

A Pragmatic Study of Mitigating Strategies for Interpersonal Conflicts in Unequal Power Relations

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Abstract: Conflict talk is a common but complex interactional phenomenon, whose initiation, maintenance, termination, etc. have been explored by many scholars. However, the mitigating strategies of conflict talk have not attracted much attention for research. This paper is a pragmatic study of mitigating strategies for interpersonal conflicts on the basis of the collected data from a number of Chinese official novels within Verschueren's theoretical framework of Linguistic Adaptation Theory. It then offers an account of the pragmatic motivations for interlocutors with unequal power relations to use mitigating strategies in verbal conflicts in Chinese official settings.

Keywords: Interpersonal Conflicts, Mitigating Strategies, Unequal Power Relations, Adaptation, Chinese Official Settings

1. Introduction

Conflict and mitigation are two phenomena constantly involved in interpersonal communication. Conflict talk arises when the two parties in interaction differ or disagree with each other on opinions, standpoints, beliefs or attitudes, and take actions to oppose one the other in successive (unfriendly) turns [1], and is often accompanied by the negative emotions of the participants. In most cases, conflict talk and its attendant hostility would cause a series of unpleasant consequences, detrimental to the achievement of communicative goals and harmful to the maintenance of interpersonal harmony. Therefore, how to mitigate the conflict talk, and hopefully, resolve it, is among the core concerns of the interlocutors.

In recent years, the study of conflict talk has attracted attention from scholars at home and abroad and has yielded abundant fruits in such fields as conversational analysis, sociolinguistics, and pragmatics (e.g. [2-6]). However, former studies invariably focus their attention on the conflict talk per se, examining its conversational structure, initiation, maintenance, termination, etc., and hardly ever touch upon the mitigating strategies in conflict talk used to alleviate the antagonism and/or weaken verbal confrontation. Moreover, former studies seldom take unequal power relations into consideration in their discussion. However, as Verschueren (2000) argues, power is a key factor in communicative context

which may influence the choice of language strategies [7].

Thus, based on data collected from a few Chinese official novels, this paper tries to explore the pragmatic motivations for interlocutors in unequal power relations to use mitigating strategies and how the choice of mitigating strategies adapt to unequal power relations.

2. Working Definition of Mitigating Strategies

In a broad sense, conflict talk refers to the kind of conversational communication in which two or more participants who take alternative or oppositional positions on the same issue, oppose the utterances, actions, or selves of one another unfriendly in successive turns, and the process by which such disagreement arises, is dealt with and resolved [1]. In other words, conflict talk is a dynamic process which includes a series of speech acts and different stages. Moreover, hostility or negative emotions may often, if not all the time, accompany the interactions involving conflict [8, 9].

When examining the dynamic process of conflict talk closely, some scholars note that after verbal conflict is initiated, two different situations may emerge. One is that more conflicting responses, e.g. disagreement, refutation, are returned and therefore the conflict continues to escalate; the

other is that some mitigating responses, e.g. expressing acceptance, approval, are given so that the conversation can be carried on in a mitigated way [10, 11].

While the former situation has been given frequent attention, the latter one, which has not received its due attention so far, inspires the present study.

As mitigating strategies in this study are different from conventional notions in which mitigating strategies restrictively refer to those that modify the force of a speech act and reduce certain anticipated unwelcome effects the speech act has on the hearer (e.g. [12, 13]), it is necessary to clarify the notion in this paper in the first place.

As Caffi (2007) has noted, the object referred to by “mitigation” may not yet have happened, in which case mitigation refers to an anticipatory strategy; or the object may have already happened, in which case mitigation is co-extensive with repair [12]. This paper focuses on mitigating strategies used after the conflict talk is initiated. Therefore, in this paper, mitigating strategies are defined as a group of repair strategies which the interlocutors employ with the intention to weaken verbal confrontation and/or reduce the antagonism or tension (associated with negative emotions) in verbal conflict. It is worth noting, however, that while use of mitigating strategies may result in the termination or resolution of the conflict talk, it is not necessarily the case all the time. In other words, the speaker may intend to do so, but not always succeed. Consider the following example.

(1) [Situation] Zhang Guichun is the Secretary of the Municipal Party Committee and Xiang Yangsheng is the chief of a subordinate county. The former has greater power over the latter due to his higher official rank. The two are having a discussion about how to receive a research group of the superiors.

