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# Exploring metalinguistic patterns with large-scale corpora: A case of Chinese notions of face and politeness

**Abstract:** Scholars have repeatedly emphasized that clearly and explicitly defining a concept underscores good research. Drawing on an emic approach to first-order concepts, metapragmatics offers researchers a viable method to assess the difference between their theoretical definitions and laypersons' everyday interpretations. Powered by corpus linguistic methods, researchers can automatically extract patterns of metalinguistic expressions from large-scale corpora. Using Sketch Engine (Kilgarrieff et al. 2014), the metalinguistic patterns are identified using frequency analysis, word sketch analysis, and distributional thesaurus analysis. To illustrate this approach, this chapter provides a case study of Chinese notions of face (*mianzi*) and politeness (*limao*). The results show that Chinese speakers perceive face and politeness as distinct concepts in everyday interactions. While politeness is mostly represented by people's language choice, face covers a wider range of social behaviors. Moreover, the mixed semantic prosody of *mianzi* suggests that the concept needs to be studied in specific interactions. In contrast, the consistently positive semantic prosody of *limao* indicates that norms of politeness are shared among community members. In conclusion, this chapter demonstrates the utility of a metapragmatic approach to concept explication. The case study analyzed in this chapter extends corpus-based metapragmatic research to the Chinese context which has received relatively little attention (Haugh 2018).

## 1 Introduction

Scholars have repeatedly emphasized that clearly and explicitly defining a concept underscores good research (Chaffee 1991; Merton 1958; Sartori 1984). MeLeod and Pan (2005) point out that scientific concepts differ from everyday concepts for their abstractness, clarity of meaning, operationalizability, and precision. One salient feature of sociopragmatic research is that many of the theoretical concepts overlap with their everyday lay terms such as face, politeness, aggression, and rudeness (Eelen 2001; Watts 2003). Therefore, it becomes particularly important for scholars to understand the conceptual discrepancy between the precisely

crafted academic jargons and the messy everyday concepts, ensuring that their ideas are communicated accurately.

Metapragmatics constitutes an essential practice to connect lay conceptualizations with scholarly conceptualizations. It refers to the “systematic study of the metalevel, where indicators of reflexive awareness are to be found in the actual choice-making that constitutes language use” (Verschuere 1999: 188). Powered by computer programs that can process a large volume of these “indicators of reflexive awareness”, corpus-based metapragmatics represents an emerging approach to explicating theoretical concepts by examining the collocational patterns associated with the concept of interest (Culpeper 2009; Haugh 2018). The purpose of the present chapter, therefore, is to demonstrate how a corpus-based approach to metapragmatics (specifically metalinguistics) can contribute to concept explication in research on language and communication.

The chapter is organized as follows. In Section 2, I provide definitions of key concepts in corpus-based metapragmatics. Section 3 introduces Sketch Engine and its three applications in corpus-based metapragmatics. Drawing on large-scale web corpora, a case study of Chinese notions of face and politeness is presented in Section 4. The final section discusses the strengths and weaknesses of this corpus approach and puts forward directions for future studies.

## 2 Key concepts in corpus-based metapragmatics

### 2.1 First-order and second-order concepts

The distinction between first-order and second-order concepts is mostly discussed in research on linguistic (im)politeness (Culpeper, O’Driscoll & Hardaker 2019; Eelen 2001; Watts 2003; Xiang, Jia & Bu 2024). This line of research aims to address the discrepancy between researchers’ technical (second-order) definition of (im) politeness and discourse participants’ common (first-order) interpretation of the same concept (Culpeper, O’Driscoll & Hardaker 2019; Eelen 2001; Watts 2003). While participants’ first-order definitions are often idiosyncratic and even messy, researchers’ second-order definitions expect a high level of clarity. Examples of classic second-order concepts include Brown and Levinson’s (1987) definition of positive politeness (strategies orienting toward one’s positive self-image) and negative politeness (strategies orienting towards one’s freedom from imposition). Scholars who study East Asian linguacultures (e.g., Gu 1990; Haugh & Hinze 2003; Mao 1994) point out that Brown and Levinson’s second-order definitions of politeness are inconsistent with their second-order counterparts in East Asian cultures.

For example, while the English notion of politeness is defined as volitional face management, the Japanese notion of politeness is centered around the concept of *discernment*, which describes their tendency to speak based on shared social conventions (Ide 1989).

Despite being idiosyncratic, first-order concepts can inform researchers about how their technical definitions might be understood (Culpeper 2021). For example, by comparing the distributional frequencies of *impoliteness* and their related terms in research articles and the Oxford English Corpus, Culpeper (2011) found that, unlike the high frequency of *verbal aggression* in Psychology, *impoliteness* is hardly used in both academia and in lay interactions, making it a suitable label to represent this growing field in linguistics. In a more recent study, Culpeper (2021) examined the first- and second-order conceptualizations of *impoliteness* and *hate speech*. His results show that while the scholarly definition of *hate speech* is generally consistent with its first-order counterpart, *impoliteness* embodies a much broader second-order concept than its first-order counterpart. Understanding the nuances between concepts can help scholars communicate their findings more effectively to the research community.

