



Politeness system of the ethnic Chinese community in the Javanese cultural area of Indonesia

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Abstract

Politeness is an important aspect of human interaction. Every cultural group may have different ways of expressing politeness. Based on literature review, research on politeness has been carried out in various countries and cultures. However, in Indonesia not much research on politeness has been done. This research investigated the politeness system of the ethnic Chinese community in the Javanese Cultural Area (of Indonesia). This study used the qualitative method. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with informants. The politeness theory followed Scollon and Scollon (2001), but there were slight modifications to suit conditions in the field. The goal was to explain in what contexts the involvement and independence strategies were used, and what their implications were on the politeness systems practiced. The results of the data analysis showed that in the ethnic Chinese community, the context of the use of the involvement and independence strategy were strongly determined by \pm Distance, while the \pm Power was not so decisive. The implication is that a hierarchical politeness system is almost never practiced. Meanwhile, in the ethnic Javanese community, the factor \pm Power strongly determined the use of strategy. These differences may cause politeness friction if the two ethnic groups fail to show respect for each other's differences.

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Introduction

Politeness is an important aspect of human interaction. It is universal and found in all communities worldwide. This means that there is not a single group of people in

the world that does not recognize politeness. Nevertheless, every community or ethnic group may have different ways of expressing politeness. Research on politeness has been carried out in various countries and cultures. However, in Indonesia not much research on politeness has been done (see literature review). This research investigated the politeness system of the Chinese ethnic community in Indonesia, especially those living in the Javanese Cultural Area (JCA). It should be explained that JCA in this article refers to the regions that have been the main living centers for the ethnic Javanese community,

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including East Java, Central Java, and the Special Region of Yogyakarta. The Chinese people studied in this article were those who lived in these three regions. The questions to be answered are in what contexts the involvement and independence strategy are used by ethnic Chinese in the JCA, and what their implications are on the politeness systems practiced in day-to-day communication.

This research, will of course, result in something new based on the data. First, although ethnic Chinese use the same language as Javanese ethnicity in daily communication, they tend to manifest the involvement and independence strategy in a different way from Javanese ethnicity. In addition, they use the two strategies in different contexts. The result is that the politeness system they apply is different from the Javanese ethnicity. This is something unusual because in general, minority groups who live in the midst of a culture of the majority group for hundreds of years will tend to merge with the culture of the majority group, including communication culture. Second, the data indicated that the politeness system practiced by ethnic Chinese in the JCA does not completely conform to the theory proposed by Scollon and Scollon (2001).

It should be pointed out that the differences in politeness system between ethnic Chinese and Javanese in the JCA can cause friction of politeness in cross-ethnic communication. What is considered polite by ethnic Chinese is very likely to be considered rude (impolite) by ethnic Javanese, and vice versa. If these differences are not managed properly, this can interfere with the harmonization of cross-ethnic communication in JCA. Therefore, this research is urgently required.

Literature Review

Politeness has an important function in human interaction. Therefore, it is natural that researchers all over the world are interested in carrying out studies on politeness, both in Western and Eastern cultural communities. In the West, politeness studies have been conducted by a number of scholars. The results of their studies can be read in Hickey and Miranda (2005). In Asia, meanwhile, politeness studies have also been carried out on various cultural communities. In the Chinese cultural community, for example, politeness studies have been conducted by Kádár and Yuling Pan (2011), in the Japanese cultural community by Haugh and Yasuko (2011), in the Korean cultural community by Kim (2011), in the Vietnamese cultural community by Chew (2011), and in the Singapore cultural community by Lee

(2011). There are also a number of other comparative studies about different cultural groups, such as those by Tao (2013) and Lee (2018).

However, very few studies exist about politeness in different cultural groups in Indonesia, including the ethnic Chinese community. Most studies tend to focus on politeness in a particular setting, such as a seminar or classroom setting, including those by Haryanto, Weda, and Nashruddin (2018) and Mahmud, Abduh, and Akil (2019). It is true that a number of studies do already exist about the language of Chinese people in Indonesia. These include studies by Karsono (2014), Kuntjara (2001, 2007), and Sartini (2007). However, a review of each showed that only Kuntjara (2001) studied the ethnic Chinese from the perspective of politeness, while the rest only discussed the use of language without relating it to politeness. Although the present study has certain similarities with Kuntjara (2001), namely, that it was conducted in JCA, the present study had a fundamental difference, since it studied the politeness systems of the ethnic Chinese based on the theory of Scollon and Scollon (2001), while Kuntjara (2001) studied politeness in the ethnic Chinese community in relation to gender.