01 Xiang Yangsheng asks: “...what dishes shall we use to entertain the research group?”

02 Zhang Guichun gets annoyed: “You idiot! Do you even have to ask? Of course we will use the ‘four dishes and one soup’ that you invented!”

03 Xing Yangsheng says hesitantly: “Secretary Zhang, it is a little bit difficult to prepare ‘four dishes and one soup’ for so many people. The Spring Festival has just passed, and there are not many high-quality abalones and shark’s fins left, so...”

04 Zhang Guichun fires up: “Xiang Yangsheng, how reckless you are when doing things! When you people reveled in drinking and eating, there were plenty of abalones and shark’s fins. However, when you have to entertain the provincial leaders, there are not enough abalones and shark’s fins. I warn you that you might be discharged from your post!”

05 Xiang Yangsheng: “Secretary Zhang, don’t worry, I will send someone downtown instantly for the purchase...”

06 Zhang Guichun is still furious: “Is there enough time for the purchase? Just forget it, I will ask the Hong Kong Hotel to deliver the dishes there at once.”

07 Xiang Yangsheng: “It just occurs to me that Secretary Lv of our county is just in the downtown today and we can

ask him to arrange for the delivery.”

(Zhou Meisen *I am a Hero*)

Xiang’s rejection of the suggestion (02) by Zhang and further account of the present situation (03) invokes a confrontational disagreement (04) from Zhang, who vents his dissatisfaction by an exclamatory utterance with derogatory meaning (“how reckless you are when doing things”) and a threat to discharge Xiang from his post. The conflict, therefore, causes tension to their communication as well as their relationship. In order to remove Zhang’s anger and rescue the situation, Xiang makes efforts to mitigate the conflict by offering way out (05) (“I will send someone downtown instantly for the purchase”). After his first attempt again is confronted by Zhang (06), he suggests an alternative solution to deal with the situation. In a word, when conflict talk is initiated, instead of opposing the other party, Xiang tries hard to solve the root causes of the conflict and to alleviate the antagonism of Zhang, using mitigating strategies as is underlined in the excerpt.

3. Types of Mitigating Strategies

A close examination of the data shows that the mitigating strategies can be further classified according to the initiator of the strategy and the targeted object of the strategy.

Firstly, in terms of the initiator of mitigating strategies, there are two general cases. The first and most common case is that the one who tries to mitigate the conflict is the one who, either intentionally or unintentionally, causes offence and therefore elicits conflicting response (s) in return. As in example (1) in section 2.1, the one who uses mitigating strategies is the one who causes the conflict. By means of mitigating strategies, they try to redress their action and rescue the situation.

On the other hand, speakers can also initiate mitigating strategies immediately after his or her conflicting response. After the speakers give a conflicting response, if they feel that what they have said has been too harsh to be accepted, or if they sense the extreme tense atmosphere and tries to break the ice, they may try to soften their speech acts and mitigate the conflict immediately after the conflicting response.

Secondly, as has been mentioned above, a conflict talk generally involves two aspects, one is the incompatibility in stances, viewpoints, beliefs, or goals, and so on, between the interlocutors, and the other is the attendant negative emotions with the conflict. In correspondence with these two characters of conflict talk, another finding about mitigating strategies in this study is that there are mitigating strategies directed at the conflict per se as well as mitigating strategies directed at the negative emotions and tension only.

When speakers try to address the cause of the conflict, they may bear a final goal of resolving the conflict in mind, therefore, whether they succeeds or not, they convey to the hearer their good intention, and their efforts may well work to some certain degree. Mitigating strategies of this type include disclaiming one’s intention to be offensive (e.g., “I didn’t mean that”; “it is not what I meant”; “I was just kidding”),

offering justification or explanation, offering way out (which includes proposal of solution and promise of forbearance) and expression of concession (which includes acknowledgement of one's fault or deficiency, expression of agreement or acceptance and explicit apology).

On the other hand, in some cases, the mitigating strategies may simply be an attempt at the negative emotions and interpersonal tension that come along with the conflict, instead of being the efforts to dispose of the conflict. Nevertheless, strategies of this type can help pacify the interlocutors and reduce the awkwardness in the atmosphere and therefore reframe the fractious tone of the conversation and offer chances to negotiate and resolve the conflict. Mitigating strategies like use of imperatives to contain the conflict (e.g. "calm down", "let's stop arguing/quarrelling"), direct dissuasion (with implicit apologies) (e.g. "do not get angry/irritated", "do not take offence"), paying compliments, expressing understanding and showing concern are mainly directed at the attendant negative emotions and the emergent interpersonal tension instead of the conflict per se.