## 2.2 Emic and etic approaches to language and culture

A closely related set of concepts is the emic and etic approaches to language and culture. These two notions are derived from the English linguistic terms *phonetic* (the production of actual sounds) and *phonemic* (the interpretation of sounds by their users) and are used to describe culture-general and culture-specific language behaviors (Pike 1967; Spencer-Oatey & Franklin 2009). Common etic frameworks include Brown and Levinson's (1987) dichotomy of positive and negative face, Leech's (2014) General Strategy of Politeness, and Schwartz's (1992) universal value constructs. One shared feature is that these frameworks all seek to explain behaviors across different cultures, stimulating numerous empirical studies to falsify their propositions.

In contrast, emic frameworks seek to explain language-specific behaviors. For example, Gu (1990) argues that etic theories of politeness (Brown & Levinson 1987; Leech 1983) are essentially individualistic and are insufficient to explain the collective and reciprocal expectations in Chinese culture; therefore, he proposes a Chinese version of the Politeness Principle that includes the maxims of self-denigration and address as well as an overarching Balance Principle. Similarly, drawing on various interactional data, Haugh (2007) highlights the role of place or identity in the interactional achievement of Japanese facework and politeness. This study not only contributes to an emic approach to research on (im)politeness

but also brings practical implications for language learners to better understand the subtle Japanese conversational conventions. Moreover, using lexical analysis, an emic approach can be extended to the analysis of extinct languages such as Latin (Unceta Gómez 2019).

By jointly considering the distinctions between first-order and second-order concepts as well as emic and etic approaches, Jucker (2020) distinguishes three ways of analyzing (im)politeness. First, by adopting an emic approach, researchers can use first-order concepts to understand how speakers of a certain lingua-culture talk about communicative concepts such as *politeness*, *face*, and *attentiveness*. This corresponds to the metapragmatic approach that will be further illustrated in the remainder of this paper. Second, researchers can also adopt an emic approach but analyze social interactions by using scholarly defined concepts that are suitable for a particular lingua-culture. For example, Ran and Zhao (2018) propose the *mutual affect-based face* to account for Chinese people's concern for favors which is often overlooked in classic second-order models. Finally, the third approach shifts to an etic perspective and seeks to explain cross-cultural behaviors with the same set of second-order concepts. For example, the recent development of *ritual frame indicating expressions* is one such endeavor to examine cross-cultural pragmatics based on a shared set of concepts (House & Kádár 2020).

## 2.3 Metapragmatics and metalinguistic patterns

As a fuzzy concept, metapragmatics embodies varying forms of reflexive awareness in pragmatic research. For example, metapragmatics can refer to a critical theoretical reflection on what constitutes the discipline of pragmatics, but it can also refer to the explicit and implicit metacommunication which discourse participants use to reflect their understanding of social interactions (Hübler 2011; Mey 2001).

Kádár and Haugh (2013) propose four categories of metapragmatics that are informed by (im)politeness research. First, metalinguistic awareness studies the linguistic expressions that reflexively represent (im)politeness phenomena across different discourse communities. For example, Kádár and Ran (2019) investigate the metalinguistic expressions of globalization in Chinese and English. Their findings suggest that while globalization is often negatively evaluated in English, it is positively evaluated as a result of China's opening-up policy. Second, metacommunicative awareness refers to participants' explicit evaluations made in a conversation. For example, Chinese notions of face (e.g., *lian* and *mianzi*) are frequently used as metacommunicative markers to comment on others' behaviors (Zhou & Zhang 2018b). Third, moving to the societal level, metadiscursive awareness refers to the ongoing debate about pragmatic concepts. For example, due to

the contagious nature of COVID-19, people all around the world have started to discuss what the new norm of being polite to each other is in the age of a pandemic. Finally, metacognitive awareness involves participants' attitudes and expectations that are communicated via pragmatic markers. For example, hedges such as “as far as I know” and “to my knowledge” qualify the speakers' epistemic status on their following statement. In contrast, certainty expressions such as “there is no doubt that” and “as we all know” highlight the speakers' confidence in the certainty of their statements.

Corpus-based metapragmatics is particularly suitable for studying the metalinguistic awareness of speech communities. Viewing language as social action, metalanguage reflects a structured understanding of “how language works, what it is usually like, what certain ways of speaking connote and imply, what they ought to be like” (Jaworski, Coupland & Galasiński 2004: 3). Examining the relations between metalinguistic labels, therefore, helps probe into the ideologies behind theoretical concepts (Verschueren 2000).

The word “pattern” in corpus linguistics generally refers to “an observed regularity” with varying levels of abstraction, scales of the phenomenon, natures of the corpus, and sources of the phenomenon (Hunston 2022: 140). In corpus-based metapragmatics, *metalinguistic pattern* concerns the reoccurring collocates that associate with the metalinguistic expression of interest based on various lexicogrammatical relations. In this study, meaningful metalinguistic patterns are identified by conducting frequency analysis, word sketch analysis, and distributional thesaurus analysis. These methods are elaborated in the following section.

### 3 Approaches to corpus-based metapragmatics

Compared to other methods such as lexical mapping (e.g., Pizziconi 2007), interviews (e.g., Gagné 2010), and questionnaires (e.g., Shi, Ichiro & Jin 2011), corpus approaches to metapragmatics enable researchers to look at patterns of metalanguage across a large volume of naturally occurring texts. This section introduces three corpus-based methods for analyzing the collocational patterns of metalanguage: frequency analysis, word sketch analysis, and distributional thesaurus analysis. Frequency analysis is available at various corpus linguistic programs, and the latter two are available via Sketch Engine<sup>1</sup> (Kilgarrieff et al. 2014), which has been widely used in similar studies of metapragmatics across different languages (Chang & Haugh 2020; Culpeper 2009; Taylor 2016).

