuan, at 3:00 p.m., on April 7th. We would specially like to announce this matter with respect to all of our relatives and friends. DUAN Jia-feng and FENG Jing-rong sincerely report (Translated by the author).

An interesting feature of this text is that the addressees are in relation with the parents of the groom, that is, the writers, but unrelated to the family of the bride. Hence, the family of the bride occurs in the message as a third party, being deferentially elevated. And so the writers utilize the size-difference of the characters to denigrate their own child—they apply the right-intended (i.e., "marginal") characters to refer to the identity of Yong-hui as their "second son" ("cinan" (   )), which is a typical graphic device of self-denigration (CAI, 1999). On the other hand, they use "regular" characters when describing with honorific expressions the identity of the bride as "the respected second daughter of the wise couple RONG Yi-ren and LIN Shu-kuan" ("xian-kangli zhi cinü-gongzi" (賢　儷　　　　　)) (see Figure 8).
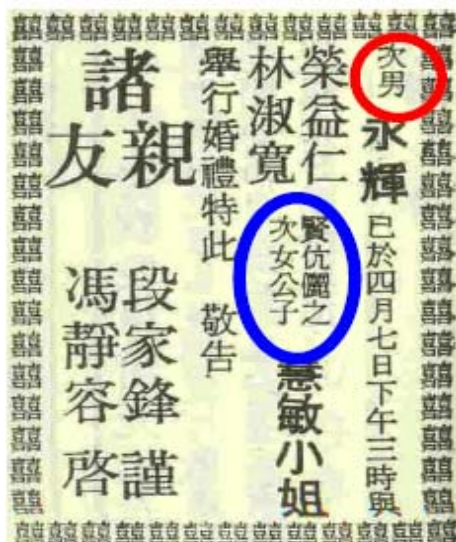

Figure 8. The use of "regular" and "marginalized" characters to express interpersonal relationships in a complex situation.

Note that in this text, the larger-smaller, up-down dichotomies are applied again when the writers refer to the addressees and themselves, though somewhat atypically, they write their names with relatively large characters. The clear boldface versus non-boldface opposition of the characters, however, counterbalances this fact (see Figure 9).

Figure 9. Boldface (elevating) vs. non-boldface (denigrating) characters.

Summing up the analysis of examples of deferential elevation/denigration, there are stereotypical graphic patterns in Chinese written genres that trigger some elevating and denigrating semiotic message. These graphic patterns are highly developed, which enable authors to use them to convey deference in considerably complex interpersonal relationships. The elaborate nature of these patterns shows the importance of elevation and denigration in traditional Chinese society.

Rude Examples

Turning to rudeness, let us first study addressee-denigration by examining an example of shame placards (see Figure 10).

Figure 10. A shame placard in the "Cultural Revolution".

This photo was made at a Heilongjiang Province mass rally where a provincial Party Committee Secretary, WANG Yi-lun (　　倫), was forced to stand on a chair in front of the gathered mass in a traditional bowing position, and hold a shame placard that writes: "Counter-revolutionary, restoration-supporting element WANG Yi-lun" ("fan-geming xiuzheng-zhuyi-fenzi WANG Yi-lun" (　　　　　　　　義　　　　倫)).

This is a typical example of shame placards that were photographed by LI (2003), that is, most of the placards are drawn in a similar way. Therefore, shame placards arguably have stereotypic graphic patterns to convey rude semiotic message, similarly to "deferential" genres. Let us discuss some of the stereotypical ways in which denigration is practiced on these placards. Typically, the characters of the names of the humiliated persons are written in irregular ways, which conveys the lowness of the given persons' identities. First of all, the names of the denigrated persons are written with large but intentionally "badly drawn" characters. For example, the family name of "Wang" is intentionally written in a way that counts as "irregular" according to the rules of Chinese calligraphy (see Figure 11).

Figure 11. Intentionally incorrect calligraphy (addressee-denigration).

Furthermore, according to the rules of Chinese writing, characters have to be written in the same horizontal or vertical level, the names of the humiliated persons are written in a "zigzagging" way, which again expresses the denigration of their social identities (see Figure 12).

Figure 12. Zigzagging layout (addressee-denigration).

Finally, the names of humiliated persons are inked over without exception (see Figure 13).

Figure 13. Overinking (addressee-denigration).

It must be added to the analysis that there is a further point which underlines the denigrating message of these placards: On most of the placards, the alleged identities of the persons accused are always with "well drawn" characters, which are in clear contrast with the "badly written" name (see Figure 14).

Figure 14. Intentional contrast in calligraphic styles (addressee-denigration).

The analysis has illustrated that in traditional Chinese communication interlocutor-denigration is practiced through elaborate means, which supports the claim that the degree of elaborateness of a certain discourse phenomenon is in proportion to the importance assigned to it in a society.