(2) [Situation] Huang Jiangbei is the acting mayor of Zhang Tai city and Lin is his superior, the secretary of the municipal party committee. Huang is really upset about the fact that his secretary reports his doings to Lin and argues with Lin over the issue.

01 Huang Jiangbei: "Is it my secretary Gao who reported things to you?"

02 Secretary Lin gets upset: "...Acting Mayor Huang, are others not allowed to report your doings to me? Don't you need supervision from others?"

03 Huang Jiangbei: "My doings can be reported and I need supervision, but the way that things are reported is (quite annoying)..."

04 Secretary Lin becomes tougher in his tone: "What way? What exactly did we do to you, Acting Mayor Huang?"

05 Huang Jiangbei does not dare a response.

06 Secretary Lin then moderates his tone: "...Jiangbei, the situation of Zhang Tai is more complicated than you thought. I have concern for you because you are young, aggressive and new to the place. You may be unable to carry out work if you rush into things and make enemies, which may further affect your political prospects."

(Lu Tianming *Heaven is Above*)

In this example, Huang and Lin conflict on the issue whether Huang's doings should be reported to the superior, or Lin in this case. The two argue on this issue for several turns and the conflict comes to a climax as Lin indicates his criticism and extreme dissatisfaction with two successive rhetorical questions in (04) ("What way? What exactly did we do to you, Acting Mayor Huang?"). Sensing the extreme tension between him and Huang, Lin makes some efforts to mitigate the conflict and the tension after he gives a conflicting response. He offers explanation for his behavior and shows his concern for Huang as a superior and an experienced elder. In this way, Lin explains that what he has done is out of good intention and for Huang's own good, which helps to soothe out Huang's displeasure and, hopefully,

resolve the conflict. In this example, the mitigating strategies are used by the party who gives conflicting responses, and of the two mitigating strategies employed, offering explanation is mainly targeted at the conflict per se while showing concern is mainly targeted at the attendant negative emotions and tension.

4. Mitigating Strategies as Realizations of Adaptation

4.1. Adaptation Theory and Mitigating Strategies

The Adaptation theory proposed by Verschueren (2000) has great explanatory power for choices made in terms of linguistic forms and strategies in language use. At the core of this theory is the idea that using language must consist of the continuous making of linguistic choices, consciously or unconsciously, for language-internal and/or language-external reasons [7].

Under the framework of the Adaptation theory, use of mitigating strategies is just a result of conscious linguistic choices. When confronted with verbal conflict, the interlocutors have at least two choices: they can either choose to produce another conflicting response again to escalate the conflict or to provide a mitigating response instead to reduce the conflict, depending on the contextual correlates or his/her communicative needs. That is to say, the interlocutor makes the choice of mitigating response with some serious consideration and thus the choice is highly conscious. Then, after making the choice of a mitigating response, the speaker then still has to make the choices as to which strategy or strategies should be used in order to effectively achieve certain goals. In a word, using mitigating strategies in conflictive contexts is a conscious choice-making process.

Besides, context is a very important notion in pragmatics. Adaptation theory classifies context further into linguistic context and communicative context [7]. This paper pays special attention to how the use of mitigating strategies adapts to communicative context in verbal interactions. Communicative context, however, is a quite broad notion which incorporates physical world, mental world and social world [7]. Among the three worlds, social world is mainly concerned with properties of social settings or institutions; or to be more specific, with the relationships of dependence and authority, or power and solidarity between the utterer and interpreter as well as with the social correlate of culture. The present study mainly considers the unequal power relations between the interlocutors in the social world as a key factor for adaptation. Specifically in this study, the interlocutors are endowed with unequal powers by different official ranks and are referred to as superior and subordinate. In the context of Chinese official settings where deference and hierarchy are highlighted and valued, what the speakers say or do should appropriately adapt to their identity and power status in order to maintain the rank order. That is to say, how certain types of linguistic acts are to be performed and who is allowed to perform them in Chinese official settings are mainly decided

by the social factor of unequal power relations between the interlocutors. It is also found that, on the one hand, the circumstances that would decide the interlocutors to use mitigating strategies differ greatly, and on the other hand, the interlocutors also behave quite differently in the choice of mitigating strategies.

4.2. Circumstances Giving Rise to the Use of Mitigating Strategies

During the examination of the data, it is found that not only the interlocutors in lower power positions employ mitigating strategies in conflictive contexts, but also those in higher power positions, though the former surpasses the latter either in number or frequency. Nevertheless, it is also found that the preconditions for interlocutors of different powers to employ mitigating strategies vary. They are, actually, greatly influenced and shaped by the social factor of power.