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1 The Sketch Engine program can be accessed at <https://www.sketchengine.eu/>.

### 3.1 Frequency analysis and simple collocation analysis

One basic form of analysis is to calculate the frequency of each metalinguistic expression that is related to the concept of interest. For example, to understand how second-order concepts of impoliteness are understood in everyday interaction, Culpeper (2009) searched for the frequency of relevant expressions of impoliteness in the Oxford English Corpus (OEC). The results show that unlike the prevailing use of “impoliteness” in linguistic pragmatics, “rude”, “rudeness”, and “verbal abuse” are commonly used among lay communicators. The low frequency of “impoliteness” in OEC suggests that it is very much an academic term.

In addition to conducting frequency analysis, researchers can analyze the collocates of the target concept by examining its semantic prosody, which refers to “a consistent aura of meaning with which a form is imbued by its collocates” (Louw 1993: 157). A positive semantic prosody means that the term implies a positive attitude, whereas a negative semantic prosody means that the term is often negatively evaluated. Using *V+mianzi* and *V+lian* as search terms, for example, Zhou and Zhang (2017) identified 14 predominant collocations of Chinese face expressions from a corpus of Chinese radio and television programs. The frequency count of each face expression suggests that *mianzi* behaviors are often positively evaluated, whereas *lian* behaviors are often negatively evaluated.

Researchers also trace the varying usage of the same expression across various categories embedded in the corpus metadata, such as regions, genders, genres, languages, and times. For example, Culpeper (2009) found that expressions of rudeness and impoliteness are used more often among females than males, indicating that females tend to favor socially prescribed forms over males. Using Google Ngram Viewer, Kádár and Ran (2019) found that the surge of *guojihua* ‘internationalization’ coincides with the increasing publication of etiquette manuals since the 1980s. Such evidence indicates the correlations between politeness and internationalization in Modern Chinese society.

It is also informative to compare the frequencies of metalanguage against categories created by the researchers. To understand the conceptual differences between the two interconnected notions of Chinese face (i.e., *mianzi* and *lian*), Zhou and Zhang (2017) analyze the metalinguistic expressions of these two key notions. Specifically, they conceptualize Chinese face concepts as a system of value-constructs at individual, relational, and collective levels. Their results show that across all three levels of face, *lian* and *mianzi* share salient values of public self-image, capability, and dignity. In addition, *lian* is exclusively salient in reputation whereas *mianzi* is salient in morality.

### 3.2 Word sketch analysis

The word sketch analysis in Sketch Engine summarizes the prominent collocational patterns based on 27 grammatical relations such as connectives, modifiers, and possessors (Kilgarrieff et al. 2014; Rychlý 2008). For example, if researchers want to understand the speech act of advice from a first-order perspective, the word sketch function can generate a list of collocates that frequently co-occur with *advice*. To illustrate, Table 1 presents a summary of four lexico-grammatical collocations of the word “advice” in the English Web 2020 Corpus.<sup>2</sup> Powered by Sketch Engine, this corpus contains 38 billion words that were collected from the Internet between 2019 and 2021. It is designed as a general corpus that covers a wide range of topics such as arts, business, games, health, home, recreation, reference, science, sport, society, and technology. In addition to generating a list of collocates, Sketch Engine calculates the frequency and the typicality score of each collocate. In the most recent version of Sketch Engine, the typicality score is calculated using logDice. A greater logDice value indicates a stronger collocation and a negative or zero value indicates the word is not related to the search term (Gablasova, Brezina & McEnery 2017). For each lexico-grammatical relation, the collocates were sorted based on their typicality scores, and the first seven collocates are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Summary of Word sketch for *advice*.

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b><i>advice and/or</i></b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| <i>advice and guidance</i> (39,366/10.0), <i>help and advice</i> (31,690/9.8), <i>tips and advice</i> (29,713/9.5), <i>advice and support</i> (60,294/9.3), <i>advice and assistance</i> (23,727/9.3), <i>information and advice</i> (59,762/8.9), <i>advice and recommendation</i> (9,721/8.1) |
| <b><i>modifiers of advice</i></b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| <i>legal advice</i> (96,583/9.1), <i>expert</i> (noun) <i>advice</i> (34,608/8.9), <i>practical advice</i> (42,826/8.7), <i>expert</i> (adjective) <i>advice</i> (22,677/8.7), <i>helpful advice</i> (13,935/7.9), <i>sound advice</i> (17,308/7.6), <i>professional advice</i> (32,703/7.5)    |
| <b><i>possessors of advice</i></b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| <i>doctor's advice</i> (5,279/9.4), <i>experts' advice</i> (1,088/8.4), <i>lawyer's advice</i> (686/7.5), <i>physician's advice</i> (686/7.5), <i>counsel's advice</i> (423/7.2), <i>your vet's advice</i> (326/7.0), <i>friend's advice</i> (1,094/7.0)                                        |
| <b><i>verbs with advice as object</i></b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| <i>seek advice</i> (83,487/9.4), <i>offer advice</i> (107,994/8.1), <i>heed advice</i> (9,393/7.9), <i>provide advice</i> (187,111/7.8), <i>give advice</i> (161,093/7.8), <i>appreciate any advice</i> (9,726/7.1), <i>ignore the advice</i> (9,856/7.1)                                       |

*Note:* Frequency and typicality scores are shown in parenthesis after each collocate.

