Face-Saving Strategies in the Chinese Context: A Case Study of Post-match Interviews With Table Tennis Athletes

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Post-match interview is a medium for athletes to showcase their impressions. This paper focus on the discourse of a post-match interview by Chinese athletes in the sport of table tennis at the 2024 Paris Olympics using the face-saving theory as the main framework introduced by Brown and Levinson (1987). In addition, theoretical extensions (Gu, 1990; Mao, 1994; Gao, 1996) are also used to explain conceptions of face in the Chinese context. This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to investigating how athletes construct and maintain their face. It specifically analyzes the positive face, negative face, and redressive strategies. The findings indicate that Chinese athletes commonly adopt strategies such as emphasizing collective honor, humor, and indirect expressions to address face issues. These strategies are related to the collectivist values that are embedded in Chinese culture. This study extends the application of face theory to the under-explored domain of sports discourse and offers insights for future studies in sports communication and intercultural pragmatics.

Keywords: face-saving theory, post-match interview, positive face, negative face

Introduction

Post-match interviews play a crucial role in contemporary sports reporting. Table tennis is the national sport of China and the post-match remarks of these athletes attract a large amount of social media attention. These interviews often reflect social and cultural values. When answering media questions, athletes may use multiple politeness strategies to express personal attitudes, maintain interpersonal harmony, and protect both their individual and collective image. The after-match conversation is a chance of analyzing face-saving behaviors and the underlying cultural motivations.

The face-saving theory proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) offers a framework to study the phenomena of face in communication. However, this theory has been criticized in the context of non-Western cultures. The Chinese face concept is more relational, socially critical, and more collective oriented (Gu, 1990; Mao, 1994). Therefore, this study is based on the classical face-saving theory and it also involves localized interpretations to explain the real use of language in international sporting events by the Chinese athletes. The present study examines post-match interview data from six Chinese table tennis players during the 2024 Paris Olympic Games. From a pragmatic perspective, the study aims to explore how these sportsmen strategically manage both individual and collective face in public discourse.

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Literature Review

The Development of Face-Saving Theory

Brown and Levinson (1987) proposed a model of politeness strategies, in which face is defined as the public self-image that every member wants to claim for themselves. It provides that individuals possess two primary faces in discourse positive face, the need to be liked and approved of by others, and negative face, the need to behave without being restricted. The role of politeness is to guard the needs of face of people speaking as well as those hearing and to minimize the risk of face threatening acts (FTAs) in this context. Brown and Levinson argued that FTAs are unavoidable in interaction but can be mitigated through five major types of redressive strategies: bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, off record, and do not do the FTA.

Subsequently, researchers have turned to more dynamic and interaction-based approaches to explain how faces work in actual communicative contexts. Spencer-Oatey (2007) incorporated the identity theory into the conceptualization of face and proposed three perspectives: personal attributes, relationship attributes, and group-based attributes. Spencer-Oatey (2008) further studied the politeness phenomenon in cross-cultural business communication and education contexts. Haugh (2007) introduced an interactional approach to politeness, arguing that politeness is co-constructed in specific social interactions and cannot be divorced from participant roles, situational and cultural factors.

Localization of Face Theory in the Chinese Context

The traditional face theory has been criticized for overlooking cultural differences (Watts, 2003). According to the binary opposition between positive and negative face in the model of Brown and Levinson, there is an individualistic perception.

There are certain localized views which offer some theoretical foundation to the reinterpretation of the behavior of Chinese politeness. Gu (1990) proposed a "Chinese politeness principle". He argued that politeness in Chinese discourse is not only made by individual demands but also by some principles like social harmony. Mao (1994) developed the concept of the relative face orientation construct to explain differences between English and Chinese facework. According to him, there were two dimensions of face: ideal social identity and ideal individual autonomy. In East Asian cultures, the focus is on the former. Gao (1996) also examined how interpersonal relationships, social dynamics, and culturally embedded notions of face influence daily interaction in Chinese cultures. Hwang (2006) introduced the idea of relation-based self-esteem. He argued that personal dignity is related to role performance and social evaluation within relational networks in Confucian societies.

Research on Face and Politeness in Sports Discourse

Face-saving theory has been widely applied in many fields such as business communication, and educational settings. Nevertheless, there is lack of pragmatic research in sports communication. File (2012) noted that sports interviews are generally distinguished by their conciliatory and non-adversarial aspects. Recent studies have begun to explore politeness in this domain. Cunningham, Simmons, and Mascarenhas (2018) examined how sports referees engage in face-work to manage interactions with athletes. Other studies focused on humor as a face management tool. File and Schnurr (2019) investigated the use of humor in interviews conducted with athletes and coaches, and explored how the failed humor can be a threat to personal identity and face. Chovanec (2021) carried out case studies on the strategic use of humor by athletes in post-match interviews as a means of face management. More recently, Tseng and Chen (2022) explored how mutual face-maintaining acts (MFMA) function among referee, athlete, and coach interactions in the NBA.

However, research on Chinese athletes, especially the pragmatic strategies they use in post-match interview remains scarce. Few studies have examined how Chinese athletes work in a collectivist framework to maintain their public image. The current paper is an attempt to apply localized face theory and analyzes the post-match interviews of Chinese table tennis players at the 2024 Olympics in Paris.