4.2.1. From the Perspective of Those with Less Power

(i) When Deliberate Offensive Speech from the Speakers Causes Conflict

Though quite rare, there are cases in the collected data when the speakers with lesser power, bearing great discontent with the hearer, use deliberate offensive speech to attack the face or position of the other party, which, only naturally, would result in conflicting responses from the other party since the latter would feel that his or her authority has been neglected and challenged. Then, the party with less power has to take actions, i.e. using mitigating strategies, to rescue the situation.

(3) [Situation] Qian Fanxing and Li Dongfang are having a discussion about the two projects they are going to carry out. Qian always curries favor with the superior and values much their opinions so that he may get his own benefits. Besides, in this situation, the project of Time Avenue is what he attaches greater importance to, for it is closely related to his political achievements.

01 Qian Fanxing (mayor): "My dear monitor, please put it clearly: what does our Big Boss (a nickname for their superior, Sectary of the provincial CPC committee) mean? Do we only work on the project of Immigration and abandon the project of Time Avenue? I've discussed the project of Time Avenue with our Big Boss, and he showed support for this project!"

02 Li Dongfang (Sectary of the municipal CPC committee): "Our Big Boss is still supportive of the project, but he asks us not to bite off more than we can chew. He showed reservations on this project compared with before!"

03 Looking at Li Dongfang with discontent, Qian Fanxing says ironically: "Sectary Li, I do admire you! As soon as our Big Boss changed his attitude, you changed yours too. You are such an expert in keeping pace with the superiors and I do believe there is still much room for you to improve!"

04 Li Dongfang flares up: "Comrade Fanxing, how could you speak in this way? In what way did I change? When

on earth did I ask you to make the project of Time Avenue such a big one? Didn't you report to me until today? To say the least, even though I supported you before, now I want to accept the correct criticism and well-meant warning of Sectary Zhong. Am I wrong in doing so?"

05 Qian Fanxing forces a smiling face: "Sectary Li, please do not take offence whatsoever. I was just kidding. Please, Sectary Li, just stand there, I will bow to you for apology!"

06 Li Dongfang: "That's enough, Fangxing, do not make a spectacle of yourself. Let's continue our discussion!"

(Zhou Meisen *Supreme Interest*)

In this example, Li is the secretary of the municipal party committee and Qian is the mayor of the city. The former has greater power than the latter according to Chinese official ranks. During the discussion, since Qian values so much the project of Time Avenue, when he has learned that there might be a possibility that the project cannot be put into practice, he issues a sarcasm indicating that Li tries to ingratiate himself (Li) with the superior to release his dissatisfaction (03) ("you are such an expert in keeping pace with the superiors"), which greatly attacks the positive face of Li and induces a conflicting response as a result. The conflict not only interrupts the progression of their communication, but also threatens their superior-subordinate relationship, and therefore, Qian has to appeal to mitigating strategies, i.e., direct dissuasion with implicit apologies ("please do not take offence"), disclaiming one's intention ("I was just kidding"), and explicit apology, to redress his speech acts. The mitigating strategies Qian uses are with great face cost, which also highlight the power difference.

(ii) When the Non-aggressive Speech from the Speakers Causes Conflict

Situations of this type are very typical in the collected data. To be specific, the speaker has no intention to be offensive or aggressive, at least not directly towards the hearer, which is but normal in Chinese official settings in which lower-positioned communicators are seldom inclined to open confrontation with higher-positioned communicators for the sake of power respect. Nevertheless, the speaker's speech invokes conflicting responses for the following reasons. Firstly, the speaker is believed to have said or done something inappropriate and therefore cannot be approved of by the hearer; and/or secondly, the hearer wants to highlight his/her identity in relation to the speaker; and/or thirdly, the hearer is in a bad mood and uses conflicting response as a way to vent feelings. In such cases, it is found that the speakers would usually adopt mitigating strategies to cater to the hearers, indicating their submission and adapting to his/her inferior status.

(4) [Situation] Qi, the vice-secretary of provincial Party committee, is really upset about the fact that his car has been intercepted for quite a long time by a group of villagers who ask for their resettlement indemnity with an uncompromising attitude.