<sup>2</sup> The full detail of the corpus can be found at <https://www.sketchengine.eu/ententen-english-corpus/>.

The four lexico-grammatical relations can reveal four aspects of advice in everyday social interactions. First, and/or connectives connect the advice to its synonyms. Corpus data suggest that advice is commonly conceived as information support (e.g., *guidance, tips, information, recommendation*). Second, modifiers of *advice* describe the properties of advice. The present results suggest that advice mostly comes from advisors with special knowledge (e.g., *legal, expert, professional*) and are perceived positively by others (e.g., *helpful, sound*). Third, possessors of *advice* reveal sources of the advice. Consistent with the results of modifiers, advice comes from specialists such as *doctors, experts, lawyers, physicians, counsels*, and *veterinarians*. Finally, verbs that take *advice* as objects reflect people's treatment of the advice. It seems that many more people give than seek advice online, which could lead to imposing unsolicited advice on others. Moreover, the high frequency and typicality score of *ignore the advice* suggest that many people do not take others' advice seriously, calling for more research on the persuasive effects of advice-giving. Taken together, these findings suggest that the first-order conceptualization of advice is much broader in scope than its second-order definition as one category of directives. A simple exchange of information may also be masked as advice in everyday interactions.

In addition, the word sketch differences function in Sketch Engine can identify shared and unique collocates of two words by comparing their lexico-grammatical patterns (Kilgariff et al. 2014). This function is particularly popular in recent metapragmatic studies on impoliteness (Culpeper 2009, 2021; Culpeper & Haugh 2021). For example, to disentangle *impoliteness* and *hate speech*, Culpeper (2021) compared the two words based on their collocates that are connected by conjuncts (and/or) and pre-modified adverbs in the Oxford English Corpus. His results show that compared to impoliteness, hate speech associated more frequently with extreme behaviors, prejudice, as well as negative emotions of sadness and anger. Using the same corpus, Culpeper and Haugh (2021) compared Australian and British uses of *offensive* by examining their cooccurring collocates connected by conjuncts, pre-modified adverbs, and pre-modified "to" propositional phrases. They found that *offensive* encodes a stronger negative emotion among the British than the Australian. Moreover, the British connect *hate speech* more to religion (e.g., Islam, Christianity, Muslim, Christian) than the Australian. These findings lead the authors to reconsider the definition of *offensive* when analyzing the two linguacultures.



### 3.3 Distributional thesaurus analysis

Another method is to generate a distributional thesaurus for the metalinguistic expression of interest. Sketch Engine calculates the thesaurus for each word based on their lexico-grammatical relations (Kilgariff et al. 2014). The approach is grounded in distributional semantics and the synonyms are operationalized as words that share a significant amount of grammatical relations. For example, *advice* and *recommendation* are considered similar because they share the same syntagmatic relation with verbs such as *provide*, *offer*, and *decline* (i.e., *advice* or *recommendation* serve as the object for the verbs). By aggregating the shared collocates across all grammatical relations, we would obtain a list of words that are indicative of the lay understanding of the search word. The strength of similarity is assessed by the similarity score which is the percentage of collocates shared between the two words. Since synonyms in distributional thesaurus are determined based on lexico-grammatical relations, collocates do not necessarily share similar semantic meanings and should be interpreted with caution.

One growing issue in corpus-based metapragmatics is that most of the studies were conducted on English metalanguages due to limited corpora in other languages (Haugh 2018). Sketch Engine is powerful because it contains large-scale corpora from a wide range of languages, such as Chinese, Spanish, Hindi, Arabic, Portuguese, and Russian (Kilgariff et al. 2014). The rich language databases enable researchers to map out clusters of synonyms across various major languages. For example, Chang and Haugh (2020: 18) compared the clusters of collocates across six major terms about teasing in Mandarin Chinese and created a semantic map based on their collocational relationships. Their results suggest a complex as opposed to a simple linear relationship among teasing-related terms. Moreover, the similarity scores also indicate that *tiaokan* plays a central role in connecting other terms.

Moving beyond a single language variety, researchers also compare synonyms across different languages by generating separate clusters of collocates in each of the languages or varieties of the same language. For example, Taylor (2017) compared the metalinguistic labels of irony and sarcasm in British English and Italian. Her results reveal that these terms are understood differently between the two linguacultures. Moreover, Culpeper et al. (2019) problematize the prevailing second-order interpretation of *politeness* in British and American cultures (e.g., Brown & Levinson 1987), calling for first-order understandings of the concept. Using the distributional thesaurus, Culpeper and colleagues generated two separate clusters of collocates for *politeness* using the British and the American data. They found that *politeness* in the British data conveys a stronger sense of calmness, echoing the pragmatic rationality emphasized in the classic model of

politeness (Brown & Levinson 1987). Such an approach offers researchers a reflexive understanding of concepts that are otherwise taken for granted.

