Variational Pragmatics in Chinese Social Media Requests: The Influence of Gender

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In the studies of variational pragmatics (VP), the factor of gender-based difference has not been investigated to a full extent. Gender, without any doubt, is a very vital factor influencing the production of requests while researches about this are very few in number. This paper studied the influence of gender in terms of making requests in WeChat and this study included 22 Chinese participants who were divided into two groups based on their gender, 11 males and 11 females. There were in total 61 requests collected from the WeChat. And the results showed that the female group preferred to use indirect strategies while the male group preferred direct strategies.

Keywords: variational pragmatics, gender, Requests Chinese WeChat

Introduction

Variational pragmatics (VP) investigates the pragmatic conventions existing in varieties of a language influenced by macro-social factors, for example, region, ethnicity, gender, age, social class, etc. (Barron & Schneider, 2009). In the studies of VP now, difference between gender has not been researched in a very good way, and in the same time, influence of macro-social factors on the pragmatic strategies used in face-to-face communication has been studied in a large scale (Felix-Brasdefer, 2009) while there were very few studies paying attention to the social media communication. Nowadays as the technology developed, social media communication has become an indispensable part of our life, and WeChat has become our daily communication tool which plays an extremely vital role in our life, in that we carry on a majority of our communication with others with WeChat.

The speech act of requesting is the most frequently examined in pragmatics. Research on requests includes cross-cultural comparison (e.g., Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989), development patterns (e.g., Achiba, 2003; Ren, 2019), dimension of variation (e.g., Barron, 2008a; 2008b; Felix-Brasdefer, 2009; Ren, 2018), the strategies used in a particular language or culture (e.g., Hassall, 1999; Zhang, 1995), and so on. And the speech act of requesting in terms of the difference of genders in social media communication was studied in a very limited way.

This paper collected data of how males and females making a request and the difference between them in WeChat communication and analyzed the data in terms of three aspects, request strategies, internal modification, and external modification. It aims to tell the difference between the two genders and discuss the reasons behind them.

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Literature Review

The previous researches have studied how people make requests in various countries, including in China. For example, in early time, Lee-Wong (1994) in his studies found that Chinese were more likely to employ direct request strategies. By contrast, nevertheless, Zhang (1995) found in his researches that conventionally indirect strategies were Chinese people's favorite, whether they were making a request to an interlocutor with a higher social status or a lower social status. Zhang (1995) also proved the popularity of the conventionally indirect strategies in Chinese when making a request and they also pointed a vital fact that many a factor exerted a large impact on the request strategies people use, say, social status, gender or age. Han (2013) found that Chinese people were more liable to choose conventionally indirect strategies in a majority of situations and in a few conditions, they use direct strategies to make a request and this is often in the conditions that the interlocutors they make requests to were in a lower social status than them or were in a very close relationship with them. Han (2013) pointed out that employing direct strategies, to a large extent, reflected the relationship between the two speakers while using conventionally indirect strategies reflected a kind of politeness.

However, the previous researches focused more on face-to-face communication and the results were also mostly based on that. Features of requests in social media communication were investigated not that much and this study examined the influence of gender when making a request and the features of different genders making requests in WeChat. And the research question can be stated as this, when making a request of an interlocutor; do male and female Chinese WeChat users perform request strategies, external modification and internal modification differently? If so, in what respects?

The Study

Participants

A total of 22 native speakers of Chinese are included in this study who were classified into two different groups based on their genders. The male group was composed of 11 participants while the female group was composed of 11 participants, all of which were aged between 20 and 27 at the time of the data collection and were all graduate students in University of Shanghai for Science and Technology.

Data Collection

WeChat has now become an indispensable means of communication in people's lives. People use WeChat to communicate on a daily basis. Thanks to WeChat, we are able to send and receive messages in a variety of ways, including text, emojis, pictures, or audio and video files. In this study, participants were required to save their daily WeChat communication record which was all about making a request to others. On top of that, in order to control the rank of imposition of collected requests, we only collect those requests which were considered as small favors. All the collected data were typed into a word document, and all sentences which included a real name were replaced by XXX, so as to protect the privacy of participants.