Let us finally study rude self-elevation through the analysis of an example of a seal that was found on an Internet website.

This seal (see Figure 15) is quoted in a humorous sense in an Internet discussion (website already deleted) of the Chinese self-elevation phenomenon. Though from a contextual-evaluative perspective, this instance is perhaps not "rude" but "mocking" (Culpeper, 1996), it interestingly shows how the Chinese perceive the

traditional graphic representation of self-elevation.

Figure 15. A humorous seal (self-elevation). The grandiose red seal, the characters of which are written with a form of the so-called "Seal Script" ("zhuanshu" (書), see more in Norman, 1988, p. 66), literally reads as "self-great" ("zida" (   )).

The seal has some systematic features that are similar to the previous examples even though they are probably not so developed here as in the previous cases, due to the fact that self-elevation is a basically colloquial phenomenon. This reinforces the claim that the importance assigned to elevation and denigration in traditional Chinese communication manifests itself in the degree of development of the graphic tools through which they can be expressed.

On the one hand, the grandiosity of the self-referring characters conveys self-elevating connotation: The "Seal Script" is used only in strongly pompous contexts (this is why the characters of many "ordinary" Chinese seals are carved in different style). On the other hand, the boldface character "self" ("zi" ( )) is written "above", which also explicitly conveys self-elevation (see Figure 16).

Figure 16. Boldfacing and vertical elevation (self-elevation).

Summing up the examination of the rude examples, there are stereotypic graphic patterns in Chinese written genres that trigger some elevating and denigrating semiotic messages, similar to deferential cases. In general, these graphic patterns have a relatively complex system, which illustrates that in traditional Chinese communication, elevation and denigration have a pivotal role.

Conclusion

This study has contributed to politeness research by analysing a somewhat neglected phenomenon, that is, graphic representations of deference and rudeness. It has shown that deferential and rude Chinese elevating and denigrating phenomena have common characteristics, which are also manifested in "written discourse". Both deferential and rude elevation and denigration phenomenon have typical and elaborate graphic tools that are used to trigger semiotic messages. This supports the recent argument in politeness research that culture-specific features of a phenomenon can be captured by focusing on its "degree of development" rather than debating whether it exists across cultures or not. Even though the graphic phenomena studied might exist—and indeed

they do exist in some forms in other cultures, what makes them unique in traditional Chinese communication is that they are utilized in considerably systematic and elaborate ways.

References

Agha, A. (2007). *Language and social relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

CAI, D. Q. (1999). *Standard practical writing (Ying yong wen biao gan).* Tainan: Wen guo shu ju. (in Chinese)

Culpeper, J. (1996). Towards and anatomy of impoliteness. *Journal of Pragmatics, 25,* 349-367.

Eelen, G. (2001). *A critique of politeness theories*. Manchester: UK and Northampton, St. Jerome Publishing.

GU, Y. G. (1990). Politeness phenomena in modern Chinese. *Journal of Pragmatics, 14,* 237-257.

GU, Y. G. (2011). Modern Chinese politeness revisited. In F. Bargiela-Chiappini, & D. Z. Kádár (Eds.), *Politeness across cultures* (pp. 128-148). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

HUANG, X. Y. (2001). *Practical writing (Ying yong wen)*. Taipei: Hong ye wen hua shi ye you xian gong si. (in Chinese)

Kádár, D. Z. (2007). *Terms of (im)politeness—On the communicational properties of traditional Chinese (im)polite terms of address*. Budapest: Eötvös Loránd University Press.

LI, Z. S. (2003). *Red-color news soldier*. New York: Phaidon.

Miklós, P. (1979). Mire jó a szemiotika? (What semiotics is good for?) In J. J. Barabas (Ed.), *Semiotics and art* (pp. 211-224). Budapest: Hungarian Academy of Sciences Press. (in Hungarian)

Norman, J. (1988). *Chinese*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

PENG, G. Y. (2000). *The polite language system of pre-modern Chinese (Kin dai Chū go ku go no kei go shi su te mu)*. Tokyo: Hakuteisha. (in Japanese)

Pizziconi, B. (2011). Japanese honorifics: The cultural specificity of a universal mechanism. In D. Z. Kádár, & S. Mills (Eds.), *Politeness in East Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Van Leeuwen, K. (2006). *Reading images—The grammar of visual design*. London: Routledge.

Watts, R. J. (2003). *Politeness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

ZHANG, R. Q. (1979). *Practical writing (Ying yong wen)*. Taipei: Wen shi zhe chu ban she.

ZHU, Y. X. (2005). *Written communication across cultures—A sociocognitive perspective on business genres.* Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.