

# A Study of the Historical Period Drama “*Downton Abbey*” from the Perspective of Face Theory\*

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**Abstract**—This paper chooses Brown and Levinson's face theory to make an analysis into the historical period drama series *Downton Abbey*, which reflects the British culture after the Second Industrial Revolution, and probes into the face conflicts dialogues among characters. By dividing relationships between characters into three major types, the author gives an analysis of face conflicts, compares the process and degree of the speakers' face threatening acts between western and Chinese culture, and finally sums up the different attitudes toward “face” between western people and Chinese. By discussing the different attitudes of Chinese and western people towards “face”, this paper hopes to provide references for political, economic and cultural communication between China and the Western countries, as well as guidance on how to avoid face threatening acts and protect mutual faces in cross-cultural communication.

**Keywords**—*Downton Abbey*; *Face Theory*; *positive face*; *negative face*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Language application is a communication process in which a user chooses language expressions based on the specific conditions; whether in daily life or on business occasions, “face” plays a significant role in conversations, and it is very important to save face for both sides during that process. Therefore, to analyze the different understanding on face between western and Chinese has a great significance.

First of all, many people believe that western people ignore face when communicating, and face is what Chinese people pay more attention to. Actually the thought is totally wrong. In every society and every culture, face is an important rule that, to some degree, dominates the behaviors between the speaker and listener. Additionally, when one country has cultural communications with other countries, or even has official state visits, the two sides must strive to protect both of their faces from being threatened, while at the same time, guarantee that the communications go on smoothly. As a result, it is vital for people in different cultures to have a command of the difference between people's attitude toward face. Lastly, it is universally acknowledged that to learn more cross-cultural

knowledge can enhance our creativities and broaden our horizons.

Therefore, in this article the author will give a detailed explanation to the different attitudes towards face between western people and Chinese people from the perspective of face theory, and attempt to put forward some solutions, as well, hoping to help those people to overcome cultural shocks and barriers in cross-cultural communications.

## II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This chapter will review the literature related to this thesis, give a brief introduction into Brown and Levinson's Face Theory, and summarize previous relevant researches in the domain.

### A. Brown and Levinson's Face Theory

The first publication of Brown and Levinson's book – *Politeness: Some universals in language use*, came out in 1987, and is considered as a seminal event with tremendous influence in the history of linguistics, in which Brown and Levinson classified face into several categories and put forward certain politeness strategies [1]. In the first part of the book, Brown and Levinson thoroughly described the relationship between face and politeness, and claimed that politeness strategies are chosen on the degree of face threats. Brown and Levinson also believe that giving other people face is a mutual action, and people generally intend to save their own face while communicating with each other.

Furthermore, Brown and Levinson bring up the idea that the concept of face is the public self-image that every number wants to claim for himself or herself, which consists of two related aspects: negative face and positive face.

1) *Positive face and negative face*: Brown and Levinson stated that “positive face means the positive consistent self-image that people have and want to be appreciated and approved of by at least some other people. Positive politeness is redress aiming at the addressee's positive face, his perennial wants that his desires or actions should be looked on as desirable positive politeness”[1]. While in contrast, “negative face means the rights to territories, freedom of action and freedom from imposition, essentially the wants that your

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actions not be stressed by others. Negative politeness is redress action addressed to the addressee's negative face and usually 'avoidance based', characterized by 'self-effacement, formality and restraint'. Negative politeness strategies are used so that one's wants to have his freedom of action would be unhindered and his attention impeded"[1].

Strategies are ways of building solidarity, emphasizing closeness between the speaker and the hearer in communication. Positive politeness is given by such methods as exaggerating interest or compliments, expressing sympathy of the hearer, seeking agreement while avoiding disagreement, assuming reciprocity, and using inclusive pronouns, dialects, quotations, and so on.

2) *Face enhancing acts and face threatening acts*: According to Brown and Levinson' Face Theory, face threatening acts threaten the speakers' face. Some speech acts like requesting or apologizing are intrinsically face threatening acts. Even thanking, which signifies one's "debt" to the addressee and obligation to acknowledge it, is considered to involve threat to one's own face. In order to succeed in interpersonal communication, one needs to take good care of the interlocutor's positive and negative face. But so as to do so, one needs to attend to his or her interest, feelings, opinions, so on and so forth. On the one hand, one could enhance his or her positive face, whenever possible, while at the same time, minimize the threat to his or her negative face, even if the threat is inevitable.

Moreover, there are many devices used to enhance face and avoid face threatening. One device is the use of impersonalization, either to avoid mentioning oneself or the interlocutor, or to appeal to a public rule or institutional regulation. Another device characteristic of English is to reduce the degree of directness as much as necessary: the more direct, the less politeness; the less direct, the more politeness [2].