Politeness Theory

There are several theories of politeness, including Brown and Levinson (1987), Leech (1993, 2014), Scollon and Scollon (2001), Watts (2003), and so on. However, according to researchers, the most suitable theory to explain the ethnic Chinese politeness system in the JCA is the Scollon and Scollon theory. The two experts argued that based primarily on whether there are differences in Power (+ P or -P) and the Distance between participants (+ D or -D), we can distinguish three politeness systems: the deference politeness system, the solidarity politeness system, and the hierarchical politeness system. Power refers to the degree to which speakers can impose wants on the hearer (Brown and Levinson (1987). Or, according to Scollon and Scollon (2001), power refers to the vertical disparity between the participants in a hierarchical structure. Social Distance refers to the degree of familiarity and solidarity between speaker and hearer.

Deference politeness system is one in which participants are considered to be equals or near equals but treat each other at a distance. This system is symbolized by (-P, +D). Solidarity politeness system is one in which participants are considered to be close. There is a high level of involvement politeness strategies. There is no feeling of either a power difference (-P) or distance (-D) between them. This system is symbolized by (-P, -D).

The third politeness system is hierarchical. In such a system the participants recognize and respect the social differences that place one in a superordinate position and the other in a subordinate position. The main characteristic of this system is the recognized difference in status, for which we used the designation +P. It may be of much less significance whether or not there is distance between the participants. In this system the relationships are asymmetrical. The participants do not use the same face politeness strategies in speaking to each other. The person in the superordinate or upper position uses involvement strategies in speaking “down.” The person in the subordinate or lower position uses independence strategies in speaking “up.”

The theory by Scollon and Scollon (2001) in this article was slightly modified, adapted to the conditions and needs in the field. This modification mainly concerned the division of power which Scollon and Scollon (2001) differentiated into (–P) and (+P). In this article, the division was further detailed by adding the symbol (=P) so that this causes the meaning of (–P) and (+P) to change as follows. =P means that the participants see themselves as being in equal social position. –P means that the participants see themselves as being in unequal social position where the hearer is inferior to the speaker. +P means that the participants see themselves as being in unequal social position where the hearer is superior to the speaker.

Methodology

Participants

The target of this research was the ethnic Chinese community in the JCA. Because this research was a qualitative study, it used informants not samples. In this case, the informant represented information not people (Sutopo, 2006). Informants in qualitative research are usually not determined randomly, but purposively with certain criteria. In this study, the criteria of informants were determined as follows: (1) Chinese ethnicity, born, raised, and living in the JCA; (2) having a good understanding of the communication habits of the Chinese ethnic community in the JCA; (3) at least 25 years old; (4) minimum of high school education; and (5) willing to find time for interviews.

It should be noted that there may have been a large number of Chinese at the JCA who qualified as informants, but it was impossible for all of them to be used as informants. Therefore, the informants in this study were

only determined by a total of 10 people. However, even though there were only 10 people, the information provided was expected to represent all the information about the politeness system of the ethnic Chinese community in JCA because they had met the requirements as informants.

Data Collection

The data in this study were collected through in-depth interviews with informants. The researchers as a key instrument interacted and interviewed directly with informants in the field (not through questionnaires). The process of collecting data through in-depth interviews like this is very common in qualitative research (Sutopo, 2006). The data collected were in the form of a dialogue between participant-1 (P1) and participant-2 (P2). Based on these dialogues, it could be understood how the politeness system was practiced, whether solidarity, deference, or hierarchical politeness system. The researchers were Javanese, lived in JCA, and often communicated with ethnic Chinese, so this made it easier in collecting data.

