



Face Threats and Ritual Interaction in International Chinese Debating Competition from the Perspective of Ritual and Speech Act

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Abstract. In the ritual context of debate, debaters often use a variety of speech acts to realize face threats, and follow the conventionalized formulaic expressions within the ritual frame to convince the audience and refute the other side. Based on the ritual frame of the third wave of politeness and the interactive typology of speech acts, this paper examines what speech acts can be used to realize face threats and how debaters realize ritual interaction from the perspective of ritual and speech act in International Chinese Debating Competition. The results show that debaters realize face-threats through speech acts such as *Request*, *Complain*, *Opine*, *Tell* etc. The speech acts of *Opine* and *Complaint* are used to threaten the positive face of the other side to achieve the refuting function, and that of *Request* is used to threaten the negative face of the other side to achieve the questioning function. The ritual interaction in debate is mainly realized by the patters of “Initiate – Counter – Initiate”, “Initiate – Satisfy – Counter” and “Initiate – Counter – Counter”. This study explores the relationship of speech acts, face threats and ritual interaction in debate. In the future, further attention can be paid to speech acts and ritual interaction in other ritual contexts.

Keywords: face threats, speech acts, ritual frame, debating competition

1 Introduction

Face threatening act is a common pragmatic strategy in the interactive context of debating competitions for college students. Compared with daily communicative discourse, in the context of debating competition, the debaters state their own positions and refute the opposing viewpoints in the sessions of opening statements, questioning, rebuttal, free debate and closing arguments, etc., to achieve the purpose of convincing the audience. The debaters follow conventionalized formulaic expressions of a ritual frame and seek alignment with the third party, that is, the public. In the sessions of questioning and free debate, both sides often use pragmatics strategies of face threats through a variety of speech acts to refute or question the opposing side forcefully, and achieve the effect of heated debates. The debaters not only have to follow certain rules under the ritual frame of debate, but also have to use a variety of speech acts to achieve the

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purpose of persuasion and questioning, so debating has a potential moral order and certain ritual features. Based on ritual theory, combined with the classification of speech acts, this study takes the transcribed texts of International Chinese Debating Competition as the data to analyze the face threats and the patterns of ritual interaction among the debaters in the competition. It provides a theoretical reference and analytical path for the study of interactive debates among participants in ritual context.

2 Literature Review

Face threat, ritual and speech acts are closely connected. Face threats and ritual are core theories of politeness research. And speech act is one of the realizations of face threat and ritual. Brown & Levinson^[1] divided face threat into positive and negative face threat, believing that certain acts will threaten face if they violate the face needs of the listeners or speakers. Kádár^[2] defines ritual as a formalized, recurrent action, which is relationship forcing; that is, by operating, it reinforces/transforms interpersonal relationships, bounding to the maintenance of moral orders. The essential features of ritual that distinguish them from ordinary behaviors are that ritual participants have perceived rights and obligations, and that they are able to reshape the social order and form an alignment with a third-party audience. Following a conventionalized ritual frame, participants employ routinized expressions and formulaic utterances in performing ritual activities and invest varying degrees of emotion^[3]. House et al.^[4] proposed an integrative model of interactional structures, speech acts, and ritual. This model illustrates how speech acts operate in interaction from a ritual perspective and explains how the model operates through the ritual of bargaining in a Chinese market, providing a paradigm for the systematic analysis of ritualized interaction.

In order to explore the participants' ritual interaction features, Edmondson et al.^[5] refined the classification of interactional speech acts by categorizing 25 basic speech acts into two types: substantive and ritual (see **Fig. 1**. Interactional typology of illocutionary acts (Edmondson et al., 2023: 103). Ritual speech acts refer to those that are expected to appear in interactive communication; substantive speech acts refer to those related to attitudes, as well as those related to the transmission of information. This classification can be applied to everyday communicative discourse in ritual contexts such as bargaining^[4], military training^[6], and public apologies^[7].

After Kádár proposed ritual and refined interactive speech acts, many scholars have conducted researches to explore speech acts in different ritual contexts, such as daily communication^[8], political context^[9] and historical texts^[10], enriching the research paradigm of the third-wave politeness research.

Face threat, as an important concept in politeness studies, occupies an important position in ritual contexts and can be equally realized through speech acts. Jiao Lin et al.^[11] explored face threats in the British TV show from the perspectives of ritual and speech acts. However, few scholars have explored the relationship between face threats, speech acts and ritual in the interactive communication context of college students' debating competition.