### B. Previous Relevant Researches

Xia Fangyun & Zhao Zhenzhen (2012) publish an essay on Face Theory in which they explain how to avoid face threatening acts in business communication, without mentioning the differences between western and Chinese people's different attitudes towards face[3]. Jiao Weiwei (2014) holds that Face Theory plays an important role in teaching, but it is a pity that he does not find enough evidence to support the point that students, especially those who study in rural areas, believe that standing up to answer a question is a face losing act[4]. Feng Lijuan (2016) analyzes the difference between western culture and Chinese culture in her essay on pragmatic failures in the cross-cultural communication; however, she only gives a rough explanation from the perspective of politeness in different cultures, without further proof on the fact that both western people and Chinese place a high value on face [5]. Wang Min (2017) gives the explanation of the development of Face Theory, which is similar to the author, but her investigation is too brief to offer any detailed and explicit illustration [6].

All in all, there are a lot of relevant researches in the field of Face Theory, but few researches study the different attitudes

between western people and Chinese toward face. Therefore, it is worthwhile to do the research.

### III. BACKGROUND SETTINGS FOR *DOWNTON ABBEY*

As a historical period drama, the English TV series, *Downton Abbey*, was created by Julian Fellowes and set in the fictional Yorkshire country estate of *Downton Abbey* between 1912 and 1926. It depicts the lives of the aristocratic Crawley family and their domestic servants in the post-Edwardian era as well as how the great events in history have an effect on the lives of Crawley family and British social hierarchy. There are many real historical events involved in the series, for instance, the sinking of the Titanic in the first season of the series; the outbreak of the First World War in the second series; the Irish War of Independence and the formation of the Irish Free State in the third series; the British general election of 1923, the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in the fifth series; and the rise of the working class during the interwar period and influence of second industrial revolution, which led to the eventual decline of the British aristocracy, in the six and final series[7]. The director depicts the events and incidents happening in *Downton Abbey* to reflect the historical and cultural changes during that special period.

The main characters are Grantham Robert, Grantham Cora – Robert's wife, Lady Mary Crawley – Robert's eldest daughter and one of the important protagonists, Lady Edith Crawley – Robert's secondary daughter, Lady Sybil Crawley – Robert's youngest daughter, Matthew Crawley – Robert's nephew-in-law who is regarded as the only one who can inherit Robert's heritage and later becomes Mary's husband, etc.

Since its first appearance, *Downton Abbey* has received many awards and is recognized as one of the most critically acclaimed English-language television series, which has earned the most nominations of any international television series in the history of the Primetime Emmy Awards, twenty seven in total only after the first two series. *Downton Abbey* is also popularly regarded as a useful material for learning British history and culture. In the series, the main characters have intricate and complicate relationships, as a result of which, many face threatening acts or face enhancing acts may happen with the development of the episodes. Thus, in the following section, the author will try to compare the emphases on face between westerners and Chinese by case studies of three major relationships between different characters.

### IV. CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS OF *DOWNTON ABBEY*

#### A. Research Methodology

Methods of studying the data are arranged as follows: firstly, 52 video episodes of *Downton Abbey* from season one to six with bilingual subtitles will be reviewed. Then contrastive analyses concerning face threatening and face enhancing situations will be given, based on three different relationships. Finally, also more importantly, conclusion and summary will be given with data analyses of dialogues. Due to the limited space of the article, the language data selected by the author is random but typical.

## B. Case Study of Downton Abbey

1) *Face conflict between wife and husband*: In the TV series Downton Abbey, the relationship between wife and husband is of great importance. Marriage in western countries is independent and free because they believe that couples are equal, so they often focus on protecting their own face from being threatened. The following dialogue is based on scenario that the female protagonist, Mary, made a mistake and had sex with a Turkish diplomat before marriage. Her second sister and the first footman revealed the scandal to newspaper office which was run by her fiancé. Mary regretted what she had done, but she did not want her family to be laughed at, so she decided to tell the truth to Matthew.

Matthew: *If it is love...*

Mary: *How can it be love? I didn't...*

Matthew: *Then why would you?*

Mary: *It was lust, Mathew! Or a need for excitement. Or something in him that I... God, what difference does it make? I am Tess of the d'Urbervilles to your Angel Clare. I have fallen, I am impure.*

(omit...)

Matthew: *You are wrong about one thing.*

Mary: *Only one? And what is that, pray?*

Matthew: *I never would... I never could despise you.*

This part reveals the fact that even in Britain people think women who have sex before marriage is impure, which may put their family to shame. But from the dialogue it can be seen that if the couples love each other, the extent to which they can tolerate the face threatening acts is much larger. In Matthew's heart, he loves Mary. Therefore, after hearing Mary's explanation that threatens his positive face, he does not pay much attention to saving his own face by accusing Mary of her mistake, but tries his best to accept the scandal and embarrassment, and helps Mary to deal with it.

But suppose that the matter happens in China, things would be totally different. There is always the saying going like this: husband and wife should treat each other with courtesy; a wife should sing in the same tune with her husband. In the feudal etiquette, even in modern days, there are some areas in China with the traditional concept that wife belongs to her husband, so wife has no independent personality or free will. When a man knows his wife is impure (not a virgin) before marriage, the man feels he loses face thoroughly. Even if the man accepts the woman and marries her, he still believes that his face is threatened and the woman owns him much. Therefore, it is obviously seen that the relationship between husband and wife is unequal.