## 4 Case study: Metalinguistics of Chinese face and politeness

Based on a large-scale web corpus, this section presents a metapragmatic explication of Chinese notions of face and politeness. The Chinese notions of face are typically denoted by *lian* 脸 and *mianzi* 面子 (Hu 1944; Mao 1994; Zhou & Zhang 2018b) and the Chinese notions of politeness are typically denoted by *limao* 礼貌 and *keqi* 客气 (Feng 2011; Gao & Ting-Toomey 1998; Hinze 2012). Previous studies have yielded fruitful findings by adopting a second-order approach to explicating Chinese conceptions of face (He & Zhang 2011; Zhou & Zhang 2017). In contrast, few studies compared notions of face and politeness in Chinese language from a first-order perspective. For illustration purposes, this section focuses on the comparison between *mianzi* and *limao*. *Mianzi* was selected because it is more frequently used (Haugh & Hinze 2003; Qi 2011) and it covers a much broader spectrum of concepts than *lian* in Chinese social interactions (Gao 2009; Yu 2001). *Limao* was selected because it is used more frequently than *keqi*. For example, the Chinese Web 2017 Simplified Corpus (zhTenTen17) contains 100,352 tokens of *limao* but only 11,615 tokens of *keqi*.

The data of the case study come from zhTenTen17 which contains 16.6 billion tokens of Chinese texts collected from the Internet in August and November of 2017. The web texts mainly come from websites that contain Chinese domains (e.g., cn, hk, tw). This corpus was POS annotated by the Stanford Log-linear Part-Of-Speech Tagger using Chinese Penn TreeBank (<https://www.sketchengine.eu/zhtenten-chinese-corpus/>). The corpus only retains linguistically valuable contents by using a specialized computer program to remove duplicated contents, spam, and unwanted contents such as advertisements and incomplete texts (<https://www.sketchengine.eu/blog/build-a-corpus-from-the-web/>). A corpus-based approach is suitable for analyzing Chinese notions of face and politeness because these expressions are often explicitly communicated in Chinese social interactions (Jia & Yang 2021). This section begins with a second-order synthesis of *mianzi* and *limao* suggested by scholars. Then these second-order conceptualizations are cross-examined based on the first-order evidence extracted from the web corpora.

## 4.1 Second-order conceptualization of *mianzi* and *limao*

Scholars have a history of connecting face with politeness in Chinese social interactions. In his seminal book on *Chinese Characteristics*, Smith (1894) associates politeness with giving face to the recipient. According to Brown and Levinson's (1987) classic model of politeness, individuals are motivated to be polite because they want to avoid imposing any threats to others' positive and negative face when performing actions. Several scholars concur with Brown and Levinson's assumption that face is essential for understanding Chinese politeness phenomena (Kinnison 2017; Mao 1994; Yu 2003). For example, Mao (1994) contends that Brown and Levinson's individualistic definition of face is insufficient to explain the community-based conceptualization of face in Chinese culture, but he also acknowledges the defining role of face in politeness research. In a similar vein, Zhou and Zhang (2018a) suggest that face and politeness are interconnected in Chinese culture and these two concepts should be jointly discussed. While acknowledging differences between face and politeness, Li (2020) notes that these two concepts share at least two commonalities. First, lay communicators tend to evaluate giving *mianzi* and being *limao* as interchangeable. Second, giving *mianzi* is a normative method of upholding politeness in various communicative contexts, and failure to practice facework would violate social norms and be evaluated as inappropriate.

In contrast, another group of scholars maintains that politeness and face are two separate concepts in Chinese communication (Gu 1990; Hinze 2012). In his seminal paper, Gu (1990) points out that the negative face proposed in Brown and Levinson's framework is conceptually distinct in Chinese society. While an invitation threatens the invitee's negative face in Western society, it is commonly viewed as a genuine act of politeness among the Chinese. Moreover, to Chinese speakers, facework is instrumental and strategic, whereas politeness is largely normative (Gu 1990, 2011). Echoing Gu's normative view of Chinese politeness, Ji (2000) argues that Brown and Levinson's model of face management is insufficient to cover all aspects of politeness phenomena. Hinze (2012) pushes this idea further and argues that face is not the underlying motivation for Chinese speakers to be polite to others, suggesting that people can uphold their face by being impolite to others.

Scholars have also demonstrated how second-order definitions of Chinese *mianzi* and *limao* can be used as an analytical tool and how it compares to second-order conceptualizations of similar terms in other linguacultures. For example, Ran and Zhao (2018) highlight the role of affection in the Chinese notion of face because it involves both *mianzi*-saving expectations and favor-expectations. This finding is consistent with Arundale's (2021) argument that face is a relational property rather than an individual property. What is relatively missing, however,

is comparisons between Chinese notions and notions from African cultures and Hispanic cultures. The second-order concepts in these cultures are worth comparing because they all claim similar concepts such as group face and concern for others (Jia & Yang 2021). Examining these concepts would help scholars understand subtle differences between cultures that are geographically distant but conceptually close.

## 4.2 First-order conceptualization of *mianzi* and *limao*

The second-order synthesis above shows that face and politeness are two different concepts with hypothesized theoretical connections. It remains unclear, however, how they differ and relate to each other in actual use. To begin with, I used the distributional thesaurus function to compare the metalinguistic expressions of *mianzi* and *limao* in the zhTenTen17 corpus. The minimum similarity between clusters was set at 0.3, which is the default value in Sketch Engine and generates a manageable size of meaningful clusters. Table 2 presents the top 15 clusters for each search word.