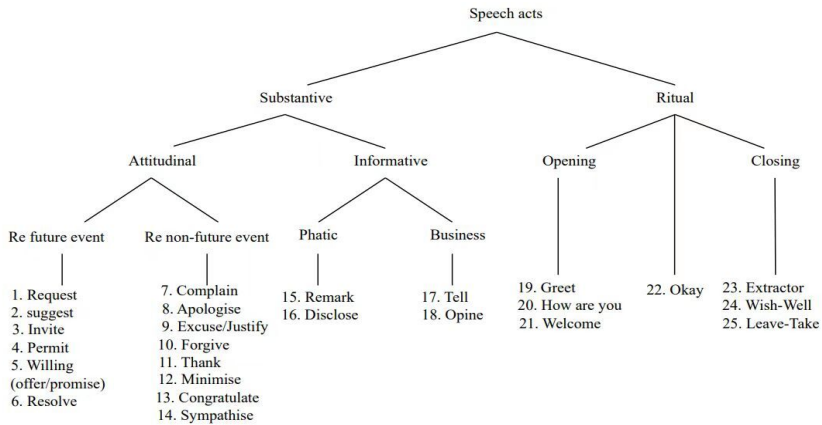


Fig. 1. Interactional typology of illocutionary acts (Edmondson et al., 2023: 103)

3 Research Design

3.1 Research Questions

This study aims to answer the following two questions:

1. What kind of speech acts do the debaters in ICDC use to realize face threats from the perspective of ritual and speech act?
2. What are the patterns of ritual interaction in ICDC from the perspective of ritual and speech act?

3.2 Data Collection

To reveal the face threats and patterns of ritual interaction in debating competition, this study chooses four debates of International Chinese Debating Competition (ICDC) 2020-2023 as the data, covering topics of philosophy, ethics and morals, and social hot issues. According to the definition of face threat and the data features of debating competitions, only the data of the questioning and free debate sessions in the debates are transcribed, which are characterized by more interactive communication. The criteria for choosing are that the debaters begin to speak in the questioning and free debate sessions, and end when either debater runs out of time or indicates that he or she has stopped speaking in the session. By means of reading, software transcription, manual transcription and manual proofreading, 39,418 characters are finally obtained.

3.3 Analytical Model

In debating competitions for college students, debaters often realize face threats through different speech acts to convince the audience and refute the opposing side. Firstly,

competitions, debaters need to abide by the moral order under the debate ritual. According to the rules of the debating competition, debaters have to state their own viewpoints or question the other side within the specified time to fulfill the rights and obligations as participants in the ritual, to gain the recognition of the judges, the audience, and the third-party public, and to strengthen the relationship with the connection between multiple parties. In order to ensure the “maximum efficiency” of the interaction, the participants will lack the politeness strategy^[1], thus a variety of speech acts will be used to threaten the positive or negative faces of the other party, as shown in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Frequency of speech acts to realize threat faces

Face threats	Speech acts (%)						Total (%)
	Opine	Request	Complain	Tell	Suggest	Apologize	
Positive face	125 (47.7)	48 (18.3)	53 (20.2)	27 (10.3)	6 (2.3)	3 (1.1)	262 (55.3)
Negative face	57 (26.9)	103 (48.6)	15 (7.1)	22 (10.4)	12 (5.7)	3 (1.4)	212 (44.7)
Total (%)	182 (38.4)	151 (31.9)	68 (14.3)	49 (10.3)	18 (3.8)	6 (1.3)	474 (100)

According to the data analysis, the debaters use face threats 474 times in total, among which the frequency of positive face threats was 262 times, accounting for 55.3%, while that of negative face threats was 212 times, accounting for 44.7%. In the ritual context of debating competition for college students, by threatening positive face of the other party, the speaker can express his viewpoint and position more directly and effectively question and refute the opposing viewpoint, so the frequency of positive face threatening acts is higher than that of negative face threatening acts^[11]. In addition, among all the face threatening acts, the frequencies of Opine and Request are higher than other speech acts, accounting for 38.4% and 31.9% respectively.

In positive face threatening acts, the speech acts of Opine and Complain are more frequently used, accounting for 47.7% and 20.2% respectively, and other speech acts, in order of frequency, are Request, Tell, Suggest and Apologize. In negative face threatening acts, Request and Opine are more frequently used speech acts by the debaters, accounting for 48.6% and 26.9% respectively, and other speech acts, in order of frequency, are Tell, Complain, Suggest and Apologize.

