



## Pragmatic Features of Chinese Ostensible Invitations

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### Abstract

Invitations can be roughly divided into genius invitations and ostensible invitations. The ostensible invitation as a kind of ostensible speech act is always carried out for some unspoken purposes. In this paper, the properties and features of Chinese ostensible invitations are analyzed based on the examples collected by the method of experience description, experience record and interview. The study provides a guideline for people to distinguish Chinese ostensible invitations so that they are able to respond to the ostensible invitations appropriately to promote harmonious interpersonal relations.

**Key words:** Chinese ostensible invitation; Speech act; Interpersonal relation

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The research on speech act is always welcomed. Austin first put forward the speech act theory in 1962. He gave the definition of speech act that language is not only a tool to describe the objective world, but, for language itself is an action. Searle (1979) further developed this theory; he held the view that the smallest unit of language communication is not symbol, word or sentence, but a

speech act which has been completed. He also pointed out that a speaker can perform one or more speech acts by saying one or more sentences, and all the language communication includes speech act. Invitation is one of the most common speech acts in our daily verbal communication.

The use of ostensible speech act is very common, but there are few researches on it. Clark and Isaacs, in 1990, identified five defining properties and seven features of ostensible invitation which is an ostensible speech act. Chinese scholar Yu Xiucheng gave his own ideas on the felicity conditions of speech act and pragmatics features of ostensible invitation. Their work on ostensible invitations is a good reference for the researchers who are interested in the research on ostensible speech act.

This paper is to study the features of Chinese ostensible invitations by analyzing the collected examples from a pragmatic perspective, which can enrich the research on the ostensible speech act.

#### 1.1 Ostensible Invitation as a Language Strategy to Save Face

Brown and Levinson are linguists who are famous for their work on the politeness, their views on the politeness give people some constraints to control the way how they interact verbally. Brown and Levinson (1978) believed that speech acts are inherently face-threatening, so people are always looking for ways to reduce this threat of speech acts, even to avoid these acts. Face-saving theory (FST) aims to save face which includes positive face and negative face for both sides of the communication by adopting certain language strategies. Ostensible invitation can be viewed a language strategy to save face for both the speaker and the hearer.

To be polite is the respect to one's face, thus the politeness function can be seen in the speech act of ostensible invitation very obviously.

Leech (1983), a famous English linguist, pointed out

that in order to not directly threaten one's face, the speakers can only express their real information implicitly and indirectly to let the hearers understand their "implied meaning". Leech proposed the principle of politeness which is to reduce the belief of impoliteness to a minimum; some words that are impolite to the hearer should be omitted or expressed indirectly and tactfully. The ostensible invitation is carried out for the purpose of politeness, and then the face of both the inviter and the invitee can be well satisfied.

By using the theory of face and politeness, this paper analyses the collected examples so that not only Chinese but also foreigners can have an understanding of the pragmatic functions of Chinese ostensible invitation.

## 1.2 Defining Ostensible Invitations

At first we must have a certain understanding of invitation. Invitations are usually viewed as a social commitment. Wolfson (1981) defined invitation as a speech act that contains something involved to time, place or activity, and this speech act needs the response of the other side.

Invitations can be roughly divided into two types in the communication under the background of Chinese culture. Some invitations can be named "genuine invitations", some others can be named as "ostensible invitations". In Chinese culture, to make a successful invitation must go by three typical steps: (1) invite – refuse politely; (2) invite - refuse politely again; (3) insist to invite- accept invitation. So we can know that after the hearer expressly refuses to accept the invitation, the speaker still insists on the invitation, we can confirm that is a genius invitation. The other is ostensible invitation which uttered by the addresser who do not really want the addressee to accept. This kind of invitation is carried out to meet the purpose of courtesy. For example, the greeting phrase “吃了没?” (Have you eaten yet?) commonly used between Chinese people when they meet.