**Table 2:** Clusters of collocates associated with *mianzi* or *limao*.

| Search words                   | Cluster labels (Frequency/Similarity score)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 面子<br><i>mianzi</i><br>199,569 | 脸面 ‘face’ (28,183/0.28), 尊严 ‘dignity’ (156,53/0.25), 脾气 ‘temper’ (198,661/0.24), 话 ‘utterance’ (2,240,067/0.24), 身边 ‘surrounding’ (1,204,514/0.24), 感情 ‘affection’ (969,933/0.23), 眼里 ‘in someone’s eyes’ (301,339/0.23), 心思 ‘thought’ (233,908/0.23), 钱 ‘money’ (4,430,179/0.22), 心里 ‘in one’s heart’ (1,289,167/0.22), 性命 life (106,554/0.22), 名声 ‘reputation’ (107,864/0.22), 事情 ‘issues’ (3,202,873/0.22), 年纪 ‘age’ (296,739/0.21), 麻烦 ‘trouble’ (296,739/0.21)              |
| 礼貌<br><i>limao</i><br>100,352  | 礼仪 ‘etiquette’ (279,293/0.27), 举止 ‘manner’ (85,922/0.22), 宽容 ‘tolerance’ (94,134/0.21), 耐心 ‘patience’ (275,976/0.21), 诚实 ‘honesty’ (63,531/0.19), 真诚 ‘sincerity’ (56,453/0.19), 自信 ‘self-confidence’ (456,946/0.19), 善意 ‘goodwill’ (60,431/0.19), 尊重 ‘respect’ (145,072/0.19), 风度 ‘demeanor’ (59,874/0.19), 修养 ‘self-cultivation’ (221,075/0.19), 诚信 ‘trustworthiness’ (792,555/0.19), 大度 ‘generosity’ (30,307/0.18), 态度 ‘attitude’ (1,471,156/0.17), 道德 ‘ethics’ (963,860/0.17) |

Table 2 reveals that *mianzi* and *limao* are distinct in everyday interactions. The word *mianzi* constitutes important aspects of one’s cognitive state (e.g., *dignity*, *life*, *affection*). It is closely connected to people’s character (e.g., *age*, *temper*) and social status (e.g., *reputation*, *money*) judged from others’ perspectives. Facework

is often realized via language (e.g., *utterance*) and is shaped by demographic factors such as age. While most of the *mianzi* collocates are associated with neutral semantic prosodies (e.g., *thought*, *life*, *issues*, *age*, *utterance*), the collocates of *limao* convey positive semantic prosodies. It correlates with other positive characteristics such as *tolerance*, *patience*, *honesty*, *sincerity*, *self-confidence*, *goodwill*, *trustworthiness*, and *generosity*, all of which are socially approved qualities upheld by Chinese people.

To further explore the patterns of meaning associated with *mianzi* and *limao*, I used the word sketch differences function to map out collocates that are shared by the two search words (Table 3) and that are unique to each word (Tables 4 and 5). For illustration purposes, we will focus on three lexico-grammatical relations: and/or conjunct, modifiers, and possessors.

**Table 3:** Patterns of collocates associated with both *mianzi* and *limao*.

|                   |                                                                                                                                                                             |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>and/or</b>     |                                                                                                                                                                             |
|                   | 客套 ‘courtesy’, 别人 ‘others’, 语气 ‘tone’, 客气 ‘politeness’ ( <i>keqi</i> ), 脸 ‘face’ ( <i>lian</i> ), 女人 ‘women’, 心里 ‘inside the heart’, 中国人 ‘Chinese’, 男人 ‘men’, 身份 ‘identity’ |
| <b>modifiers</b>  |                                                                                                                                                                             |
|                   | 话 ‘utterance’, 问题 ‘issue’                                                                                                                                                   |
| <b>possessors</b> |                                                                                                                                                                             |
|                   | 客人 ‘guest’, 孩子们 ‘children’, 美国人 ‘American’, 员工 ‘staff’, 学生 ‘student’, 长辈 ‘senior’, 中国人 ‘Chinese’, 孩子 ‘child’, 顾客 ‘customer’, 别人 ‘others’                                    |

As shown in Table 3, *mianzi* and *limao* are both important concepts to Chinese people. Their shared collocates of *keqi* and *lian* indicate that notions of face and politeness are interconnected. Both concepts are manifested via linguistic (e.g., utterance) and paralinguistic features (e.g., tone). The various identities that serve as the possessors of *mianzi* and *limao* suggest that the representations of both concepts are likely to vary by different identities of gender (e.g., *men*, *women*), culture (e.g., *Chinese*, *American*), occupation (e.g., *staff*, *customer*), and social relation (e.g., *guest*, *senior*, *child*). As shown in Examples (1) and (2), different possessors of *limao* imply different cultural values or conventions. A similar pattern is observed in 18 out of the 24 *Chinese* + *limao* collocations and all ten instances of the *American* + *limao* collocations.

## (1) document 36369810

中国人的礼貌, 虽然没有日本人的礼貌那样周全, 却让人舒服, 因为它正如法国人完美表达的那样, 是心灵的礼貌。

[Although Chinese politeness is not as comprehensive as that of the Japanese, it is comfortable because it is the courtesy of the soul, as the French perfectly express it.]

## (2) document 33064818

不过, 夸耀别人只是美国人的一种礼貌, 所以你应该入乡随俗, 把赞美多多给予对方。

[However, complimenting others is just a polite way for Americans, so you should do as the Romans do and give your compliments a lot.]

Nevertheless, not all pairs indicate variations. For example, all ten instances of *American* + *mianzi* collocations only denote the self-image of Americans without implying a contrast with other cultures. Similarly, the majority of *Chinese* + *mianzi* collocations only convey the importance of face in Chinese culture without necessarily comparing the importance of face in other cultures. As illustrated in Examples (3) and (4), the immediate co-texts did not make any comparisons or suggest varying notions of face between Chinese and American people.