In a word, in western culture, husband and wife are equal, a husband tends to consider more about his wife's face in some degree, while on the contrary, people believe that women are inferior to men in Chinese culture, and the Chinese husband focuses more on his own face.

2) *Face conflict between parents and children*: It is very common to have conflicts between parents and children, no matter whether they are in western or Chinese culture. However, parents and children may act differently when meeting face threatening acts.

In the special period of Britain in Downton Abbey, the politics was in chaos, so that the rich men were not willing to take part in politics. But Robert's youngest daughter Sybil fell in love with his chauffeur, Tom Branson, who was an Irish and so attached to politics, and Sybil later accepted Tom's political thoughts and became crazy about politics. But Robert was strongly against their love and politics. The following is a dialogue from season three in which Sybil had a fierce conflict with her father, which threaten the faces of both sides.

Robert: *How dare you? How dare you disobey me in this way? (angry)*

Cora: *Robert, I'm sure...*

Robert: *Are you so knowledgeable about the great world that my instructions are to be set as nothing?*

Sybil: *Papa, I'm sorry I disobey you. But I am interested! I'm political! I have opinions!*

(omit...)

Sybil: *Well, I can't think now. But I will go, and you'll be sorry.*

Robert: *I should be sorry, very sorry, indeed.*

In this part, Robert's words such as "dare", "disobey" and "blame" show his anger, and he scolds Sybil. Of course, his severe words threaten Sybil's both positive and negative face. In other words, he doesn't have any idea to save Sybil's face. Meanwhile, Sybil also threatens his father's negative face, and even challenges his father's authority. Because everyone has freedom of speech, Robert does not agree with Sybil's interests in politics but could understand her behavior. Later, due to the generous love as the parent, Robert accepts Sybil's thoughts.

On the contrary, in traditional Chinese culture, manners and respect are very important in a family. As the Chinese saying goes: minister must defer to emperor; wife must defer to husband; children must defer to their father. In the family, children must have filial piety, that is, children must obey their father and mustn't contradict his parents' thoughts. So in this condition, Chinese parents use the filial piety to save their face, and they pay more attention to their own faces, not permitting their children to do or say what they want. Children's acts to contradict parents will threaten their parents' positive face, so their acts to insist on their own opinion can't be tolerated in Chinese traditional culture.

3) *Face conflict between sisters and brothers*: In the following scene, Mary's fiancé passed away in the Titanic, so people were sad to take part in funeral, and the following conversation took place after funeral on their way to home.

Mary: *Really, Edith. Do you have to put on such an exhibition? (Edith is sad for Mary's fiancé' death and whimpering)*

Sybil: *She is not.*

Mary: *I was supposed to be engaged to him, for heaven's sake, not you, and I can control myself.*

Edith: *Then you should be ashamed.*

In this part, due to the fact that Mary is not so acquainted with her fiancé she is not very sad, but Edith has long hidden her love for Mary's fiancé, so she is heartbroken with low sobs. Actually, Mary doesn't like Edith and she disagrees with Edith's behavior, so she speaks to Edith sarcastically, which threatens Edith's positive face. In return, to enhance her own face, Edith also says something to threaten Mary's positive face directly.

At the point, western people have some similarities with Chinese people in the relationship of brothers and sisters in modern society. But in old days, there are also some differences. In traditional culture, people believe that "the eldest brother has father's rights; the eldest sister has mother's rights". In general, the oldest sister or brother's face is important and the young sisters or brothers can't threaten her or his face. Young sisters or brothers' face requisite levels are lower than their oldest brothers. In modern society, children in each family have equal position, but the young sisters or brothers are required to respect the elderly ones.

## V. CONCLUSION

From what has been discussed above, it is a misunderstanding that the concept of face exists only in China; rather instead, people's tolerability of face threatening acts in western and Chinese culture is different. Meanwhile, people have different focuses on face, as well. In Britain, people are equal and they are free in expressing their opinions, and people respect other's privacy room as much as themselves. In addition, they tend to stress their self-esteem and individuality. In China, especially in old days, the vassal relationships divide people into different hierarchies, which leads to the phenomenon that people with higher social ranking pay more attention to their own face and enhance their face actively at the expense of sacrificing their lower partners' faces. Furthermore, the superordinate people formulate many principles, i.e., blind filial piety, to avoid their faces being threatened. Face threatening acts may cause unnecessary displeasures. In Britain, no matter who they are, people can't tolerate the face threatening acts. But in China, the words "harmony" and "tolerance" are always familiar to us when we meet troublesome matters. In this article, the author gives a detailed explanation to the different attitudes towards face between western people and Chinese people from the perspective of face theory. Though this article might not be perfect and have some shortcomings, and the conclusion might be not very accurate, the author endeavors to offer some solutions and suggestions in the hope of helping people to overcome cultural shocks and barriers in cross-cultural communications.

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