Ostensible speech act is a very common linguistic phenomenon. In daily communication, people sometimes motivate genius invitations; people sometimes motivate ostensible invitations for the sake of being polite. In the speech act of praise, some praise is the real praise from heart of the addresser; some are ostensible praise out of etiquette. Similarly, in the speech act of congratulations, some congratulations are sincere from the speaker's heart, and some are ostensible out of etiquette. Whether they are ostensible invitations, ostensible compliments, or ostensible congratulations, the feature of pretense is the prominent commonality of them. Ostensible speech act has some pragmatic functions; the important one is to promote harmony between people.

Ostensible invitations possess five defining properties and seven features, we can distinguish ostensible invitations from genuine invitations by the defining properties. The seven features can help the invitee to understand whether the invitation is ostensible or not. Or

the inviters can give ostensible invitation by using the seven features so as to save face. So it's necessary to talk about how the properties and features work in Chinese ostensible invitation.

## 1.3 Defining Properties of Ostensible Invitation

The five defining properties of ostensible invitation are pretense, mutual recognition, collusion, ambivalence, and off-record purpose.

**Pretense:** The inviter pretends to give a genius invitation only for politeness.

**Mutual recognition:** The inviter and the invitee all know clearly that the invitation made by the inviter is not sincere. Only in this way can the speech act of ostensible invitation be successfully completed.

**Collusion:** Both inviter and invitee are aware of the invitation is ostensible, and then they work together to complete the speech act.

**Ambivalence:** The inviter does not want to extend the invitation, but for the sake of saving face, the inviter has to motivate the ostensible invitation to meet the needs of communication. This is a paradoxical point in relation to ostensible invitations.

**Off-record** refers to the off-record of communicative purposes. As we all know, motivation is the internal force that directly promotes a person's activities. The implementation of the speech act of ostensible invitation is driven by some implicit communicative intention, aiming at expressing some implicit potential information to achieve some implicit communicative purpose which can only be meant unutterably, which is the typical of off-record. The speech act of ostensible invitation has two levels, the top level and the bottom level. The top level is the literal meaning of ostensible invitation, which is on-record to both sides, while the bottom level is a kind of implicit communicative intention, which is off-record.

## 1.4 Seven Features of Ostensible Invitation

Clark and Isaacs, in 1990, gave seven features of ostensible invitation, according to the work of Clark and Isaacs, we can know, the seven features can be used as strategies to issue an ostensible invitation to another one.

The seven features are,

- (1) A makes B's presence at E implausible;
- (2) A extends invitations only after they have been solicited by B;
- (3) A does not motivate invitation beyond social courtesy;
- (4) A is vague about arrangements for E;
- (5) A does not persist or insist on the invitation;
- (6) A hedges the invitation to B;
- (7) A delivers the invitation with inappropriate verbal, vocal, or facial cues. (Clark and Isaacs, 1990)

These six features of ostensible invitation are not independent of each other, and one or few of the features is enough to make the invitation ostensible.

## 2. PREVIOUS STUDIES ON OSTENSIBLE INVITATION

Ostensible speech act has been of particular interest to researchers who make the researchers in speech act and politeness strategies. But there are few work can be a reference. Foreign scholar Clark and Isaacs (1990) gave an overall introduction of ostensible speech act, which was regarded as a reference for the researches who are interested in ostensible speech act. Chinese scholar Yu Xucheng, Zhao Shaojie (2010, 2011) said their own words on how the ostensible invitation is occurred based on Seal's felicity conditions of speech act. The researches referred above focused on the ostensible invitation itself. Yu Xiucheng, Zhao Yingling (2004); Zhang Jinyi, Xu Benchuan, Jiang Xiaoyi (2011); Dong Wenxuan (2008) analyzed Chinese ostensible invitation from a perspective of pragmatics to make research on Chinese ostensible invitation itself. Wang Yan (2010) made a research on the real intention of ostensible invitation, which let us know the reason to make ostensible invitation not only to be politeness but also for some other reasons.

## 3. DATA COLLECTION

To make the data more accurate, method of experience description, experience record and interview were used.