Data Analysis

The data analysis was carried out by comparing the data collected. This comparison is able to explain first of all how (+P), (–P), (+D) and (–D) influence each type of language used. If the facts show that language X, for example, can only be used in a context with factor (–D), while on the contrary language Y is more suitable to be used in a context with factor (+D), it can probably be assumed that language X is a form of involvement strategy, while language Y is a form of independence strategy. Secondly, this method of analysis is able to explain in what type of contexts involvement strategies are usually used and in what type of contexts independence strategies tend to be used. For example, after analyzing the data, it was found that involvement strategies in the ethnic Chinese community in JCA are inclined to be used (both by P1 and P2) in the context (–P–D) or even (+P–D). Thirdly, this method of analysis is able to explain how the solidarity politeness system, deference politeness system, and hierarchical politeness system are practiced in day-to-day communication by the ethnic Chinese community in JCA, and whether or not it is in accordance with the theory by Scollon and Scollon. For example, in the theory by Scollon and Scollon, the solidarity politeness system occurs in the context (–P–D). The question was whether or not this was also true in the ethnic Chinese community in JCA, or whether

it was possible for the solidarity politeness system to occur in (+P–D), and so on. It was hoped that this method of analysis was able to explain the questions formulated in the study.

Results and Discussion

Contexts of Use of Involvement Strategy in the Ethnic Chinese Community in JCA

Javanese language has several speech levels, namely *ngoko* (low level), *madya* (middle level), and *krama* (high level). The involvement strategy in ethnic Chinese in JCA is realized in *ngoko*. This level is used to indicate the closeness of the relationship between P1 and P2. This is no different from the realization of involvement strategy in the ethnic Javanese community (Poedjosoedarmo, Kundjana, Soepomo, & Suharso, 2013); (Dwiraharjo, 2001). Nevertheless, the two ethnic groups appear to use this strategy in different contexts. Based on the data analysis, in the ethnic Chinese community in JCA, involvement strategy is generally used in contexts that contain (–D). In contexts that contain (+D), the use of involvement strategy tends to be avoided because it is considered impolite. Meanwhile, (–P) tends not to have any significant influence. Therefore, involvement strategy in the ethnic Chinese community in JCA is very commonly used in the context (–P–D). The question is whether (+P) has the potential to change the use of an involvement strategy to an independence strategy. The data shows that (+P) also tends to have no significant influence on the use of involvement strategy. Therefore, involvement strategy is also commonly used in the context (+P–D).

In more detail, the contexts of the use of involvement strategy in the ethnic Chinese community in JCA can be seen in Table 1. The symbol (v) means that an involvement strategy is normally used, while (x) means it is not normally used.

It is important to point out that the contexts of the use of involvement strategy in the ethnic Chinese community are different from those in the ethnic Javanese community

(even though this strategy has the same realization in both ethnic groups). The difference lies primarily in factor (+P). In the ethnic Javanese community, the use of involvement strategy not only considers factor (–D) but also (+P). For example, in the context (+P–D), P1 in the ethnic Javanese will be more inclined to take into consideration (+P) and ignore (–D), so that the strategy used by P1 will tend to be independence rather than involvement, while P2 may use an involvement strategy to address P1 because of having a higher status and also being older. In the ethnic Chinese community, however, since the important consideration is (–D) not (+P), the strategy that tends to be used by both P1 and P2 in the context (+P–D) is an involvement. It seems that this difference in context of the use may create a situation in which the use of involvement is regarded as polite by the ethnic Chinese but considered impolite by the ethnic Javanese. This can lead to politeness friction and interfere with the harmonization of cross-ethnic communication.

Contexts of Use of Independence Strategy in the Ethnic Chinese Community in JCA

Independence strategy in the ethnic Chinese community in JCA is realized with the Indonesian language (national language). This language tends to be used to denote the social distance. In certain contexts, ethnic Chinese use Indonesian mixed with Javanese at the *ngoko* level. The mixture is to show the level of closeness of the relationship between P1 and P2. The more familiar, the fewer elements of Indonesian are used (more Javanese elements). On the other hand, the less familiar it is, the fewer elements of Javanese are used (there are more Indonesian elements).