- 01 Zhou Tieshan: "Let's go, my old Leader. Let's go for meal first. I know you are still starving. It's not worth getting so angry with the unruly mob."
- 02 Qi Moran: "What do you mean? Unruly mob? How could you call these villagers 'unruly'? Comrade Tieshan, you are an NPC member. You should never forget your identity in any circumstances!"
- 03 Zhou Tieshan: "I won't use these words in the future anymore. I promise. So long as you, my old leader, do not get angry anymore."
- 04 "You should not do so for my sake but for your own sake!" Qi Moran criticized Zhou again.
- 05 "I know, I know. You have criticized me several times. Still I did not make any progress, which disappoints you."

(Xu Kaizhen *People's Congress Members*)

In this example, Zhou, in line (01), says something with not the slightest intention to be offensive to Qi; in fact, he is trying to comfort and cheer Qi up by degrading the group of villagers who makes trouble as "unruly mob" (*diao min*). However, as the superior of Zhou and the provincial vice-secretary of a party whose principle is to serve the people with whole heart, Qi thinks that Zhou has said something that does not conform to his identity and therefore can in no way be approved of. The confrontational disagreement indicating severe criticism by Qi (02) makes Zhou realize how inappropriate his words are, and therefore he uses several mitigating strategies, e.g., promise of forbearance, acknowledging one's fault or deficiency, to patch up the conflict and remove Qi's antagonism against him.

(iii) When the Argument Triggers Dissatisfaction in the Other Party

When the two parties in verbal interaction have different opinions or stances on certain issues, or the inferior party wants to justify their words or deeds which have been misunderstood or misjudged, though they are in different power positions, they may also be involved in some kind of argument. However, it is found in the collected data that when the interlocutor with greater power shows his/her dissatisfaction and begins to overwhelm the other party with power, the interlocutor with less power would always submit or at least partially concede by means of mitigating strategies.

(5) [Situation] The investigation of the fire that shocks the whole country may pose threat to the position and taint official achievements of Wang Changgong, the former mayor and present governor of the province. As Chen Hanjie, the present director of the provincial People's Congress, insists on a thorough investigation of the fire, Wang hopes to win favor from Chen by asking Jiang, the chief of the police, to set free Chen's son, Chen Xiaomu, who has committed the crime of intentional injury.

- 01 Wang Changgong: "Zhengliu, I tell you: I do not want to intensify the conflict with Chen Hanjie for the present. Is there any good if we provoke him? Do we want a peaceful environment or not?"
- 02 Jiang Zhengliu was not convinced: "Governor Wang, so long as Chen Xiaomu is prosecuted, he will face a

sentence of more than five years in prison. We have made detailed investigation, and there are verified evidences for his crime!"

- 03 Wang Changgong lost his temper: "Comrade Zhengliu, how could you be such a fool? You should try to cover for him even if he committed the crime of murder, needless to say the crime of intentional injury! We should be sophisticated in politics and take the interests of the whole into consideration! For now, what matters most is that the cadre team in Chang Shan cannot be thrown into chaos!"
- 04 Jiang Zhengliu tried to redress his words: "yeah, yeah, we should take the interests of the whole into consideration. I just want to report the case to you so that you could have a clear mind about it."

(Zhou Meisen *National Prosecution*)

In this example, Jiang has divergence in how to deal with the case of Chen Xiaomu with Wang and argues with the latter, which only results in Wang's dissatisfaction. Wang criticizes Jiang for being stupid. In order to adapt to the higher power position of Wang and mitigate the conflict between them, Jiang express his agreement with Wang ("yeah, yeah, we should take the interests of the whole into consideration") to show his concession. Moreover, his agreement is further accompanied by an offer of justification to highlight deference. These efforts help to suppress the conflict and, meanwhile, underline the power difference.

4.2.2. From the Perspective of Those with Greater Power

(i) When the Deliberate Offensive Speech from the Speakers Causes Conflict

Generally speaking, in verbal interaction involving unequal power relations, the party with greater power tends to be very directly in expressing their views, requests, inner feelings, etc., without considering too much about the face or feelings of the other party. However, the higher-positioned party may sometimes be too offensive to be accepted. Besides, the party of higher party may not always be justified in saying or doing things. When the interlocutors with greater power realize that they have been too harsh on the other party or have been in the wrong, they may also make efforts to mitigate the conflict, pacifying the other party, repairing the other party's face and/or making their utterances more acceptable.