Methodology

This study analyses the post-match interviews of Chinese table tennis players. The data set consists of six athletes, Chen Meng, Sun Yingsha, Wang Manyu, Ma Long, Fan Zhendong, and Wang Chuqin. The data cover five event categories: men's singles, women's singles, mixed doubles, men's team, and women's team. They were collected from the interview videos published in the official post-match interviews released by mainstream media. The interviews have been transcribed for the purpose of the present study. The sample covers different genders, types of events, and match result.

This study adopts a qualitative approach to identify pragmatic features. The first step is to identify expressions related to positive and negative face to determine face-threatening behaviors (FTAs). For each FTA, the analysis examines the target and the specific face type threatened; then classify the redressive strategies to analyze the potential face demands and cultural motivations in the Chinese context.

Discussion

Positive Face Maintenance

In the field of Chinese sports, athletes tend to maintain positive face by attributing success to external factors. This practice is especially obvious when the athlete clearly refuses to praise his innate ability. When a reporter called Fan Zhendong a "talented player", Fan Zhendong did not accept such praise. He said that he did not feel "any so-called talent". He redefined his success as a result of "usual accumulation" and a "suitable mindset". Fan Zhendong recognized the traditional Chinese value of diligence. He further generalized this attribute to other teams, noting that "every team... has this kind of talented players". It satisfied the need of his teammates for a good image, and also consolidated his status as a humble winner.

In team events, athletes often put their personal contributions below team cohesion. Athletes often express praise and thank their teammates and coaches in interviews. This is a sign of politeness, and it also helps to preserve the positive face of both self and others. For instance, this is depicted in the reflection of Chen Meng on the victory of the women team. Even though she acknowledged the match was "very difficult", she attributed the final victory to the "cooperation and understanding" among the team members. She also said that her teammates were "two little sisters". This expression conveys the close relationship and unity within a group. This kind of behavior also builds up a good image for oneself and wins the favor and appreciation of others. It further maintains one's positive face and reflects that one is a team-oriented athlete, which is consistent with the value of collectivism in Chinese culture.

Negative Face Maintenance

Some of the sensitive or sharp questions posed by reporters may become a menace to the face of the athletes. The study concluded that Chinese athletes tend to use indirect and euphemistic expressions to save their negative image.

Athletes usually adopt indirect expressions and avoid making explicit commitments to maintain their negative face when confronted with questions about future competitions. One of the Swedish reporters questioned

Ma Long on whether the Swedish team would win the championship at the next Olympics Games. Ma Long did not directly predict whether the Swedish team would win the championship, but emphasized the uncertainty of competitive sports. He utilized hedges such as "I think" and "I expect" to express his personal views. He showed his admiration of the Swedish team and avoided the embarrassing situation he might face if he made a wrong prediction. He protected his negative face and reserved the right to freely express his opinions. Then he concluded by affirming that "the Chinese team is still the strongest". This reply respected the potential of the opponent and firmly upheld the position of its own team.

Athletes employ euphemism and justification to reduce the face threat caused by negative evaluations. When Wang Chuqin was questioned about his performance, he did not simply comment on his performance or ability. He first pointed out the failure within objective constraints, citing "physical and mental consumption" and the lack of "readiness time". Then he admitted that "this match was still not well played". This kind of response avoided a direct conflict with the reporter. It maintained the reporter's face and provided a reasonable explanation for his performance.

FTAs and Redressive Strategies

In the face of FTAs, athletes could employ some redressive strategies to balance competing face needs. Athletes may engage in FTAs if they need to evaluate their opponents. Offering overly critical comments can threaten the opponent's positive face, while excessive praise may risk undermining the athlete's own image. Fan Zhendong utilized a positive politeness strategy in an interview after his victory over a Swedish player. He framed the match against his opponent, Moregard, as an "honor" and emphasized that there were "no losers" on the court. He confirmed the opponent's ability and praised their "glorious history". These remarks show the positive face of the opponent. This praise indirectly enhanced his own face. This reflects a strategy in Chinese sports discourse where the speaker downplays the conflictual aspect of victory to maintain interpersonal harmony.

Humor in certain instances often serves as an off-record strategy. In the case when a reporter incorrectly claimed that Ma Long had won seven gold medals, a direct correction might have embarrassed and threatened the reporter's face. Therefore, Ma Long joked that he did "not know where this seventh medal came from" and suggested the reporter might have counted a "souvenir medal". This kind of humor enables the speaker to indirectly correct the message. It reduces the intensity of the interaction. It provides a face-saving way for the reporter and describes the mistake as a minor misunderstanding rather than a lack of professional literacy.

Conclusion

This paper applies face-saving theory and its extensions in Chinese contexts, in order to examine the pragmatic strategies used by Chinese table tennis players in post-match interviews. The results show that athletes often attribute their success to the team and emphasize national honor. This practice reflects the collectivist orientation of Chinese culture (Hofstede, 2001) and helps to uphold social image. In the interviews, athletes tend to respond to sensitive issues in an indirect and humorous way. Athletes often express gratitude to teammates, highlight team unity, and show respect for their opponents. These behaviors reflect the interpersonal harmony and respect for social relationships in Confucianism (Gu, 1990; Gao, 1996).

This study employs face theory to the field of sports discourse. It gives details on the way Chinese athletes conduct media communication and manage their public image. In the present research, the sample size is relatively little since its primary focus extends to the interviews of Chinese table tennis players in only one

Olympics Games. Future studies could investigate other sports events or compare Chinese athletes with international counterparts. This would help such research to understand the impact of cultural differences on expression of facework and language communication in sports.

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