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## The sequential organisation of gift offering and acceptance in Chinese<sup>☆</sup>

Zhu Hua<sup>a,\*</sup>, Li Wei<sup>a</sup> and Qian Yuan<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *Department of Speech, University of Newcastle upon Tyne,  
King George VI Building, Newcastle, NE1 73U, UK*

<sup>b</sup> *Department of Foreign Languages, Beijing Normal University, China*

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### Abstract

This paper reports on a study of gift offering and acceptance (G.O.A.) in the Chinese cultural context. We adopt the ‘explore and discover’ approach and its two associated principles – the principle of ‘holism’ which requires that issues concerning communication patterns of a specific group of people are not divorced from the historical development, social experience, cultural beliefs and values of that group generally; and the principle of ‘emergence’ which requires that we discover structures from empirical evidence rather than pre-assigning or imposing structures. 71 instances of G.O.A. have been recorded, using a specially designed observation sheet. The sequential structure of G.O.A. is analysed, and subsequently interpreted with reference to the Chinese notion of *li*. It is argued that the Chinese *li* differs significantly from the western concept of ‘politeness’ in both content and structure, which manifests itself in the act of G.O.A., and has far-reaching implications for intercultural communication. © 2000 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Gift offering and acceptance; Politeness; Sequential analysis; Chinese.

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<sup>☆</sup> The study on which this paper is based was carried out as part of the first author's MA project, under the supervision of Professor Qian Yuan. Professor Qian died of cancer in March, 1997. This paper is dedicated to her memory. Versions of the paper have been presented at the Sociolinguistics Symposium 12 in London and the 6th International Pragmatics Conference in Reims, France. We are grateful to the participants for their helpful comments and suggestions. The revision of the paper has benefited from comments by two anonymous referees of this journal, from suggestions by its editor Jacob Mey, and from discussions with our friend Gu Yueguo. Needless to say, the study would not have been possible without the assistance of the people who took part in it.

\* Corresponding author: +44 191 222 7385; Fax: +44 191 222 6518, Email: hua.zhu@newcastle.ac.uk

## 1. Introduction

This paper examines the sequential organisation of gift offering and acceptance (G.O.A.) in Chinese. G.O.A. as a communicative event is not unique to the Chinese culture. Nevertheless, we wish to argue in this paper that the cultural context in which G.O.A. occurs has a fundamental impact on the organisation of the event, and an understanding of how G.O.A. works in a particular culture requires an understanding of the broader social norms and values.

As far as the methodology is concerned, the study on which this paper is based adopts an ‘ethnographic’, rather than a ‘comparative’, perspective. Much of the recent work on cross-cultural communication has used the comparative approach – examples are cited from a variety of cultural contexts and the differences between them highlighted. The main goal of these studies seems to be the testing of the generality of existing models and theories of human communication. This kind of ‘transport and test’ approach has been criticised for its lack of the necessary sensitivity to discovering social phenomena, including linguistic phenomena, which may be important in the other culture but not particularly salient in one’s own (e.g. Bremer et al., 1996; Li, 1996). The alternative approach is to ‘explore and discover’. This requires us to keep our eyes open for novel aspects of culture-bound human behaviour, even when we do find support for the generality of the phenomena we study. And rather than simply coming back from our study in another culture with the conclusion that there are (no) differences, we go further and seek explanations from *within* that culture. Traditionally, ethnographers adopt this kind of perspective in their studies of cultural phenomena in different communities across the world. We shall use this approach to complement the analytic framework provided by Conversation Analysis in the present study of G.O.A. in the Chinese cultural context.

The paper is structured as follows: we begin with a brief discussion of the significance of G.O.A. as a politeness phenomenon in the Chinese culture. We shall look at the etymology of the Chinese word *liwu* (gifts) and distinguish two main functions of gift-giving. We then outline the analytic framework which we shall use for the study of Chinese G.O.A., namely Conversation Analysis. Following a brief description of the database of the study, the core of this paper will be devoted to a detailed analysis of the sequential organisation of G.O.A. in Chinese. A discussion of the socio-cultural motivations for the sequential organisation of G.O.A. will then follow, focusing on the cultural beliefs and values which underlie the G.O.A. event in Chinese. The paper concludes with a summary of the key findings of the study and the theoretical and methodological issues emerging from it.

## 2. G.O.A. as a politeness phenomenon in Chinese

There is a great deal of interest in and confusion about the notion of ‘politeness’ amongst students of linguistic pragmatics. More often than not, linguistic politeness is equated with either an individual’s desire to be pleasant to others in daily social interaction, or ‘deference’, i.e. the respect one shows to others by virtue of their

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