## (3) document 26872260

但是我知道我做不到, 我会用另外一种方式为我们中国人争光。你看我在外面所拍的电影, 从头到尾都没有丢过我们中国人的面子。

[But I know I can't do it; I will use another way to win glory for us Chinese. Look at the movies I made overseas, from the beginning to the end, we Chinese have never lost face.]

## (4) document 27052194

不能把时间拖得太长, 也不能把日本打得太狠。否则美国人的面子上过不去, 毕竟美国是日本的保护者。

[The time should not be dragged on for too long, nor should Japan be beaten too hard. Otherwise, the Americans will lose face. After all, the United States is Japan's protector.]

Consistent with findings identified in Table 2, *mianzi* is a cognitive self-concept (e.g., *self-esteem*, *dignity*) and is correlated with one's social status (e.g., *reputation*) and achievements (e.g., *political achievement*, *position*). For example, *national table tennis* is related to *mianzi* because the Chinese team has a long tradition of winning competitions in table tennis and exemplifies China's Ping-Pong

Table 4: Patterns of collocates associated only with *mianzi*.

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b><i>mianzi</i> and/or</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| 里子 ‘inner property’ (593/9.3), 人情 ‘favor’ (334/7.3), 自尊心 ‘self-esteem’ (160/7.0), 虚荣心 ‘vanity’ (105/6.7), 排场 ‘ostentation’ (89/6.4), 票子 ‘money’ (67/6.1), 攀比 ‘comparing unrealistically’ (41/5.4), 名声 ‘reputation’ (60/5.3), 政绩 ‘political achievements’ (47/5.3), 位子 ‘position’ (35/5.1) |
| <b>modifiers of <i>mianzi</i></b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| 里子 ‘inner property’ (377/9.2), 活 ‘work’ (105/5.8), 功夫 ‘(face)work’ (163/5.6), 工程 ‘project’ (6,347/5.5), 消费 ‘consumption’ (294/3.2), 活儿 ‘work’ (24/4.7), 尊严 ‘dignity’ (33/4.2), 法纪 ‘law’ (13/4.2), 国乒 ‘national table tennis’ (11/4.1), 狮子座 ‘Leo’ (14/4.0)                                 |
| <b>possessors of <i>mianzi</i></b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| 蒋公 ‘Chiang Kai-shek’ (53/6.9), 男人 ‘men’ (400/6.4), 大哥 ‘big brother’ (52/5.9), 老爷子 ‘old man’ (41/5.9), 师父 ‘master’ (48/5.8), 大人 ‘Your Honor’ (79/5.7), 老大 ‘boss’ (52/5.7), 熟人 ‘acquaintance’ (26/5.5), 亲戚 ‘relatives’ (34/5.5), 老公 ‘husband’ (63/5.5)                                      |

Note: Frequency and typicality scores are shown in parenthesis after each collocate.

diplomacy. While *mianzi* is a desirable social want, solely focusing on managing *mianzi* (e.g., *facework*) would be negatively evaluated as a sign of longing for superficial qualities (e.g., *vanity*, *comparing unrealistically*). As is shown in Example (5), excessive facework would do nothing good but hurt people’s livelihood. Similarly, Example (6) equates saving face for the bad to losing the integrity of the good, indicating that face management should make place for other more intrinsic qualities.

- (5) document 18137924

所以在工作中我们严禁搞政绩工程、面子工程,那只会是劳民伤财。  
[Therefore, at work, we are strictly prohibited from engaging in performance projects and *mianzi* (face-saving) projects, which will only result in a loss of labor and money.]
- (6) document 6662347

不给违纪官员留面子,法纪才不失里子。  
[Only by not giving face to officials who violate discipline can the law and discipline be maintained.]

Finally, the most typical possessors of *mianzi* suggest that face is established in interpersonal relationships and is particularly sensitive to people who normatively hold higher social status (e.g., *Chiang Kai-shek*, *master*, *boss*, *Your Honor*).

Unlike the negative connotations of *mianzi* shown in Table 4, *limao* is associated with positively evaluated terms such as *civility*, *respect*, *hospitality*, and *hu-*

**Table 5:** Patterns of collocates associated only with *limao*.

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b><i>limao</i> and/or</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| 用语 ‘language’ (329/7.9), 举止 ‘manner’ (250/7.4), 教养 ‘upbringing’ (125/7.0), 尊敬 ‘respect’ (127/6.6), 谦让 ‘humility’ (72/6.5), 文明 ‘civility’ (744/6.4), 风度 ‘demeanor’ (102/6.4), 微笑 ‘smile’ (141/6.3), 师长 ‘teachers’ (95/6.3), 好客 ‘hospitality’ (73/6.3)                     |
| <b>modifiers of <i>limao</i></b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| 用语 ‘language’ (6,548/11.5), 礼节 ‘etiquette’ (386/8.9), 谦让 ‘humility’ (113/7.6), 待人 ‘treating people’ (59/6.7), 问候 ‘greeting’ (76/5.6), 言行 ‘words and deeds’ (48/5.5), 客气 ‘politeness’ (21/5.1), 修养 ‘upbringing’ (158/5.0), 热情 ‘warmth’ (302/4.9), 语言 ‘language’ (688/4.9) |
| <b>possessors of <i>limao</i></b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| 举止 ‘manner’ (9/6.6), 日本人 ‘Japanese’ (41/6.1), 台湾人 ‘Taiwanese’ (9/5.9), 先人 ‘ancestors’ (11/5.8), 绅士 ‘gentlemen’ (10/5.3), 英国人 ‘British’ (8/5.2), 场合 ‘situation’ (11/4.4), 陌生人 ‘strangers’ (7/4.2), 社交 ‘social interaction’ (7/3.9), 电话 ‘telephone’ (17/3.4)               |

*Note:* Frequency and typicality scores are shown in parenthesis after each collocate.