The realization of the independence strategy in ethnic Chinese is different from that of Javanese ethnicity. In this ethnicity, especially in communication of a regional nature, independence strategy tends to be realized with Javanese *krama*, not Indonesian. People in the ethnic Javanese community also use Indonesian. However, the contexts of use of Indonesian by the ethnic Javanese community are different from those in the ethnic Chinese community. The use of Indonesian by the ethnic Javanese is not intended to show social distance.

Based on the data analysis, independence strategy in the ethnic Chinese community in JCA is generally used in contexts that contain (+D). In the context of (–D) the use of Indonesian, although not necessarily seen as violating the norm of politeness, is not a manifestation of an independence strategy because it alternates with Javanese *ngoko*, even though Javanese *ngoko* is considered more

Table 1 Contexts of Use of Involvement Strategy in the Ethnic Chinese Community in JCA

No	Context	Involvement Strategy
1	(+P+D)	x
2	(+P–D)	v
3	(–P+D)	x
4	(–P–D)	v

suitable and more commonly used. Meanwhile, (-P) tends not to have any significant influence so that independence strategy in the ethnic Chinese community in JCA is commonly used in the context (-P+D). What is interesting to ask is whether (+P) has any influence in changing the use of an independence strategy to involvement strategy (especially for P2). The data shows that (+P) also tends not to have a significant influence on the use of independence strategy. Therefore, independence strategy is also commonly used in the context (+P+D).

In more detail, the context of the use of the independence strategy in Chinese ethnic community in the JCA can be explained in Table 2 below. The symbol (v) means independence strategy must be used, while (x) means it may not be used.

Table 2 Contexts of Use of Independence Strategy in the Ethnic Chinese Community in JCA

No	Context	Independence Strategy
1	(+P+D)	v
2	(+P-D)	x
3	(-P+D)	v
4	(-P-D)	x

There are two interesting things to note about the independence strategy. First, the realization of independence strategy in the ethnic Chinese and ethnic Javanese community is not the same. In the ethnic Javanese community, independence strategy is not realized using the Indonesian language but using Javanese *krama*. In the ethnic Javanese community, Indonesian is not a form of any particular strategy, while on the other hand, the ethnic Chinese community never use Javanese *krama* in day-to-day communication. Second, the contexts of the use of independence strategy in the ethnic Chinese and ethnic Javanese communities are not the same. In the ethnic Javanese community, it is not only component (+D) that is an important consideration in using an independence strategy, but also component (+P). For example, P1, as an ethnic Javanese, is allowed to use an involvement strategy when addressing P2 even though they do not have a close relationship since they do not know each other (+P). This is because the power of P1 is higher than P2 (For example, P2 is older or has a higher social status). However, P2 must still use an independence strategy to address P1 because the power of P2 is lower than P1. Hence, in the ethnic Javanese community, in the context (+P+D), P2 is required to use an independence strategy and P1 may use an involvement, while in the ethnic Chinese community, both P1 and P2 are required to use an independence. Similarly,

in the context (+P-D), it is more appropriate for both P1 and P2 to use an independence strategy in the ethnic Chinese community, while in the ethnic Javanese community P1 is required to use an independence strategy and P2 may use an involvement strategy.

Politeness Systems of the Ethnic Chinese Community in JCA

Table 1 explains that the use of involvement strategy in the ethnic Chinese community in JCA can occur in contexts (-P-D) and (+P-D). In these contexts, both P1 and P2 can use an involvement strategy. If this is related to the theory of Scollon and Scollon (2001), there is no problem with the use of an involvement strategy in the context (-P-D) because it matches the features of a solidarity politeness system. However, the use of an involvement strategy in the context (+P-D) appears to be problematic. Why? Because this context reflects an asymmetrical relationship (+P) so according to the theory by Scollon and Scollon, it is not possible for P1 and P2 to use an involvement strategy in their communication. In an asymmetrical relationship, P1 is inclined to use an independence strategy while P2 uses an involvement strategy. This type of politeness belongs to a hierarchical politeness system. However, the facts in the ethnic Chinese community in JCA show that in the context (+P-D), both P1 and P2 are inclined to use an involvement strategy because it is not (+P) that is considered important but rather (-D), so the context (+P-D) can be classed more appropriately as a context of a solidarity politeness system, not a hierarchical politeness system. Therefore, the contexts of use of involvement strategies in the ethnic Chinese community in JCA would appear not to be entirely true to the theory proposed by Scollon and Scollon (2001).