(6) [Situation] The workers of Chang Shan Mineral Group are planning an appeal to the provincial government. As the number of workers who go for the appeal is so large, Lin Rongqiang, the mayor, is afraid that they would cause serious trouble, which in turn would threaten his image in front of the superior as a capable mayor. Therefore, Lin Yongqiang puts pressure on Huang Xiuguo, the vice-secretary of the company's Party committee, to deal with the matter.

- 01 Lin Rongqiang: "Here I reiterate it: Chang Shan Mineral Group is a province-owned enterprise which didn't contribute any to the financial income of Chang Shan so that we cannot and we will not take the responsibility of the trouble caused by its workers!"
- 02 Huang Xiuguo: "But the trouble has to be dealt with

anyway!”

03 Lin Rongqiang is rude and unreasonable: “Of course we have to solve the trouble, but it’s you who will do it! I warn you now that you will be the one that is to blame if the unemployed workers go to the train station of Chang Shan. It’s okay if you don’t want to detain them. Then you have to visit those workers and dissuade them from doing so! If necessary, you may even bow or kowtow to them, begging them not to make trouble! You should stop shifting responsibility on to the higher-ups or the subordinates and stop just staying in downtown Chang Shan being a detached official!”

04 Huang Xiuguo cannot bear the harsh words anymore and retorts angrily: “Mayor Lin, I will quit the position as an official, is that okay? I’m begging you to make suggestion to the provincial CPC committee to discharge me from the position of the vice-secretary of Chang Shan Mineral Group’s Party committee!”

05 Lin Yongqiang moderates his tone: “Lao Huang, Please forgive me. I am in bad mood today due to the outburst of protest from the workers. I may be harsh on you. Please do not take offence!”

(Zhou Meisen *National Prosecution*)

In this example, Lin is the superior of Huang and would like the latter to deal with the emergent situation for him. However, as Lin is quite worried and anxious himself, he issues a series of offensive utterances to, actually, force Huang to do what he wants the latter to do. For example, he threatens to get even with Huang if the latter cannot resolve the problem (“you will be the one that is to blame”), devalues Huang’s working ability (“begging them not to make trouble”) and criticizes Huang as the person who would shift responsibility on to the higher-ups or the subordinates. With these offensive utterances, Lin greatly attacks Huang’s positive face as well as negative face, and offends Huang so much so that the latter produces a confrontational response to indicate his protest to what Lin has said and vent his anger. At this phase, Lin realizes that he has been being too harsh and unreasonable towards Huang and that the conflict undermines their relationship and hinders their future cooperation in work. As a result, he has to turn to mitigating strategies (explicit apology, offering explanation and direct dissuasion) to help them out of the awkward situation.

(ii) When the Speakers Feel that they have Overreacted

In communications between interlocutors with unequal power relations, having greater power means that the speaker has the right to criticize the lower-positioned party for having said or done something, or to prevent the latter from saying or doing something, and the former can be quite bold to do so. They may use quite harsh words to attack the position, status, or “quality face” like competence, personality or character of the other party to show their disagreement or disapproval, etc.; they may jump to criticism before they get things clear; or they may simply try to overwhelm the other party to highlight their superior position. Afterwards, if the tension becomes extreme or the other party fights back, which makes the interlocutors of

higher power feel that they have overreacted and have been a bit strong, they may also have to redress their words and alleviate the confrontation and the tension.

(7) [Situation] Ma Da, one member of provincial discipline inspection commission, is reporting to Yu Huabei, the vice-secretary of provincial Party committee, about the present work they are busy with.

01 Yu Huabei: “What is your intention to investigate the dynamics of personal management? Do you plan to use this as a clue to investigate all the cadres that were transferred to other posts from Gu Long?”

02 Ma Da: “...The members of the discipline inspection commission including me want them to assist us in the investigation of the Gu Long Case! Of course, we will also pay special attention to some cadres who might be corrupt and do some investigations about them, seeking truth from the facts!”

03 Yu Huabei: “Ma Da, you can’t do that! I told you last time that we should take a case-by-case approach to the investigation! If you have clues, you can do a thorough investigation. But that doesn’t mean that you can doubt everything and do things only out of imagination!”

04 Ma Da protests: “Secretary Yu, I did not do things only out of imagination. The local government of Gu Long County is corrupt, so can anybody guarantee that those cadres who were transferred to other posts from Gu Long are all clean-handed? So long as you are corrupt, I would chase after you even if you were transferred to the United Nations!”