*mility*. This finding is consistent with the comparison made in Table 3. Moreover, collocates such as *upbringing*, *etiquette*, and *gentlemen* imply a normative orientation of Chinese politeness. For example, showing politeness and modesty tends to be a culturally shared definition of what constitutes a gentleman. The possessors of *limao* suggest that the realization of Chinese politeness mainly varies by culture (e.g., *Japanese*, *Taiwanese*, *British*) and situational factors (e.g., *situation*, *telephone*).

### 4.3 Conceptualizing Chinese notions of face and politeness

In this section, I report three general observations of face and politeness based on the first-order and second-order findings above. First, Chinese face and politeness are different theoretical constructs and should be studied separately. While language is an important means of managing face and politeness, the collocates of *limao* mainly focus on the content and style in language use, whereas the collocates of *mianzi* involve both language use and other factors in social interactions (e.g., *political achievements*, *projects*, *consumption*). Consistent with other studies that adopt an emic perspective (Li 2020), the present findings highlight that politeness research is an important line of inquiry in linguistics. In contrast, facework would be a concept studied in a broader spectrum of disciplines. A similar pattern was observed in academic publications. For example, the Web of Science database indexed a comparable number of publications on facework in linguistics (113 articles) and communication (116 articles) disciplines, but the publications on politeness in linguistics (1,611 articles) far exceeded that number in communica-



tion (383 articles) (search time: April 3, 2022). The present Chinese data provide additional empirical support to the call for separating face research from politeness research (Arundale 2006; Haugh 2013).

Second, the varying semantic prosodies associated with *mianzi* and *limao* also help explain how politeness and face are related in the Chinese context. The case study shows that *mianzi* is correlated with both positive and negative terms, whereas *limao* is predominantly associated with positive terms and socially approved norms. Unlike the positive evaluation of strategic facework in Western societies (Brown & Levinson 1987), the mixed evaluation of facework in the Chinese context implies that the strategic management of face is not always appreciated by the Chinese. For example, a “face-saving project” is negatively evaluated because it sacrifices quality for superficial gains. In contrast, *limao* related terms generally convey a good sense, constituting interlocutors’ basis of evaluation in communication. This is consistent with Gu’s (1990) claim that Chinese politeness is largely normative and is different from Brown and Levinson’s strategic model that equates face strategies to politeness strategies. In the Chinese context, facework conveys politeness when the face management behavior aligns with the expected norms of behavior in a speech community. On the other hand, facework would not lead to polite evaluations when the face strategies violate the norms of that community.

Finally, the varying conceptualizations of face and politeness point to different lines of inquiry. While both *mianzi* and *limao* are related to identities, people’s *mianzi* is defined by their social relationship with others in a community. The emphasis on others’ judgment of one’s public self-image is consistent with the previous second-order explication of face as relational and community-based (Mao 1994; Yu 2001). Based on corpus data, Zhou and Zhang (2018b: 153) conclude that “*mianzi* is not primarily a property of interactants, but it is literally targeted interactively at interactants, their relationships and the communities to which they belong”. In line with corpus findings, recent research has adopted an emic conceptualization of face and studied how face is achieved interactionally (Ran & Zhao 2018). In contrast, *limao* is connected to various cultural terms, suggesting that (linguistic) politeness is guided by shared cultural norms. Facing critiques from the second wave of politeness research (e.g., Watts 2003), researchers who study politeness and culture have chosen to examine interactional rituals within and across cultures (Jia & Yao 2022; Kádár & House 2021). Since (im)politeness norms are conventionalized, it becomes feasible to identify generalized patterns of evaluations within communities of practice.

## 5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I introduced corpus-based approaches to metapragmatics, with a particular focus on the application of Sketch Engine. This embodies an accessible method to automatically identify patterns of metalinguistic patterns against large-scale naturally occurring texts. As demonstrated in Section 4, a corpus-based approach to metapragmatics can offer researchers a clearer picture of whether their technical definitions are consistent with people's everyday understandings of similar concepts.

In the meantime, this quantitative approach also bears several limitations. First, since patterns are defined as “observed regularities”, it inevitably overlooks instances that only occurred occasionally in the corpus. Since corpus-based metapragmatics does not provide the level of details that conversation analytic methods would bring, it would benefit from conducting qualitative analyses of the specific interactions in context (Haugh 2018). Second, while the creation of metalinguistic patterns is bottom-up, these patterns are still subject to researchers' interpretations. For example, since the results generated by distributional thesaurus are based on lexico-grammatical relations, it includes both semantic synonyms and antonyms. Without carefully examining the specific context, one would run the risk of associating one term with an exactly opposite meaning. Taken together, to maximize the utility of this powerful tool, it is important to triangulate the results by integrating different quantitative and qualitative analyses.

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