As in the case of involvement strategy, the contexts of the use of independence strategy in the ethnic Chinese community in JCA also appear problematic if viewed from the perspective of the theory by Scollon and Scollon (2001). It is true that in the context (-P+D) the use of independence by both P1 and P2 is not a problem because it conforms to Scollon and Scollon’s theory (2001) about communication taking place in a deference politeness system. However, in the context (+P+D) there seems to be a problem. Why? Because the context (+P+D) reflects an asymmetrical relationship (+P) so it is not possible in this context for P1 and P2 to both use the independence strategy. As explained above, in an asymmetrical relationship, P1 tends to use an involvement strategy while P2 uses an independence strategy, so that the

communication takes place in a hierarchical politeness system. However, what happens in the ethnic Chinese community in JCA, in the context (+P+D), is that both P1 and P2 tend to use the independence strategy because it is not (+P) that is considered important but rather (+D), so the communication tends to take place in deference politeness system, not a hierarchical politeness system. Therefore, the contexts of the use of independence strategy in the ethnic Chinese community in JCA are also not entirely true to the theory proposed by Scollon and Scollon (2001).

Conclusion and Recommendation

In the ethnic Chinese community in JCA, involvement strategy tends to be realized using the Javanese *ngoko* language, while independence strategy is realized with Indonesian. In practice, in day to day communication, involvement strategy is used when the relationship between P1 and P2 contains the element (−D). If the component (+D) is present, the use of involvement strategy tends to be avoided because it is considered impolite. Meanwhile, the element (+P) or (−P) tends not to be viewed as important because it does not have a significant influence on the use of involvement strategy. Thus, the use of involvement strategy can occur in the contexts (−P−D) or (+P−D), but tends not to appear in the contexts (−P+D) or (+P+D). The use of involvement strategy (by P1 and P2) in the context (−P−D) is not a problem if viewed in terms of the politeness systems of Scollon and Scollon (2001) because communication taking place in the context (−P−D) reflects a solidarity politeness system. However, the use of involvement strategy (by P1 and P2) in the context (+P−D) is problematic because this context reflects a hierarchical politeness system according to the theory of Scollon and Scollon, while facts show that in the ethnic Chinese community in JCA, P1 and P2 both use involvement strategies so their communication tends to take place in a solidarity politeness system.

Independence strategy must be used when the relationship between P1 and P2 contains the element (+D). Meanwhile, the element (+P) or (−P) tends not to be considered important because it is seen to have no significant influence on the use of independence strategy. Therefore, independence strategy must be used in the context (−P+D) or (+P+D). The use of independence strategy (by P1 and P2) in the context (−P+D) is not a problem if viewed in terms of the politeness systems of Scollon and Scollon (2001) because communication

taking place in this context reflects a deference politeness system. However, the use of the independence strategy (by P1 and P2) in the context (+P+D) is problematic because this context reflects a hierarchical politeness system according to the theory of Scollon and Scollon. The facts show that both P1 and P2 in the ethnic Chinese community in JCA use independence strategy so their communication tends to take place in a deference politeness system. It can therefore be concluded that in the ethnic Chinese community in JCA, a hierarchical politeness system is almost never practiced in day to day communication. On the contrary, communication taking place in a hierarchical politeness system occurs very frequently in the ethnic Javanese community. Therefore, when the two ethnic communities interact with one another, there is a high possibility of politeness friction if the two ethnic groups concerned are not aware of these differences in their politeness systems.

As has been argued that not much research on politeness between ethnicities in Indonesia has been carried out. In fact, in Indonesia, there are hundreds of ethnic groups and each ethnic group generally has different customs, language, culture, and socio-cultural norms. These differences greatly affect how they express politeness. It is possible that what is considered polite by ethnic group A is considered impolite by B so that this greatly affects the harmonization of cross-ethnic communication. Therefore, it is recommended to researchers, especially those who are interested in the issue of politeness in communication, to continue this research by examining other ethnic groups in Indonesia.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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