05 Yu Huabei pulls a long face: “Ma Da, you are just being suspicious of everything! If you really do so, you will go against the policy! How bold and reckless you are by saying chasing after those cadres even if they were in United Nations!” Feeling that he had overreacted, Yu moderated his tone: “Lao Ma, while we are responsible for fighting against corruption, we should also take the interests of the whole into consideration! It is economic development, not anti-corruption, that is the central task of Han Jiang province and Wen Shan city.”

(Zhou Meisen *I Dominate Vicissitudes*)

In this example, Yu does not agree with Ma’s opinion on doing a thorough investigation about all the cadres that used to work in Gu Long County, but Ma argues with him in (04) again, which provokes Yu’s displeasure finally. Yu criticizes Ma as being suspicious of everything and being bold and reckless, which severely attacks the quality face (i.e. competence) of Ma and may depress Ma and affect his enthusiasm in future work. Afterwards, Yu feels that he has overreacted to what Ma has said and has been a bit strong as the superior to a hard-working subordinate with principles and then uses mitigating strategies to redress his action in order to implement persuasion and comfort Ma.

(iii) When the Speakers Want to Control the Conversation in a Mitigated Way

In cases of this kind, the two parties in interaction conflict on a certain issue. When the higher-positioned party believes

that there is no need for further argument or when the lower-positioned party becomes more agitated than the higher-positioned one, indicating that the lower-positioned party may have been unfairly treated or be extremely dissatisfied with the superior's decision or action, the party in the higher position may use mitigating strategies to suppress the other party's negative emotions and direct the communication to a "calm and peaceful" tone so that they may work things out together in an atmosphere without too much tension.

(8) [Situation] Gong Kaichen, the secretary of provincial Party committee, assigns Song Haifeng to Da Shanzi city as the secretary of municipal Party committee, and the latter, however, conflicts with the mayor, Ma Yang, in dealing with the city affairs.

01 Ma: "You insisted that Song Haifeng be assigned to Da Shanzi city..."

02 Gong: "I've repeated it many times. Assigning Song as the top leader of Da Shanzi is to help you in your work there. Meanwhile, it is also the result of institutional reform."

03 "But after Song came to Da Shanzi, the municipal Public Security and Procuratorial Organs have changed their former work focus and investigation direction completely..."

04 "Song Haifeng has reported his thoughts to me. He told me that by doing so, he intends to create a stable social order and benign working environment for economic development, and that these old criminal cases will be investigated later."

05 "Is the case of Yan Keyan an old one? It is possible for the economy of development zone develop in a benign environment if we do not detect the hidden economic criminals and evil forces?"

06 "Calm down/control your temper and express yourself in a peaceful way. Nobody argues with you!"

07 Ma Yang swallows his anger and sits down.

(Lu Tianming *The Secretary of Provincial Party Committee*)

In this example, Ma, though as the subordinate, is very dissatisfied with Gong's decision of assigning Song as his (Ma's) superior to the city to carry out work together with him and argues with Gong on this issue and gets extremely agitated after several turns. Gong discerns Ma's hostility to his decision and the tension that comes along and uses a mitigating strategy to suppress Ma's negative emotions so that the tension may be alleviated and their conversation can be picked up in a more controllable and favorable way.

To sum up, as has been discussed above, the circumstances that would decide the interlocutors to use mitigating strategies are quite different. For those in lower power position, they may use mitigating strategies whether they are in the wrong or not while for those in higher power status, they almost only use mitigating strategies when they are in the wrong or want to control the conversation. The differences in the circumstances in deciding the use of mitigating strategies well reveals the fact that the interlocutors always put themselves in a correct

power status in relation to others and always try to behave properly in accordance with their identities.

4.2. Mitigating Strategies as Realizations of Adaptation

4.2.1. Unequal Power Relations in Chinese Official Settings

In interpersonal relationships, there always exists some kind of power difference. Roughly in Weber's sense, power is the degree to which one can impose his own plans and self-evaluation on another [14]. Therefore, people's power status in a certain situation would decide him/her to behave in a certain way to adapt to their power relation with others. According to Spencer-Oatey's (1996) summarization, what's more, the notion of power may include: 1) power of control; 2) social status or rank; 3) authority, or the legitimate right to exert influence, etc. [15]. Specific in the situation of Chinese official settings, the power coming from rank overrides power coming from other factors such as age and gender, etc. [16]. To put it differently, the speaker's official rank in an organization determines his/her power status relative to the addressee. Moreover, China has been a highly hierarchical society ever since the ancient time and still is now though with some changes. In the hierarchical society of China, the members have to behave properly according to his/her social role in order to maintain the hierarchy or social order. In Chinese official settings, deference has to be shown from the person of lower rank to the one of higher rank to attend to the superior's face, and not the other way around. On the other hand, the superior can choose between claiming authority over or seeking solidarity with the subordinate. In the latter case, however, the superior can show rapport to make the other person feel good meanwhile still be assured of his or her power privilege [16]. To sum up, in this kind of hierarchical settings, power difference is invariably acknowledged and emphasized.

