ABSTRACT

Linguistic politeness theories were put forward by Brown and Levinson (B&L)(1987), Leech (1983) and Gu Yueguo (1991). The first two theories claimed universality but were often challenged by contradicting empirical findings. The theory put forward by Gu is a cultural-specific theory, which was formulated on data collected from Mainland Chinese. The main aim of this exercise is to evaluate these theories using data collected from Chinese Singaporeans. This exercise also aims at determining how Chinese Singaporeans make use of politeness strategies in their daily conversations.

Conversation data were collected through tape recording speeches which were then transcribed. These conversation data involved the desired content, namely compliment, invitation and request, which are believed to involve more strategies of politeness than other types of conversations. In some instances, the conversations were initiated by the speaker deliberately; in others, the conversations recorded were spontaneous.

The analysis shows that contrary to their claim of universality, all three theories cannot account for all types of politeness strategies used by Chinese Singaporeans. Surprisingly, B&L and Leechs’ theory can explain these data better than Gu Yueguo’s theory, which is supposedly designed for the Chinese culture.

This academic exercise concludes although politeness is a universal phenomenon, it is also a cultural specific phenomenon, i.e., different cultural groups perceive politeness differently. B&L and Leech neglected the importance of cultural factor and this resulted in the imperfection of their theories. It is also evident that as a result of Western influence, the politeness strategies used by Chinese Singaporeans are different from those of Mainland Chinese. Thus, the studies of cultural-specific politeness phenomenon may help to achieve a better understanding of the concept of politeness in that particular culture. This will in turn be helpful to the conceptualization of a universal Politeness Theory.