In addition, in the ritual context of debating competition for college students, the debaters have the communicative goals of refuting, questioning the opponents, and convincing the third-party audience. Especially in the questioning and free debate sessions, to threaten the positive face of the opposing side, both sides often use speech acts such as Opine, Complain etc. to express their own viewpoints in a limited period of time, and refute, deny, and criticize the opponents' viewpoints. To threaten the negative face of the opposing side, the speech acts of Request, Opine, Tell will be used to question the other side or to avoid hard-to-answer questions. However, more frequently, the two

sides use a variety of speech acts alternately to continuously express their own viewpoints and to refute and question the other side's viewpoints in order to fulfill the participants' rights and obligations in the debating ritual and to achieve a strong effect of the exchange of ideas.

4.2 Patterns of Ritual Interaction in ICDC

Participants follow conventionalized formulaic expressions in ritual interaction. This study, following the model of House et al. [4], systematically analyzes how speech acts operate in an interactive ritual context of debating competition from a ritual perspective.

Based on the perspective of ritual and speech act, this study analyzes the model of ritual interaction in the context of debating ritual from the bottom-up in terms of the three basic units of the model, namely, speech acts, move, and exchange [4]. Multiple exchanges of conversational turn-taking and interaction between the two sides of the debate often form a fixed pattern, so as to achieve a sustained interactive aggression effect [11], which is conducive to express one's own point of view and refuting the other side's position, thus achieving the purpose of communication. The patterns of ritual interaction in debate are as follows:

Initiate → Counter → Initiate
 Initiate → Satisfy → Initiate
 Initiate → Counter → Counter
 (Adapted from House et al., 2021a: 2-3)

Example (1)

- O4: My fellow debaters, may I ask you a question? I am a little confused about your judgment. You are trying to say that a part of immorality is from mercy, so immorality is dependent on mercy, and immorality is not so pathetic as mercilessness? (**Request**)
- P1: No, you're not right. The part of immorality that makes us feel pathetic is actually because of mercilessness, and why the part of immorality doesn't make us feel pathetic is because it does not relate to mercilessness. So, in my opinion, merciless is more closely related to the word "pathetic" than immorality. (**Opine**)
- O4: Just wait a moment. The part of immorality that makes us feel pathetic is actually because of mercilessness, which exactly proves that immorality and mercilessness are equally pathetic. Why do you say merciless is more closely related to the word "pathetic" than immorality? (**Request**)

(Notes: O4=the fourth debater of the Opposition, P1=the first debater of the Proposition)

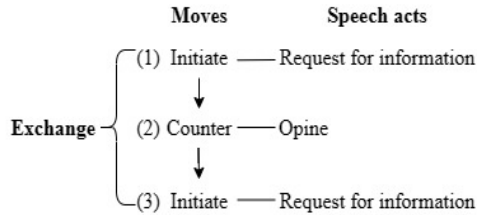


Fig. 3. Pattern 1 of ritual interaction

The interaction in example (1) applies the first pattern of ritual interaction shown in Fig.3. This interaction occurs at the beginning of the questioning session, in which the Opposition questions the Proposition based on their statement, and the Proposition has to answer the questions, and the Opposition has the right to interrupt the Proposition. In this case, O4 uses the speech act of Request to initiate the interaction: P1 is asked to verify certain information in the statement, and is expected to use the speech act of Opine to clearly counter with O4's questions. In order to insist on its own position, P1 uses the speech act of Opine to refute or skillfully avoid the requested information that is unfavorable to its own side. Sometimes the speech act of Tell is also used to present new evidence to support its position or to refute the other side's view. At the end of P1's response, O4 uses the speech act of Request again to initiate a debate around a new topic center. Therefore, in this exchange, three moves, that is, initiate, counter and initiate are used, which are realized by the speech acts of Request, Opine and Request respectively.