4.2.2. Adaptation to Superior-Subordinate Relations

In former studies of conflict talk, some scholars have already noticed the close relationship between power and conflict talk. For instance, Rees-Miller (2000), Pan (2000) and Grimshaw (1990) find that power would influence the strategies or ways to express oppositions in conflict talk and that the greater the discrepancy in power between participants, the less likely the participant with greater power will be challenged [1, 11, 16]. Meanwhile, other scholars argue that conflict talk can be used as a means of negotiating power and constructing status [17, 18]. This study also well reveals these two facts. In other words, on the one hand, the power difference between the interlocutors would decide their choice of mitigating strategies to appropriately adapt to their status relative to the other, and on the other hand, the choice of different mitigating strategies would again result in the interlocutors' comprehension of the unequal power relations between them.

Specifically in our study, among the 75 situations collected, interlocutors with less power use mitigating strategies in 53 cases, accounting for 70.67% of the total while interlocutors with greater power only uses mitigating strategies in 22 cases,

making up 29.33%. It points to the fact that interlocutors in Chinese official settings are well aware of the power difference in their relationships and the participants in inferior positions are more inclined to use mitigating strategies to adapt to their disadvantaged power status;

Moreover, when examined closely, three specific kinds of situations for the use of mitigating strategies are found.

Firstly, it is found that strategies with most face cost like acknowledgment of one's fault or deficiency, explicit apologies, expression acceptance or agreement and promise of forbearance are almost invariably utilized by the lower-positioned speakers.

Secondly, some mitigating strategies with minor face cost degree can be used by speakers with higher as well as lower power, such as offering justification or explanation, proposal of solution, disclaiming one's intention to be offensive, paying compliments to the other party. Nevertheless, as has been stated clearly in the first section of this part, the circumstances in which speakers with more or less power use mitigating strategies are different. Speakers with higher power status adopt mitigating strategies only when they feel they have been harsh and would like to mitigate the conflict without losing too much face while speakers with lower power status would adopt mitigating strategies which they believe are effective and proper in alleviating the confrontation and antagonism whenever they recognize their power inferiority. The difference, as can be drawn easily, is the result of the adaptation to the power of the speakers.

Finally, some mitigating strategies, due to their indication of the power of control or force or the assurance of the power privilege, are almost only confined to higher-positioned speakers, such as use of imperatives to suppress the conflict, expressing understanding, showing concern, use of intimate address terms, etc.

All these phenomena points to the fact that in Chinese official settings, deference is shown in one direction from the lower-positioned party to the higher-positioned party and each one has to behave properly to maintain the hierarchy and their relationships.

5. Conclusion

The development of conflict talk is a dynamic and complex process, during which the two parties do not always give tit for tat for each other. Under the constraints of communicative context and communicative needs, after conflict talk is initiated, the interlocutors, in many cases, will adopt mitigating strategies to weaken the verbal confrontation, alleviate the antagonism so as to achieve the purpose of mitigating the conflict and restoring interpersonal harmony.

Based on Verschueren's Linguistic Adaptation Theory, this paper analyzes the pragmatic motivations for the use of mitigating strategies in conflictive contexts in Chinese official settings. On the one hand, it is found that the circumstances that would decide the interlocutors to use mitigating strategies differ greatly. For those in lower power position, they may use mitigating strategies whenever they sense the negative

emotions and confrontation from the other party (whether they are in the wrong or not); or put it differently, the speakers are being "altruistic". For those in higher power position, they almost only use mitigating strategies when they are in the wrong, or feel that they have overreacted, or want to control the conversation in a mitigated way; in other words, the speakers in these cases are being "egoistic". The differences in the circumstances in deciding the use of mitigating strategies well reveals the fact that the interlocutors always put themselves in a correct power status in relation to others and always try to behave properly in accordance with their identities.

On the other hand, the interlocutors also behave quite differently in the choice of mitigating strategies. Speakers with more power generally would exploit strategies indicating imposition or superiority or with little face cost, while speakers with less power would try to rescue the hearers' face with some face-costing strategies.

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