Some data of this research were provided by some postgraduate students of NCEPU majored in foreign language. By interviewing with 28 postgraduate students, 51 ostensible invitations and 22 genius invitations were collected. Each student should give two ostensible invitations and two genius invitations. At first, they were told the definition and features of the genius and ostensible invitation to let them know how to define genius invitation and ostensible invitation and how to distinguish them. Then they not only need to retell the conversations but also need to describe the context in order to make the conversation comprehensible. To ensure the truth of the data, they were also asked to retell what the people said during their conversation as exactly as they could, if possible, the purpose of the invitation.

Some of the data were from the interviews with people from different work filed. They were asked to keep a record of any kind of invitations they experienced. First, they were asked to retell the context, and then retell what they said more exactly, and then the purpose should also be given. At last, 24 ostensible invitations were collected and 29 genius invitations were collected.

In all, 134 invitations were collected. Checking with the five defining properties of ostensible invitations, 75 invitations were judged to be ostensible, 52 invitations were genius, and the rest data were invalid.

## 4. DISCUSSION

In this chapter, the properties and features will be discussed with some collected ostensible invitations. The analysis in this study is based on the 75 ostensible invitations and 52 genuine invitations that are collected from the interviews and the observations.

### 4.1 Discussion of the Properties

From the following example, we can see how the five defining properties of ostensible invitation work.

Example one

Inviter A and invitee B are schoolfellows. One day they came across each other at the supermarket, the conversation as followed,

小鹏, 这么巧, 你也来买东西啊! (A. Hi, Peng! It's nice to meet you here.)

是啊, 咱俩挺久没联系了吧! (B. Yes, we have not seen each other for long time.)

大家都挺忙的, 要不有时间咱们聚一下吧?(A. I am a little busy with my work recently. How about going for dinner when we are both available?)

行啊, 没问题。(B. Of course!)

有时间了给我打电话啊, 我找地方。(A. When you are available, please, call me to order the restaurant.)

好的, 那我有事就先走啦。(No Problem. See you! )

A. 行, 常联系啊! (A. Always keep in touch! )

B. 好的, 拜! (B. Ok, Bye!)

In the above example, this verbal invitation is not a genius invitation, only for the sake of politeness, which is the pretense of ostensible invitation. B also realized that A made this invitation just to observe social courtesy, so invitee (B) did not further inquiry about the time and place of the arrangement, which is the mutual recognition of the ostensible invitation. A and B had already known that the invitation was ostensible, the purpose of this invitation was just for the sake of politeness, then to meet this need, they would complete this speech act together, this is the collusion of the ostensible invitation. So after the invitation was issued, B completed the speech act through such reply, "yes, we need to...." (是该) and "good" (好的). But if B didn't get A's real intention, then asked A further information of the arrangement, such as the time, place and so on. Then A would be in a dilemma and had to make this ostensible invitation into a genius invitation, which is the ambivalence of ostensible invitation. This ostensible invitation was uttered to promote the harmony of interpersonal relations of A and B, which is the off-record purpose of the ostensible invitation.

This example shows very clearly how the five properties work, and then the seven features of ostensible invitation will be discussed one by one with some typical instances.

## 4.2 Discussion of the Seven Features

By analyzing the data we can know how the features of ostensible invitation identified by Clark and Isaacs<sup>1</sup> work in Chinese ostensible invitation.

### 4.2.1 Inviter a Is Vague About Arrangements for Event

A genius invitation should include the information about the time, place that the events involved. If B cannot get enough information of the event from the context and the inviter did not give the information involved the event clearly, the invitation can be treated as ostensible. 29 (38%) examples of 75 ostensible invitations, B is vague about the arrangement.

#### Example 2

好久不见啊！最近忙啥呢？(A. Long time no see, what are you doing recently?)

没忙啥。听说你家装修了啊？(B. Nothing Important. I heard that your house has been decorated? .)

是啊，有空去家里玩玩，吃个饭。(A. Yes, welcome to visit my house!)

行啊！有时间一定去。(I'll go sometime.)