Example (2)

- O3: I know we have some different understandings for the topic. Actually, I assume your side also recognizes that sometimes understandings don't require empathy, right? (**Request**)
- P2: If your side insists on discussing $1+1=2$ with our side, we don't see any point here, and we don't want to discuss it. I have no problem with that. (**Opine**)
- O3: You said just now, "Ten years, dead and living dim and draw apart." I can use rationality to understand, so here why does your side think that this partial understanding is not a real understanding? (**Request**)

(Notes: O3=the third debater of the Opposition, P2=the second debater of the Proposition)

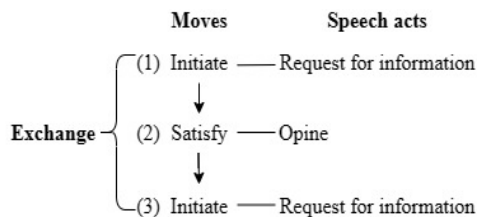


Fig. 4. Pattern 2 of ritual interaction

In this example, participants apply the pattern of ritual interaction shown in **Fig.4** O3 uses the speech act of Request to initiate the interaction to seek consensus from P2 that “partial understanding does not require empathy”, thus leading the Proposition to follow its own logic. P2 realizes that a complete denial of O3’s logic will be easily refuted, so he uses the speech act of Opine to affirm part of O3’s logical argument and satisfy the initiating Request from O3. Since P2 has not entered the logical position set by O3, O3 uses the speech act of Request again to initiate a new turn of the conversation to redirect P2 to agree with his position. Therefore, in this exchange, three moves, that is, initiate, satisfy and initiate are used, which are realized by the speech acts of Request, Opine and Request respectively.

Example (3)

- O4: If you think it is a necessity and it has value to people, then if alcohol is a necessity? (**Request**)
- P1: Uh, does alcohol ensure the existence of people? I don’t think that’s a right analogy. (**Complain**)
- O4: Wow, so much hardships have been tasted from alcohol. Li Bai’s hundreds of poems are written with the company of alcohol. It has cultural and spiritual values. Doesn’t it a necessity? (**Tell**)

(Notes: O4=the fourth debater of the Opposition, P1=the first debater of the Proposition)

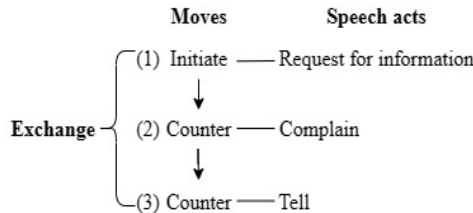


Fig. 5. Pattern 3 of ritual interaction

The pattern of “Initiate – Counter – Counter” shown in **Fig.5** often occurs at the middle stage in the debating competition. In this example, P1 does not give a direct answer after O4 uses the speech act of Request for information to initiate the exchange, but denies the analogy of O4 by the speech act of Complain. In order to further ask P1 to directly answer the question, O4 uses the speech act of Tell to put forward new evidence that “Alcohol is a necessity for people”, so as to counter with the accusation of O4 that the evidence is insufficient. Therefore, in this exchange, three moves, that is, initiate, counter and counter are used, which are realized by the speech acts of Request, Opine and Tell respectively. This pattern of interaction is common in both questioning and free debate sessions.

In the data analysis, the moves of Counter can also be realized through the speech acts of Suggest. At the same time, debaters will also use speech acts such as Apologies and Thank to maintain the moral order in the ritual context of debate. However, due to the relatively small proportion of the data, detailed analysis will not be made.

5 Conclusion

From the perspective of ritual and speech acts, this study examines the realization of face threats between the participants, and analyzes the patterns of ritual interaction in the debating competition of college students.

Face threats are widely presented in the debating competitions of college students. By using different speech acts to realize different language functions and achieve different interactive effects, debaters can follow their rights and obligations to maintain a relationship between participants and the third-party audience in the ritual interaction, thus forming a complete interaction structure. Debaters realize face threats mainly through the speech acts such as Request, Complaint, Opine and Tell. To be specific, debaters use speech acts of Opine and Complaint to threaten the positive face of the other side to achieve the refuting function, and use speech acts of Request to threaten the negative face of the other side to achieve the questioning function. The realization of face threats improves the communicative efficiency, is conducive for the debaters to express their views, and meets the audience's expectation for the effect of the debating competition.

In the ritual interaction of college students' debating competitions, multiple exchanges of conversational turn-taking and interaction between the two sides of the debate often form a fixed pattern, so as to achieve a sustained interactive aggression effect, which is conducive to express their own views and refute the other side's position. The ritual interaction in debate is mainly realized by the patterns of "Initiate – Counter – Initiate", "Initiate – Satisfy – Counter" and "Initiate – Counter – Counter".

This study explores the relationship of speech acts, face threats and ritual interaction. In the future, further attention can be paid to the connection between speech acts, face threats and interaction in other ritual contexts, and the research paradigm of interactive ritual frame can be replicated in other daily communicative discourse.

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