This study, in total, collected 61 authentic requests on WeChat, including 25 from the male group and 36 from the female group. Most of the interlocuters, the participants made requests to, were their same-grade schoolmates, while few were their senior or junior schoolmates and they all were relatively similar with the interlocuters they made requests to.

Data Coding and Analysis

Ren's (2019) coding scheme for Chinese requests was adopted in this study, while Ren's (2019) coding

scheme was modified on the basis of the classification by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989). And in Ren's (2019) coding scheme, request strategies were classified into direct, conventionally indirect and non-conventionally indirect strategies. External modification consists of adjuncts, aggravating supportive moves and mitigating supportive moves. In internal modification, lexical and syntactic strategies were utilized to mitigate the request force.

Findings

Request Strategies

By calculating, in the male group, the direct strategies were used 17 times, conventionally indirect strategies five times and non-conventionally indirect strategies three times, respectively accounting for 68%, 20%, and 12%. While in the female group, the direct strategies were used 14 times, conventionally indirect strategies 17 times and non-conventionally indirect strategies five times, respectively accounting for 38.9%, 47.2%, and 13.9%.

According to the statistical analysis, the non-conventionally indirect request strategies were used the least frequently in both groups, three times (12%) in the male group and five times (13.9%) in the female group respectively. The male group preferred direct requests, which accounted for 68% of their requests and they did not often use conventionally indirect request strategies, which only accounts for 20% while the female group preferred conventionally indirect request strategies, accounting for 47.2%, and direct requests strategies were also often used by them, which accounted for 38.9%. We can naturally come to a conclusion that males tend to be more direct than females when making a request, the latter using more indirect strategies.

External Modification

According to the statistical analysis, both the male and female group used many an external modifier when making requests while the female group used a lot more external modifiers than the male group. The aggravating supportive moves were not used by the female group at all and the male group also only used a few of them, which only accounts for 9.1%. In all the external modifiers used, it can be seen that both the adjuncts and mitigating supportive moves were frequently used by the two groups while the male group used adjuncts less frequently (31.8%) than the female group (51.1%) and mitigating supportive moves more frequently (59.1%) than the female group (48.9%). We can explain this by the fact that both males and females were likely to employ mitigating supportive moves to weaken this kind of imposed tone when making a request. And when making a request, the male group tended to directly do this without adding an address terms while as to the female group, they were liable to use more address terms when making a request, which maybe be explained by the fact that address terms can draw the distance close between two people and show a closer relationship and females tend to pay more attention to their relationships with others.

Internal Modification

According to the statistical analysis, on an overall basis, the female group used more internal modifiers than the male group. And both the male and female group employed more lexical or phrasal downgraders than the syntactic downgraders (the male group: 57.1%; 42.9%; 80.65%; 19.4%). The female group used a great number of lexical or phrasal downgraders, 25 times whose proportion reached up to 80.6%. Among the lexical or phrasal downgraders, politeness marker is frequently used in the female group, which is 15 times and only one time in the male group. And there is also another phenomenon which is worthy noticing that appealers and

Conditionals were not used at all in the male group while as to the female group three times and one times respectively. Through analyzing, we can see that the female group tend to use more downgraders when making a request and they use masses of politeness markers which were much more than the male group. This phenomenon can be explained by the fact that females tend to be more polite, kinder and use more expressions which can make their tone softer while males tended to speak more concisely, directly and they do not beat around the bush when asking and use less modifiers.

Discussion

This paper studied how males and females make requests in WeChat communication and analyzed those requests in terms of three aspects, request strategies, internal modification, and external modification. It is found that males preferred to be more direct when they make requests while for females, they were more likely to use the conventionally indirect strategies to show politeness and mildness. What is more, females tend to use more adjuncts, mitigating supportive moves and lexical, phrasal or syntactic downgraders than male to draw the relationship close to the interlocuters, soften the tone of imposition and show more politeness, which reflected the difference between Chinese male and female when they speak.

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