A and B are friends and they are almost 35, they haven't seen for a long time. They came across at the market. The information of the invitation provided by inviter (A) here is vague and incomplete, inviter (A) invites invitee (B) to visit her without giving the time and place. With this feature B can know the invitation motivated by A is ostensible.

In the sample, in 45 ostensible invitations (60%) of the 75 ostensible invitations Inviter A is vague about arrangements for Event.

### 4.2.2 Inviter A Does Not Persist or Insist on The Invitation

The Chinese genius invitation often goes three steps, (1) invite – refuse politely; (2) invite – refuse politely again; (3) insist to invite - accept invitation. 32 (42%) examples of 75 ostensible invitations, A does not persist on the invitation, only goes one step, invite-reject politely.

#### Example 3

饭点儿了，要不跟我们一块儿去吃点儿吧！(A. It's time to have lunch, would you like to have some with us?)

你们去吧，我等会儿再去。(B. Thank you, I'll go later.)

行，那你记得去吃饭啊。(A. Fine, don't forget to have some.)

一会儿就去了。(Ok!)

Inviter (A), Invitee (B) are colleagues, A was going out to have lunch with his friends, B was not familiar with A's friends. A motivated this invitation for politeness, so he didn't insist on the invitation.

In the sample, in 36 ostensible invitations (48%) of the 75 ostensible invitations Inviter A does not persist or insist on the invitation.

### 4.2.3 Inviter A Does Not Motivate Invitation Beyond Social Courtesy

Just like some greeting words, such as “早上好啊”(Good Morning), “最近怎么样”(How's going)etc. The words we often used in daily communication have the same function with greeting words, such as “有空来玩”、“下次再来啊”(Welcome back), to promote the harmony between people. 26 ostensible invitations (34%) contain this feature of the date.

#### Example 4

Inviter (A) and Invitee (B) are colleagues, A moved recently. This ostensible invitation is for the purpose to follow the social courtesy, and then the invitee can feel the respect from the inviter.

B. 听说你最近搬家了？(B. You moved recently?)

A. 啊，原来的房子离单位有点儿远，就换了一个。(A. Yes, I moved to a house the near my company.)

B. 离单位近点儿还挺方便的，都收拾好了吗？(B. It is very convenient to live near company. Has the house been tidied up yet?)

A. 收拾差不多了，下次带你参观一下。(A. Almost, you go to visit my house sometime.)

B. 行啊，有时间去！(B. Fine, I'll go when it is available.)

In the sample, in 28 ostensible invitations (38%) of the 75 ostensible invitations Inviter A motivates invitation under the social courtesy.

### 4.2.4 Inviter a Makes Invitee B's Presence at Event Implausible

A gives the invitation to B when they mutually believe that B is unable to participate in the event. The inviter has already known that invitee is not convenient to appear in E because of other unbreakable plan or other reasons, but for the sake of maintaining the invitee's positive face the inviter utters the invitation. Because it's impolite to make people feel he/she is excluded from the group in China. In this case, B would have reason to believe that the invitation is ostensible.

#### Example 5

A: 明天我和彤彤去看电影，一起去啊？(A. Tomorrow I will go to the movies with Tong. Will you join?)

B: 上次四级没过，明天要考试了，你俩去看吧。(B. Sorry, I have an exam tomorrow, I can't go with you.)

In this example, Inviter (A), Invitee (B) and Tong are roommates; A knows that B will take an exam tomorrow morning before motivating the invitation. So it is impossible to go to a movie with them tomorrow morning. Then A invited Tong to go to the movies with them, which was polite enough to show that they did not want the Tong to feel left out.

In the sample, in 32 ostensible invitations (42%) of the 75 ostensible invitations Inviter A makes Invitee B's presence at Event implausible. Ostensible invitations containing these features often occur between acquaintance who have some knowledge of your plan.



#### 4.2.5 Inviter a Extends Invitations Only After Be Solicited By Invitee B.

B can solicit the invitation through the context they are in, or directly. This kind of invitation often takes place among people of the same social status (like schoolmates or friends).

##### Example 6

A: 嗨, 听说你的稿费下来了? 请客吃饭吧! (A. Hi, I heard you have got your translation fee. Why not have a treat?)

B: 没问题, 想吃什么啊? 什么都行, 随便点啊。  
(B. Of course! What do you want to have? Anything you like is ok.)

In this example, the invitation is not motivated by B, B sends out this invitation only after A asked B to invite him. To save the positive face of A, B makes an ostensible invitation.

In the sample, in 23 ostensible invitations (30%) of the 75 ostensible invitations Inviter A gives invitations only after be solicited by Invitee B.

#### 4.2.6 Inviter A Hedges the Invitation to Invitee B

A often uses the hedge in the invitation, the most common vague hedges are “要不……”、“要是(没事的话, 有时间等)”、“(要)不然… …”、“如果… …” etc. When inviter invites someone, he often uses the hedge words in invitation unconsciously. For, by using hedges in the invitation, on the one hand, the tone of the inviter would be more euphemistic so that the invitee can have more choices, at the same time, more hedges in the invitation will make the invitee doubt the sincerity of the invitation so that the invitee knows the invitation is ostensible.

##### Example 7

In this example, A and B are roommate, Inviter (A) is going climbing with her boyfriend, she invites her roommate B to go with them.

今天天气不错啊, 别自己在宿舍呆着了, 要不一起出去跟我们爬山吧? (A. It is a nice day; you can go climbing with us instead of staying alone in the dorm.)

算了吧, 你跟你男朋友一起去吧, 我就不打扰了。  
(B. I will not bother you and your boyfriend.)

行吧, 下次咱俩再一起去。(A. Alright, we can go together next time.)

In order to take care of the positive face of others, this ostensible invitation is made. In Example 7, A made the invitation by using the hedge word“要不” to let B have more choices, what's more, hedge word“要不”made this invitation not genius enough so that B knew this invitation may be ostensible.

In the example, in 34 ostensible invitations (45%) of the 75 ostensible invitations Inviter A hedges the invitation to invitee B. This feature is often used unconsciously by the inviter when he/she is giving ostensible invitation.

#### 4.2.7 Inviter a Uses Inappropriate Verbal, Vocal, or Facial Cues

Pretense, one of the features of ostensible invitations, can be shown by some inappropriate cues. Due to the limitations of data collection methods, it is impossible to obtain more accurate data of this feature. However, through the investigation of the subjects and the observation from the author, the inappropriate cues are more obvious in the ostensible invitation. Similar to the function of hedges mentioned above, these inappropriate cues are a kind of nonverbal strategy or means adopted or displayed by the inviter intentionally or unintentionally in a certain context, so that the invitee can infer the invitation is genius or not.

As we referred in 1.4, these six features of ostensible invitations are not independent of each other, but one ostensible invitation needn't cover all the features of ostensible invitation simultaneously, one or few of the features is/are enough to make the invitation ostensible. For example, in the example 2, A does not provide enough information about the arrangement of event E and A does not insist on its invitation, so we can see two features of ostensible invitation occur in this invitation. Once the invitee notices one or few of the features, the invitee has reason to believe the invitation is ostensible.

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## CONCLUSION

Chinese ostensible invitations occur in daily communication very frequently, for making ostensible invitations is a communication strategy. According to the investigation and analysis, Chinese ostensible invitation possesses the features and properties of ostensible speech act that were listed by Clark and Isaacs, in 1990. Except the last feature referred above, the other six features are used frequently to give a Chinese ostensible invitation.

In Chinese culture, invitations, whether genius or not, are an act of saving face for the other side so that the invitee can feel the respect from the inviter. From the analysis of the properties and features of Chinese ostensible invitations with some typical instances, the readers can have an understanding of Chinese ostensible invitations, then they can judge whether the invitation is genius or not through these features, so that they can make an appropriate response to the invitation. Or they can give ostensible invitations by using the features to maintain and strengthen interpersonal relationship.

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